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“Imperialism Is the New Black: Class, Colonialism, and Catalog Shopping”

According to cultural critic Paul Fussell there is a class system in America that nobody wants to talk about. In his book, *Class*, Fussell discusses why Americans refuse to acknowledge the existing class system as well as the components of the system itself. One reason people dismiss the notion of class is that it is inherently anti-American: It challenges the idealist American motto that all men are created equal. Another reason resistance of class discussion occurs is that class systems are linked to Great Britain—the country that in many ways gave birth to America and was quickly retaliated against once the people of the British colonies decided to combat the old system. Americans have fought long and hard to distance themselves from Britain, and with that distancing has grown the pride of a classless society.

That pride is a fiction, and the class system in America has in its roots a deep connection to Britain. One similarity between the systems is that many Americans who are aware of the class they are in rarely worry about it or struggle to break free. Class mobility—in either system—is a rare occurrence, argued dutifully throughout Fussell’s book. There is one class in America’s social system, however, that is downright obsessed with gaining status: the middle class. According to Fussell many Americans consider themselves members of the middle class whether they meet the middle-class criteria or not. And of these people, Fussell observes, “It’s a rare American who doesn’t secretly want to be upper-middle class” (34). He then spends a majority of the rest of his book discussing the means the middle class employ in order to increase their status. The main activity the middle class tends to participate in is the purchasing of goods that they associate with the upper classes, thus outwardly showing their (desired) upper class status. Fussell writes, “The desire to belong, and to belong by purchasing is [a] sign of the middle class” (41).

The decisions concerning how and what and why the middle class buys what it buys are directly linked to the dominance of anglophilia rampant in that class, and by extension, to imperialist values. The members of the middle class tend to be textbook anglophiles because of their belief that the upper classes have sophisticated roots in Britain and British customs. The upper classes (as focalized by the middle) are reserved, educated, moneyed, and come from families with important, European backgrounds. One distinction of the upper class is that “money goes back a considerable time,” (Fussell 72) and that the family fortunes were established through imperialist endeavors such as mining and mercantilism. Their money and heritage are embedded in colonialism, either in response to British imperialism (the colonists who prospered after the American Revolution) or as a direct result of investments made during the many centuries of British imperialism in Africa and Asia.

As a result of this perceived upper class tie to Britain, “the appeal of Anglophilia to...the middle class should never be underestimated” (Fussell 74). Fussell writes often about middle-class purchases of coats of arms and faux family heirlooms as a way for the members of the middle class to create their own connections to Mother England. Fussell quotes class critic C. Wright Mills when he writes, “The middle class [is] one that tends to ‘borrow status from higher elements’” (39). Fussell goes on to state that, “Worried a lot about their own taste and about whether it’s working for or against them, members of the middle class try to arrest their natural tendency to sink downward by associating themselves, if ever so tenuously, with the imagined possessors of money, power, and taste” (41).

This particular mixture of anglophilia and concern over choosing the correct products to represent their desired class status makes members of the middle class perfect targets for catalog consumerism. Once the appropriate lifestyle motif has been established by consumer trends and then appropriated by companies, catalog suppliers can mine the upper-class wannabes for all that their credit cards allow. Fussell writes effusively on this subject: “The middle class is the main clientele for these catalogs, and the things they buy from them assure them of their value and support their aspirations” (117). In one tidy booklet the middle class can peruse the pre-approved garments and sundries that look to them to be indicative of upper-class style and taste.

That the middle class can purchase these wares privately serves two purposes: One, they can acquire class-elevating items inconspicuously, thus avoiding the fact that they did not have them before and they are therefore *not* heirlooms, originals, or acquired through travels and two, they can avoid the possible humiliation of shopping in stores, ever fearful that they might say or wear the wrong thing in front of salespeople and be exposed as middles. Fussell continues: “Catalog buying is the perfect way for the insecure and the hypersensitive and the socially uncertain to sustain their selfhood by accumulating goods” (117).

