

## SPECIAL SECTION: ANTHROPOLOGY OF WHITE SUPREMACY

### RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nothing Sells like Whiteness: Race, Ontology, and American Advertising

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Shankar Nothing Sells like Whiteness

**ABSTRACT** In this article, I examine how white supremacy is reproduced and circulated through advertising. I explore the shift from the racial and ethnic specificities of “multiculturalism” to the more open-ended concept of “diversity,” which indexes difference in unspecific and nonthreatening ways. How diversity is represented in general-market advertising and how it differs from multicultural advertising offers a window into white supremacy and the role of advertising in furthering its agenda. Advertising has long acted as a vehicle for white supremacy, and by analyzing diversity, there is something to be learned about the current work done by this medium. [*race/ethnicity, advertising, media, diversity, white supremacy*]

**RESUMEN** En este artículo, examino cómo la supremacía blanca es reproducida y circulada a través de la publicidad. Exploro el cambio de las especificidades raciales y étnicas del “multiculturalismo” al concepto más abierto de “diversidad”, el cual cataloga la diferencia en formas no específicas y no amenazantes. Cómo la diversidad es representada en la publicidad de mercado general y cómo difiere de la publicidad multicultural ofrece una ventana a la supremacía blanca y al rol de la publicidad en avanzar su agenda. La publicidad ha actuado largamente como un vehículo para la supremacía blanca, y al analizar la diversidad, hay algo para ser aprendido sobre el trabajo actual realizado por este medio. [*raza/etnicidad, publicidad, medios de comunicación, diversidad, supremacía blanca*]

On Saturday, October 7, 2017, Dove skincare marketers released a short video on Facebook for body wash. The ad features three women disrobing. A Black woman removes her shirt to become a white

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woman, who removes her shirt to become a Brown woman, whose undressing returns us to the first of the three models. Outrage was soon followed by calls to #BoycottDove on Twitter. The company quickly pulled the ad, but not before viewers saved versions of it. What circulated widely on the internet is a loop of images of three women, each wearing a nude-colored shirt to match the model's skin tone. Another screengrab captured a Black woman transforming into a white one. Dove offered several statements in response, expressing that it had "missed the mark" and that their ad was "tone-deaf." They additionally promised that this feedback "will help in the future." These statements did little to quell the outcry, and the ad grew to become the topic of much public consternation on social and broadcast media. Critics who labeled it as racist raised questions about skin color and representation that were familiar to proponents of post-civil-rights multiculturalism. Yet, others who reacted publicly suggested that rather than regard the ad as racist, we should see it as a commitment to diversity. But what is the nature of that commitment, and to whom is it being made?

The ideal of whiteness, so casually conveyed in this Dove ad, has been the tried-and-true basis for centuries of successful American advertising. Middle-class whiteness and its lifestyle preoccupations set the agenda for all other echelons of society. The supremacy of whiteness, once openly celebrated in a pre-civil-rights United States, materialized in ads for soap and hygiene products that routinely featured white bodies as paragons of purity (Burke 1996). Some aspects of racial representation changed in the post-civil-rights era, as I have illustrated in detail elsewhere (see Shankar 2012, 2013, 2015). In the US advertising industry, the most tangible evidence of this is the growth and development of multicultural advertising (Davila 2001, 2008). This small aggregate of agencies comprises a relatively tiny subset of the advertising world and creates ads aimed at Latinos, Asian Americans, and African Americans. Following the broader tenets of multiculturalism, multicultural advertising foregrounds race, ethnicity, language, and culture. Yet multicultural advertising tends to reach small audiences through nonmainstream media outlets. By contrast, most racial representation is still created by mainstream advertising or general-market advertising, which

encompasses the vast majority of American advertising. Once only concerned with white consumers, American advertising has, over several decades, become far more invested in representing the increasing diversity of the United States.

