



Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture

By Elizabeth Chin



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What does it mean to be young, poor, and black in our consumer culture? Are black children "brand-crazed consumer addicts" willing to kill each other over a pair of the latest Nike Air Jordans or Barbie backpack? In this first in-depth account of the consumer lives of poor and working-class black children, Elizabeth Chin enters the world of children living in hardship in order to understand the ways they learn to manage living poor in a wealthy society.

To move beyond the stereotypical images of black children obsessed with status symbols, Chin spent two years interviewing poor children in New Haven, Connecticut, about where and how they spend their money. An alternate image of the children emerges, one that puts practicality ahead of status in their purchasing decisions. On a twenty-dollar shopping spree with Chin, one boy has to choose between a walkie-talkie set and an X-Men figure. In one of the most painful moments of her research, Chin watches as Davy struggles with his decision. He finally takes the walkie-talkie set, a toy that might be shared with his younger brother.

Through personal anecdotes and compelling stories ranging from topics such as Christmas and birthday gifts, shopping malls, Toys-R-Us, neighborhood convenience shops, school lunches, ethnically correct toys, and school supplies, Chin critically examines consumption as a medium through which social inequalities -- most notably of race, class, and gender -- are formed, experienced, imposed, and resisted. Along the way she acknowledges the profound constraints under which the poor and working class must struggle in their daily lives.

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