So, catalogs it is—and the catalog companies are on to the middle class. If, as Fussell argues, “Catalogs aimed at the middle class seem to assume that only clients imagining themselves ‘British’ in descent constitute an audience...[that] no sort of hustle is apparently too coarse to work with the middle class, so deep is its need for a reputable (that is, British) family background,” (118) they would be right. A case in point is found in the Summer 2005 issue of Anthropologie’s catalog. A political reading of this issue, cover to cover, reveals this company’s unrelenting exploitation of the middle class’s anglophilia as well as the imperialist implications of that admiration. The desire of the middle class to associate itself with all things British gives Anthropologie—a clothing boutique and house wares supplier—license to liberally employ colonialist imagery. This catalog, viewed as a Western text, establishes the exotic stereotypes of “the East” and reaffirms the upper-class status and power of Westerners—white Anglos, Euros, or Americans, specifically over the native peoples of Asia.

The first pages of the catalog use Roman numerals for page numbers, immediately establishing the sophistication and education the contents of the catalog most certainly have to offer. But even before opening the text readers are struck by the enormous importance implied by the title of the company: Anthropologie. Aside from the fanciful addition of “ie” to replace the average, utilitarian spelling of anthropology with a “y,” the word is the same and retains the common definition of the word: the scientific study of man as both animal and part of human society, focusing on his origins, habits, evolution, and culture. Attention shoppers: This catalog contains scientific evidence of how to be a socially and culturally advanced member of society. The middle-class shopper can rest assured that all the grunt work has already been done in selecting the class-appropriate items contained within its pages, and with all the ease inherent to catalog shopping she may begin her expedition up the social status system.

The first few scenes depicted in the catalog have no clothes or purchasable items evident, serving only to introduce the reader to the Exotic Third-World Nation. On page Roman Numeral Three there appears the first white, overdressed model being driven around by a native. Immediately readers see that the underdressed figure from the brown class exists to service the sophisticated white lady touring the country. The imperialist story this catalog has to offer begins. On page Roman Numeral Five, the story continues, showing readers a scene of the woman, *in heels* on a *dirt road*, receiving help from two native military or police officials. She has relinquished her map to them so that they can assist her on her journey before getting back to

their task of law enforcement or government officiating. Several regular native citizens also pass by in the scene, craning their necks to view the foreigner. She is the center of attention—all eyes are on her. This image is a fixture of middle class fantasy: to be able to exert power and to be the focal point of the masses in any given situation, without apology. Middle class members are often signified as such by their apologetic and over-pleasing nature in social situations while the upper classes maintain an air of entitlement wherever they find themselves.

Easy assertion of stylish power is a trademark of the upper classes, not caring who or what they may be interrupting. The middle class is intimidated by this feature and feels that they must look the part before they can play it. A characteristic of the middle-class shopper, for example, is getting dressed up before going to the mall. The need to have things *just so* before treating people as though they are beneath them is what propels the middle class toward this anonymous catalog shopping. They can practice throwing their money around and asserting their authority without the threat of outside defiance—something the upper classes never worry about. Fussell affirms that, “Catalog buying delivers the illusion of power without the social risk of encounters with others who might dispute your power” (126).

A major component of looking the upper-class part is the manner of dress and style of clothing. Fussell describes most upper-class dress habits as generally careless and rather bland, that the upper classes generally stay within the navy-white-beige color wheel and buck current fashion trends. The Official Preppy Handbook supports this clothing theme, but Fussell exposes this book as a middle-class guidebook in disguise. So, color schemes aside, the type of clothing the upper classes don are either aged clothes or black-tie attire. The clothes do not need to be new—in fact, frayed hems and cuffs are sometimes a sign of that all-important “I don’t care” attitude associated with the upper classes. But the middle class does not seem to understand that the attitude is what makes the worn clothes a class signifier, associating old clothing with some kind of heritage hand-me-down. This is where faux vintage clothing steps in.