In this article, I examine the semiotic transformation from racial and ethnic specificities of “multiculturalism” to the more open-ended term “diversity,” which indexes difference in unspecific and nonthreatening ways and pulls focus back to a white mainstream. The ontological differences between multiculturalism and diversity speak to differences in understanding human subjectivity. Ontology, the study of the nature of being, draws attention to meanings of existence and reality. It organizes basic categories of being and their relations (see, for instance, Myers 2004; Wright 2010). Ontology matters for my discussion of race because if different constituents in the advertising world have conflicting ontological views of what race is, the role it plays in society, and how it organizes reality for potential consumers, that will lead to very different ideas about what ads should look like and how people will react to them.

These differences are operationalized in the register each party uses to promote particular understandings of race, as well as in the form and content of the apologies that accompany controversial ads. Register, or language used in a particular speech context, can include specialized language or jargon by experts. The process of enregisterment pertains to how registers are formed and transformed and the kinds of terms and language practices that get included in them to define and legitimate certain activities and approaches. The difference between representations of diversity in general-market advertising and multicultural advertising offers a window into white supremacy and the role of advertising in furthering its agenda. By white supremacy, I am not referring to people with torches and hoods, although, as we have seen, these people have reclaimed public space in alarming ways. Rather, I use the term in the way many critical race theorists and the editors of this special issue have: to

look at the normalization of white power, wealth, social standing, and cultural norms, and the conscious or unconscious furthering of these positions of power (Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Yosso 2005). It is a big term, seemingly incommensurate with the soap and soft drink ads I discuss here. Yet advertising has long acted as a vehicle for white supremacy, and by analyzing diversity, there is something to be learned about the current work done by this medium.

I'll start by contrasting the racial ontologies of diversity and multiculturalism and explore some of the enregistered language each of their practitioners uses. I'll then look at some recent ad campaigns that expose the contradictions of diversity while still managing to promote particular brand agendas. The brief examples I present are drawn from ethnographic research conducted on Asian American advertising between 2009 and 2014. I observed the day-to-day creative and production work of ad executives in three Asian American ad agencies and visited five general-market ad agencies in which I spent varying amounts of time—sometimes a day, usually a few days, and in one instance two weeks. I saw much similarity across these general-market agencies and differences from multicultural advertising.

## **RACIAL ONTOLOGICS AND AMERICAN ADVERTISING**

Racial representation in advertising today is strongly guided by logics of diversity or multiculturalism. More than simply differing viewpoints, these two concepts have starkly different ontologies about the significance of race and how it structures social reality. I use the term *racial ontologies* because it allows me to compare two ontologies—multiculturalism and diversity—that seem similar but are actually oppositional while also addressing the semiotic processes by which these meanings are operationalized. As an analytic, racial ontologies addresses the cosmology of race as it is institutionally produced for consumption. Such ontologies expose the instrumentalist ways corporate

conceptions of race are used to supplant those that reflect racial inequality wrought by capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism. The “logic” in racial ontologies is reasoned through creative strategies to depict race and ethnicity, while it is also vital to the corporate apologies that often accompany diversity advertising. In short, racial ontologies expose the disjuncture between civil-rights-based understandings of race espoused in multiculturalism and their investigation through critical race and postcolonial theory, and those borne of institutions through the moniker of “diversity” that are purported to address the same vital issues.

The racial ontologic of diversity is rooted in Enlightenment thinking, in which all humans are thought to be rational and free. Critical race and feminist theorists have amply demonstrated that this notion of liberalism and liberal society are only possible because of slavery and patriarchy, but these are omissions in diversity discourse (Collins 2002; Hesse 2014; Mills 2008). When liberalism functions correctly, the social contract ensures liberty and equality across racial and ethnic difference. This is the kind of liberalism that underpins Jurgen Habermas’s ([1962] 1991) version of the public sphere. The public sphere is heterogeneous, and rational discourse assures fair participation. Critics have argued that the Habermasian public sphere is utopic, and issues of access and privilege affect who is able to enter the coffee house and who is heard in public debate (Fraser 1990). Yet the racial ontologic that the public sphere is available to all who wish to partake obscures these dynamics of power and privilege. As such, it does not acknowledge humanity’s social failings based on race—slavery, segregation, colonialism, state brutality and incarceration, and even day-to-day prejudice. Philosopher Charles Mills (2014) makes this point in his foundational book *The Racial Contract*. This conception of diversity, I argue, is an ideal vehicle for white supremacy in advertising.