Anthropologie peddles expensive, gauzy attire that looks old. The dresses and shoes are impossibly retro and all the cuts are exceedingly feminine. The models are made up like vintage Hollywood starlets and nothing seems remotely contemporary. *Old* means upper class and insinuates historical connection. The upper classes have old money, old cars, old Oriental rugs, old furniture, and old clothes. There is a history to their things that establishes them as historically important figures, and that is why every item in the Anthropologie catalog looks like an antique. Even the new furniture within the catalog’s pages looks weathered and worn. The drawer knobs are mismatched and unique while the lamps are old-fashioned and ornate. Fussell says that the new and sleek items available for public consumption, like flat-screen televisions and iPods (authorial liberty taken in inserting new examples of technology here since Class is over twenty years old) are indicative of “the childish American obsession with the up-to-date” (181). The upper classes do not participate in this childish competition to acquire the newest products—that is the domain of the lower classes. The middle class has caught on to this in a few ways, as have the companies hawking their upper-class wares. Therefore, Fussell writes, “These catalogs offer a disproportionate number of Chinese artifacts (like ‘ginger jars’), betokening as they do a close connection with the ‘old’ Orient, the archaic one Americans used to colonize, missionary to, educate, patronize, and rip off” (122).

Returning to scenes from the colonialist past via the Anthropologie catalog, readers find on page three—using now, imperial numbers—a blond waif walking the rainy streets (again in high heels) with a merchant cart of some kind in the background. The native manning the cart is unseen in the shadows, and his umbrella is serving utilitarian purposes while hers, though useful,

is decorative and hardly work-related. She is in the foreground and of the leisure class; he is behind her, behind a cart, and metaphorically below her, a member of the working class. He remains a shadow, unseen by the middle-class readers. On page four a woman stands outside a lodge while natives ride past her on bicycles. Clearly, as the photograph indicates, she is on vacation with no place to be while these faceless natives must employ the common method of transport for the poor—the bicycle—to get to where they need to go. A quick look at the pieces of clothing for sale describes for the reader “the continental hat,” also indicative of her traveling-class status.

The name of this hat supports one of Fussell’s main points about language manipulation in advertising to the middle class. The language of exotic travel is used here to describe *clothing*. This language fuels the middle-class fantasy of traveling abroad, a frontier of the upper classes. The language shows the middle-class shopper that these are the clothes that one wears when one travels. Anthropologie also carries the “cropped touring pant,” the “excursion pant,” the “turista tank,” the “portside trouser,” the “retreat cardigan,” the “wharf slide” (a sandal), the “open horizon skirt,” and the “sojourn dress.” Names like these quickly conjure the travel fantasy and link the clothes steadfastly to the shopper’s goals. Fussell comments: “Advertising diction feeds so smoothly into the middle-class psyche because of that class’s bent toward rhetorical fake elegance. Aspiring to ascend, it imagines that verbal grandeur will forward the process” (157). To purchase the “bazaar tunic” indicates to the shopper that she is practically scouring the Moroccan marketplace already.

Shopping, travel, and leisure—these constitute the distinct domain of the upper classes, a luxurious territory that the middle class hopes to shop its way into. Pages four, five, and seven of the catalog feature charming sophisticates perfectly at ease in each exotic locale. The women are always sitting and leaning, never eager, unaffected. One distracted model in her “meandering blazer” carries a basket through an outdoor farmers’ market. She is a bohemian free of the confines of her kitchen staff, and though reared and spoon-fed by domestic servants all her life, she perfectly adapts to this environment. Were she from the middle class she would be nervous and worried about such purchases, likely apologetic and embarrassed to pay such low prices, but the upper classes are carefree and well adjusted. Fussell writes, quoting from the book Social Standing in America, “What the middle class most envies in the classes above is their trips abroad.... ‘Cultural superiority is symbolized’ by the uppers’ habit of tripping [which] ‘seems to say that the traveler is comfortable in such settings or is in the process of becoming so’” (109–111). Maybe it is the clothes, but it is more likely the sense of superiority that keeps the upper classes so cool and collected.