As I noted earlier, mainstream American advertising has, for well over a century, elevated middle-class whiteness as the ultimate consumer aspiration. The audiences for these messages were white and did not feature minorities. When minorities were featured in these early ads, they were often depicted in barbaric and demeaning ways, with Blacks as slaves or

caricatured servants and Asians as rat-like creatures speaking “yellow” or broken English (Shankar 2012). After the civil rights era, minorities simply had no presence in mainstream advertising, apart from being extras, sidekicks, or the butt of white humor. Much has improved, but stereotypes and offensive portrayals have continued. Recent examples of this include the Taco Bell chihuahua, the Metro PCS guys, or Ashton Kutcher in brownface for Popchips. These stereotypes from mainstream advertising index the racial ontologic of diversity at work: they are ads for a predominantly white audience, made by people who do not see why racial caricatures like these could be offensive. Indeed, in all of my time in ad agencies, no one set out to make an intentionally racist ad.

This approach is notably different from the racial ontologic that structures multicultural advertising, which segments consumers into categories of Black, Latino, and Asian American and creates specialized messaging for them. In the 1960s and 1970s, minority marketers lobbied to advertise directly to these consumers, arguing that specificity of ethnicity and language would increase brand identification among minority consumers otherwise bombarded with images of whiteness. With the general market largely ignoring nonwhite America, these entrepreneurs saw a great untapped market and approached it with varying degrees of integrity and thoughtfulness. Arlene Davila (2008, 2012) is respectfully critical of the creative work she documents and identifies pernicious stereotypes made by Latinos, for Latinos. Elsewhere, I have written at length about the creation of some Asian American stereotypes, especially in terms of Asian American class mobility and social integration, as well as note representations of Asian Americans that were largely absent in the mainstream (see Shankar 2015). Overall, multicultural advertising is deeply invested in racial and linguistic specificity but lacks access to major media platforms that target a mainstream viewership. The reach of multicultural ads is relatively small, as they place ads in ethnic media, such as local-

access or satellite television stations, small-circulation print publications, local or internet-based radio, and on the internet and social media.

Perhaps a more pressing concern is that even as multicultural advertising continues to reach consumers in this way, multiculturalism itself is over. It has been dismantled by “free speech” mongers who rail against the so-called politically correct speech register. Alongside the takedown of multiculturalism’s verbal hygiene comes the virulent backlash against affirmative action. Diversity emerged as a corrective to the excesses of civil rights and multiculturalism and a reinstatement of white liberalism’s core beliefs. It is multiculturalism 2.0. While multiculturalism celebrates heritage languages and cultures but offers little institutional support, diversity work champions difference as a strength in capitalist and institutional logics. It is future-looking, unwilling to get mired in a complicated past and highly attuned to where the United States is going. Diversity is often paired with “inclusion,” but without any mention of the power imbalances and racial inequality that underpin exclusion (see Ahmed 2012; Ferdman 2017).

Diversity has only grown in importance and power after the results of the 2010 census created a turning point for the mainstream ad world to pay more attention to minorities. The number of America’s minorities is on the rise, comprising over 35 percent of the US population. The prediction that America will be a majority-minority nation by 2042 lends strength and momentum to the racial ontologic of diversity. One diversity approach is to reimagine and objectify bodies and speakers to make race an unmarked category. Ad executives do so by centering whiteness and surrounding it with its opposite. This can take the form of token minorities, including those that epitomize “ethnic ambiguity,” meaning they are represented devoid of any racial, cultural, or linguistic specificity. Such a depiction only furthers this diversity, which renders such differences unimportant to include because difference from whiteness is what is valued. By this logic, any nonwhiteness indexes diversity.

Diversity is visibly represented in the infrastructure of many large agencies. Whenever I contacted agencies requesting to observe their everyday work for my research project, I was directed to the individuals who “handle” diversity. Often, but not always, they are minority individuals who did the semiotic work of repackaging racial and ethnic difference in institutionally relevant ways for white audiences. Units like Ogilvy’s “Culture” and BBDO’s department of “Cultural Discoveries,” for instance, offer their services as correctives for what the rest of their agencies had failed to do: acknowledge that mainstream, general-market agencies still only saw white America as its target audience. These specialized units suggest that diversity is something to be managed behind closed doors. The objectification of culture as something separate from what the rest of the agency does only bolsters the fact that whiteness is still at the core of how general-market advertising views the mainstream: white, middle class, and surrounded by occasional pockets of culture, all of which can be handled by people invested in empowering consumers. In this cosmology, culture is not simply the opposite of whiteness but also a pair part to it, a response to the call for unity across disparate racial categories once created for specialized consumer identification. A closer look at the semiotic modalities through which this work happens will shed light on how this still happens.

### **ENREGISTERING DIVERSITY**

The ontological distinction between multiculturalism and diversity manifests either as race being a marked category of social and linguistic representation or race being an unmarked category in which it is one of many social variables in a civil society. This split is evidenced in the speech registers used by multicultural and diversity proponents, as well as in the ads that feature race as a way to construct brand. The process I want to focus on is enregisterment, or how registers are formed and transformed (Agha 1998). Extending beyond language, registers are also embodied, imbuing individuals with characterological traits. Linguistic anthropologist Bonnie Urciuoli (2009) has written about



enregistered uses of diversity in higher-education settings, demonstrating how a variety of social differences are managed through specific register items and are used to further a diversity agenda. The linguistic process of enregistering diversity, which aims to codify a way of talking about and representing race, offers evidence of these two different ontological positions.

Multicultural advertising has developed jargon that showcases specificities of language and culture, which I have analyzed in detail elsewhere (Shankar 2012). They focus on “ethnicity” and name actual places in the world and discuss the differences within immigrant groups. They identify target designated market areas (DMAs) to do marketing and public relations at community events, such as Diwali and Lunar New Year celebrations. They make ads for regional media in-language and in-culture, aiming to heighten, rather than downplay, cultural specificities (Shankar 2013). Knowing that their consumers also see ads in mainstream media, they use a process they call “transcreation” to maintain brand identities across mainstream and multicultural ads (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014).

In contrast, diversity advertising uses terms that index a very different version of US society. In this register, “culture” indicates the nonwhite population of the United States but may also include other niche populations, such as LGBTQ people or people with disabilities. Diversity is also used to signal the global on a worldwide scale. Culture is preferable to dividing people into Black, Latino, and Asian American “silos,” which was bad not only for brands but also for society. Acknowledging specific racial groups would mean unnaturally dividing people rather than allowing brands to reach people across differences. A diversity approach contends that “cultural signals” are important but can be quite vague about what those signals are and what they can look like. In my experience, these cultural signals are intended for white audiences, referencing the existence of nonwhite cultures, or are intended for racial humor for the white imagination. Otherwise, ethnic ambiguity does the work of indexing the plurality of society by including people who fall outside the category of white in the broadest possible way.

In the ad agencies I visited, terms from diversity register were affectively performed in a cheerful, positive manner. Ad executives I spoke with and observed adopted a tone that aimed to both educate and placate, as if to doubly assure the intended good of this racial ontologic. In a conversation with two white female ad executives (whom I will call Lisa and Stephanie) in their Madison Avenue offices in 2013, the executives explained the racial ontologies of diversity advertising. Taking an expert stance, they began by acknowledging that many of their advertising colleagues are concerned about diversity, but many get it wrong because they are stuck in a multicultural past. As I set up my audio recorder, Stephanie off-handedly remarked, “My niece is in a spot<sup>1</sup> for Ogilvy and says it looks like the rainbow coalition, everyone is ethnic.” Casually maligning a civil-rights-inspired concept forwarded by the Reverend Jesse Jackson resonated well with her colleague Lisa, who nodded sympathetically. Lisa added, “The guy from Ogilvy was saying that they need to do something different, but it’s going to be messy for a while.” Both women then trained their gaze on me, smilingly. Lisa began by telling me her origin story on what race means: “People used to identify with very specific groups. Now peoples’ identities are a little more complicated.” In a calm, soothing voice, she continued that people share more similarities than differences and suggested that an identity steeped in ethnicity was a relic of an older generation. Noting the change between the earlier era of multiculturalism and our current moment, she elaborated that consumers and ad executives alike have been slow to adopt a diversity approach: “They feel like if they let go of a little, they’ll lose a lot.” This futuristic version of diversity signaled hope and promise, rather than the anger and bitterness of unfulfilled civil-rights promises.

Lisa and Stephanie patiently explained to me that making US advertising aimed at specific cultures and non-English-language speakers created siloes, and the effects that these metaphorical grain-storage units could have on brands was deleterious. Cautioning strongly against this approach, she remarked, “So that’s why I say, multicultural marketing is funny because it just, it tries to focus on the *differences* only based on culture or language, as opposed to *similarities*” (emphasis in

original). Offering a panacea to a divided society, the diversity approach could offer salvation from a backward multicultural past and deliverance into a modern present and future. To do this, Lisa explained, they would simply cast diverse talent in the form of a “diverse person” who could speak English. Aiming to connect with me as a “diverse” person, they gently reminded me, “People are in the world together and are buying the same brands.” This vision of diversity entails consumers of different races finding sameness through brand identification rather than racial identification. Bringing people out of a multicultural past into a racially utopic future means supplanting multiculturalism’s cultural and linguistic specificities with diversity’s assurances that racial sameness is the way forward.

Lisa and Stephanie were generous with their time and expertise and instructive in their performance of diversity register. Yet, as an anthropologist, I felt there was something deeply unsettling about this formulation of difference, and it has taken me a while to figure out what about this was so troubling: I realized that while they described how they aimed to reach diverse consumers, their core concern with diversity was how to make racial and ethnic difference palatable to white consumers. To put it plainly, these women were basically explaining how advertisements today continue to be such an easy vehicle for white supremacy. They were championing an approach that retained whiteness as the normative and normal center, toward which others could orient themselves. By advocating for egalitarian consumer participation and the notion that all consumers are equal, the whiteness of liberalism is retained as the core of diversity, with all other difference grouped around it.

The most skillful executions of this racial ontologic exploit the elasticity of diversity by organizing racial and ethnic differences into a tableau. Consider, for instance, a 2018 Toyota ad that aired at Super Bowl LII. In it, a rabbi, a priest, an imam, and a Buddhist monk pack into a Toyota truck, meet up with nuns at a football game, and enjoy interfaith sports fandom. “When we are free to move, anything is possible,” says the voiceover of the ad. In this futuristic vision of diversity, everyone speaks American-accented English and is loyal to the American sport of football. Conflicts

of settler colonialism in the Middle East and trauma created by the Muslim travel ban exist in a parallel universe from the postracial utopia offered by this pickup truck.

In a similar fashion, Coca-Cola has successfully circulated ads of this nature, wedding individuality and diversity in such concepts as “The Wonder of Us,” their 2018 Super Bowl ad that acknowledged the non-gender-conforming pronoun “they.” The ad showcases differences, with a voiceover in American-accented English, saying there is a Coke for each of us. We can contrast this to a Coke ad from the 2014 Super Bowl, in which the song “America the Beautiful” sung in several languages served as the backdrop of a multicultural tableau. That ad experienced major backlash from white supremacists for not following the racial ontologies of diversity, in that it acknowledged the existence of languages other than English. And rather than simply including ambiguous Brown and Black people, they chose individuals from identifiable ethnic groups, like the hijab-clad woman. The ad worked favorably for Coca-Cola and was praised for its treatment of diversity, but it drew the ire of conservative viewers and potentially lost them as consumers. Most likely, this controversy was quickly forgotten, as most Coke ads feature harmless imagery, like animated polar bears or fizzy bubbles. Few ads are able to successfully render race in this way, though many try. What is far more common are ads that push the limits of diversity in ways that incite criticism from minorities, which generally leads to apologies.

The apology is a key feature of diversity register, as it seems to do the ideological exposition of how an idea for an ad came to be. The apology allows for a statement of intentionality, also very important in proving that a corporation did not “intend” to be racist, even though that is how some people perceived it. If the intention of an ad was good, then an imperfect execution should be readily forgiven. This is perfectly sensible in the racial ontologic of diversity—that is, if white liberalism is an agreed-upon social fact, then any offense people feel is their own shortcoming. These apologies take the form of “We are sorry that people were offended.” It’s a “sorry-not-sorry,” as some might call it.

When considering what constitutes the corporate apology, to whom it is proffered, and what impact it may have, it becomes evident that this speech act often elevates the original ad and its attendant racism by prolonging the public conversation about it. Especially in a social media era, where simply pulling an ad or removing it from a Facebook page rarely leads to its disappearance, apologies are issued repeatedly until a particular scandal dies down. Merriam-Webster offers several definitions for an apology, two of which are most useful to my discussion. The first is “An admission of error or discourtesy accompanied by an expression of regret; a public apology.” For context, we can look to business and marketing strategies about the correct way to manage a public relations situation. For instance, communication studies scholar Peter Buell Hirsch (2014) summarizes this approach as “never apologize and never explain.” Hirsch writes that the number of corporate apologies has increased dramatically during the past decade and notes that there are different kinds of apologies—public, private, interpersonal, and so on.

As a corporate technique, the apology is an utterance that does a great deal of semiotic work. We can consider the corporate apology as a speech act, in terms outlined by the philosopher John L. Austin (1975). Analyzing the apology as a speech act, it should present an apology, be understood as an apology, and perform the social work of apologizing. The locutionary act, “We are sorry,” should have the illocutionary force of admitting error, and do the perlocutionary work of conveying regret and asking forgiveness. The substance of this kind of apology sequence is notably different from the corporate “never apologize and never explain” approach. The difference between these two approaches brings me to the other Merriam-Webster definition, the third entry. Here, an apology is “a poor substitute or example: ‘i.e., He’s a poor apology for a father.’” The reason this is helpful here is that many corporate apologies, as it turns out, are poor apologies for an apology. A few more examples will further demonstrate how diversity register, including the apology, furthers the racial ontologie of diversity by keeping whiteness at its core.

## RACIAL ONTOLOGICS OF DIVERSITY IN ADS

In April 2017, Pepsi released a long-form ad featuring Kendall Jenner. In it, Jenner plays a model, which is her profession in real life. The ad features a social justice protest modeled after Black Lives Matter protests, but with only young people. We see numerous individuals of color holding signs meant to be progressive but that do not espouse any specific politics (i.e., “Join our conversation”). Jenner is compelled to join the protest when a boy beckons, and she hands her blond wig to an attendant—a Black woman who looks none too pleased with this move—and begins walking with the crowd. Another major character is an angry Muslim photographer woman in a headscarf, whose artistic frustration only abates when she can photograph Jenner interacting with a police officer. The officer accepts the can of Pepsi, and the entire protest march erupts in gleeful celebration. The ad exhibits several elements of diversity register. There are many nonwhite people, most of them quite attractive. The utopic futurity of the ad is evident in the protest party, replete with a band and celebration when the cop receives Jenner’s Pepsi. The ad furthers white supremacy by elevating whiteness and trivializing a profound movement that emerged in response to racially focused police brutality.

The ad immediately came under fire and Pepsi pulled it, but it took several months for all of the apologies to roll out. The first was Pepsi’s corporate apology, which highlighted intentionality. The soft drink maker issued a statement that read, “Pepsi was trying to project a global message of unity, peace and understanding. Clearly, we missed the mark and apologize. We did not intend to make light of any serious issue. We are removing the content and halting any further rollout.” The apology features key diversity register items, including “global” and “unity.” Yet the illocutionary force of this apology is weak. The word “apologize” appears, but it is used to qualify a failed creative attempt rather than the grave judgment error in commodifying Black Lives Matter to sell soda. The apology relies heavily on white liberalism and aims to elicit consumers’ understanding by focusing on the *intention* of the ad, rather than the message they created. Pepsi’s clearest and strongest apology

was in fact to Jenner: “We also apologize for putting Kendall Jenner in this position.” The content of this statement added insult to injury for many initially offended by the Pepsi ad. Twitter user @Chinissa tweeted, “Wait a minute. @Pepsi apologized to Kendall, BUT not the communities they offended? How does that work? #PepsiKendall”

Two additional apology statements surfaced, both more embodied and personal. One was from the outgoing president of PepsiCo’s global beverage group, Brad Jakeman. Jakeman remarked that the response to Pepsi’s Kendall Jenner ad “was the most gut-wrenching experience of my career.”<sup>2</sup> In Jakeman’s case, we are treated to his inner state of turmoil, which presumably contributed to his resignation six months later. It is impossible to know whether Jakeman’s severe discomfort was caused by the failure of the ad or the failure of civil society to see it for the unifying message of peace that Pepsi intended. A tearful apology and explanation lastly emerged from Kendall Jenner, delivered months later on the fall season premiere of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. Crying to her sister Kim Kardashian, Jenner remarked, “I feel really bad that anyone was ever offended. I feel really bad that this was taken such a wrong way and I genuinely feel like shit,” as the two lay together in her bedroom. “I felt so fucking stupid,” she continued. “The [idea] that I would offend other people or hurt other people was definitely not the intent. And that’s what got me the most.”

Jenner’s statement begins similarly to Jakeman’s by distributing fault among those that misunderstood the ad and her intention in it. Perhaps through the tearful, heartfelt delivery, the illocutionary force of the apology is somewhat stronger than the other two. Of the three, Kendall wore it best. Still, the internet was unforgiving, and several excellent memes emerged. Some featured Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in protest, crediting Kendall Jenner for having the dream. @BerniceKing tweeted a photo of King being arrested with the caption, “If only Daddy would have known about the power of Pepsi.” @CharlesMBlow juxtaposed Jenner with Black Lives Matter protest images, most notably of Ieshia Evans from a July 2016 demonstration in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, underscoring exceptionalism of a white interaction with the police and those of Blacks. Here we can see white

supremacy in the power that Kendall holds that thousands of Black Americans don't, elevating her above the law and safe from reproach in ways that bodily endanger the lives of Black people.

There are many similarities between this ad's arc and Dove's approach to diversity discussed at the start of this article, in which three models of different races are essentially interchangeable, their racial differences reduced to a T-shirt hue. Like many corporate apologies, Dove's missive on Facebook attempted to explain its intent: "An image we recently posted on Facebook missed the mark in representing women of color thoughtfully. We deeply regret the offense it caused." Standing by its vision of diversity, Dove apologized for the offense caused, not the ad itself. In another, Dove reiterated that it is "committed to representing the beauty of diversity," and about missing the mark, they "deeply regret the offense that has caused." A lengthier, Monday-morning apology appeared on Facebook two days later, in which Dove once again referenced "the diversity of real beauty" as a way to underscore their commitment to an antiracist agenda and emphasize that the effect of insulting an audience was well beyond their intention. In all of these statements, Dove apologized for the affront the ad caused, and even admitted that they were mistaken in their approach, but still adhered to the "celebration of diversity" they wanted to depict.

On this note, it is interesting to consider here that Dove frequently challenges social norms in campaigns featuring "real women," partnering with Black television producers like Shonda Rhimes. Even so, some on social media were quick to point out that this was not the first time that Dove had come under fire for depicting diversity in its ads. In 2011, the brand ran a campaign promoting body wash that showed three women of different skin colors standing in a row. Copy reading "before" appeared over the woman with darker skin color while the word "after" appeared over the lighter-skinned woman. Dove responded by claiming that all three women were meant to represent the "after." Some critics tweeted images of the 2011 and 2017 ads next to each other, underscoring that Dove had learned little since this debacle. Even one of the models in the Dove ad was blindsided. The 2017 ad's Black model, Lola Ogunyemi, wrote in *The Guardian* that she did not want to be



considered a “before” image in the ad.<sup>3</sup> As a Nigerian woman born in London and raised in Atlanta, she was thrilled to be offered a chance to be the next face of Dove. She expressed criticism that Dove simply pulled the ad rather than stand by their casting of a darker-skinned model. In a time when diversity advertising celebrates ethnic ambiguity, brands like Dove can get away with featuring people who simply “embody” diversity. What is unambiguous is that they are not white. Vigilant consumers took Dove to task, but there is no evidence that incidents like this affect the racial ontologies that shape their approach to diversity.

A final example epitomizes the barely concealed partnership between diversity register and white supremacy. A 2011 Nivea print-ad campaign called “Re-Civilize Yourself” featured a Black man holding a version of his own face with an afro and facial hair. In this bizarre image, the man’s “before” face dangles like a Halloween mask in his hand, its negative value unequivocal. Once again, the apology proffered was eventually followed by a repeat offense. Nivea’s campaign from 2017 went for it again, with “White Is Purity.” The comparison between the two ads is stark, as is the contrast between this public relations debacle and that of Pepsi. The public felt it was owed apologies all around. When they did not receive them, clever memes followed. Tweeter @Chemzes wrote: “Did Pepsi blackmail Nivea to be more racist than them?” Another meme that circulated read: “Pepsi: We’ve done it. We’ve created the most tone-deaf ad of the week. Maybe the year!” Followed by: “Nivea: Hold my beer” (meaning, watch me do something even dumber). Sarcasm aside, an actual white supremacist group also posted on Nivea’s Facebook page. “Political Memes with an Edgy Theme” wrote, “We enthusiastically support this new direction your company is taking. I’m glad we can all agree that #WhiteIsPurity.”

In all three of these controversies concerning Pepsi, Dove, and Nivea, enregistered language bridges the racial ontologies of diversity and the circulation of the ad. The apologies offered are ripe with register items and statements of intentionality—signs that were conveyed in the ad but not interpreted as intended and requiring urgent semiotic revision. These corporate missives do the

additional work of reminding audiences that diversity may not be perfect, but that it is the way forward. All of these apologies share elements of the sorry-not-sorry stance that is a vital part of liberal society, in which misunderstandings are simply topics for public debate, not rallying cries against racism and white supremacy. Also important here is that none of these corporate apologies, apart from the one Pepsi delivered to Kendall Jenner, has a particular addressee, nor do they name to whom they are apologizing. These are generic statements aimed at managing public relations controversies. With good intentions stated, if not actually demonstrated, the racial ontologies of diversity place the burden on the consumer to realize the progressive intent of the ad, however underrealized.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The advertising and marketing world continues to ready itself for the rapidly shifting demographics of the United States becoming a majority-minority nation by 2042. The techniques of corporations such as the advertising agencies are sophisticated and compelling while also being imperfect and sometimes missing the mark. In the racial ontologic of diversity, race unites rather than divides, while it also remains salient for consumer identification. Nonwhiteness is conveyed through bodies that stand for idealized racial difference. Diversity renders the racial past as conflict-free but in need of updating and projects futuristic versions of race that will likely never come to be, with that possibility invitingly presented. With white liberalism as a solid foundation, diversity has become synonymous with an idealized heterogeneous, harmonious mainstream US population. Proponents of diversity contend that we are in a “postracial” era, but others see it as a reassertion of white supremacy, in which the utopic power of whiteness erases institutionalized inequality and instead presents a perfectly integrated society.

After decades of watching multiculturalism crack the façade of whiteness in advertising, the fissures are closing, leaving multicultural racial ontologies, like multiculturalism itself, left to wither

away. For ad executives whose world is primarily white and middle class, diversity discourse makes racial differences ambiguous and interchangeable, as well as nonthreatening in their knowability. In ads made for an increasingly nonwhite mainstream audience, the gaze of whiteness is once again reinstated, much like in past eras when minorities were far less numerically, politically, socially, and economically significant. What is different now is that minorities are so economically significant that it does not make sense to ignore them altogether. In 2018, I received this email from a Neilson list announcing that “Black Dollars Matter,” a clear co-option of Black Lives Matter. It’s subheading, “With African-Americans spending 1.2 trillion annually, brands have a lot to lose if they don’t engage black consumers,” epitomized the racial ontologic of diversity and the facility with which it reinvents race for brand growth.

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<sup>1</sup> A “spot” is advertising parlance for a television advertisement.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.etonline.com/kendall-jenner-tearfully-apologizes-controversial-pepsi-ad-kuwtk-premiere-i-felt-so-fking-stupid>.

<sup>3</sup> “I Am the Woman in the ‘Racist Dove Ad.’ I Am Not a Victim.” *The Guardian*, October 10, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/10/i-am-woman-racist-dove-ad-not-a-victim>.