The world is at the upper classes’ service—at least according to the story this Anthropologie catalog has to tell. On page ten (and again on page fifty-six), a woman leans in front of a bar while the bartender is behind the bar (shot in motion because he is working and is therefore blurry). On pages fifty-four and fifty-five readers encounter a two-page spread featuring native fishermen, barely clothed and perched on poles in the middle of the water. Their shot is juxtaposed with one of a bored-looking woman leaning on her cabana railing looking (conceivably) out toward that same ocean. It is possible she is watching the fishermen catching her dinner—possible, but unlikely because the upper classes prefer the servant class to remain invisible.

A supreme marriage of imperialist imagery and American idealism is found on page Roman Numeral Eight (at the end of the catalog the pages return to this literary numbering). The scene is one of a somewhat patient white woman *sitting* on a native worker’s desk while the

traditionally garbed worker—seemingly a government office worker of some kind—reviews paperwork. The power structure is symbolized not only by the foreground/background imagery but also by the vertical height comparison of the white woman sitting above the subservient native. The topper to this image is that the model bears a striking resemblance to Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, of America’s presidential “royalty” fame. It is a popular consensus that the Kennedy family was the closest America ever came to having a royal family, and Jackie Kennedy remains an upper-class icon of monumental proportion. The clothes the model wears are not listed on this page, appearing on the next. The catalog designers decided not to interrupt or put a price on the image, the dream peddled here far too valuable to be cheapened.

Another imperialist dream is represented on page thirteen with the model in position as a schoolteacher with a group of uniform-clad native girls. The model wears the cat-eye glasses of the 1950s and 1960s and has her hair in a comparably old-fashioned up-do. Her dress is feminine and has a vintage-look. The scene is relentlessly nostalgic, irresistibly adorable, and utterly condescending. This image of the white missionary teacher bringing Western customs and values to the uncivilized natives is familiar to many colonized communities. However, to the middle-class shopper this scene is associated with the upper classes because of its imperialist imagery. The scene is representative of the height of colonialism, and the utter femininity the model exudes is a value prized by the upper classes.

This missionary school spread not only presents gender segregation and promotes old-fashioned femininity; it also captures the essence of imperialist philosophy: Colonialism brings better values to the colonized. As literary theorist Hans Bertens explores in Literary Theory: The Basics:

Orientalism, then, has traditionally served two purposes. It has legitimized Western expansionism and imperialism in the eyes of Western governments and their electorates and it has insidiously worked to convince the “natives” that Western culture represented universal civilization. Accepting that culture could only benefit them—it would, for instance, elevate them from the “backward” or “superstitious” conditions in which they still lived—and would make them participants in the most advanced civilization the world had ever seen (204).

The Summer 2005 catalog from Anthropologie reasserts a familiar orientalist story through its continuity of scene and location. It promotes imperialist values because they are associated with British culture, and that culture is linked to the American upper-class values that the middle class covets. Fussell writes, “The mail-order catalogs we’ve looked at do a lot of business with middle-class people who aspire to rise but whose circumstances enable them to do so only in fantasy” (171). An extension of Fussell’s argument that class mobility in America is nearly impossible could lead to the representation of the middle class as a colonized class. The colonized countries of the world contained people who desired to be accepted among the colonizers, and this desire drove them to mimicry. These people adopted the colonizer’s language, education, and clothing. They adopted their values. Ironically, the same thing occurs to the middle class inhabitants that strive for upward mobility, and in a performance that smacks of hegemony, they are prompted to do so because of their own desires. But they, too, are merely

mimics, perhaps approximating the look and markers of the upper classes but never really entering their ranks. A key component of that approximation is catalog shopping. Catalogs are the new preppy handbook, to use a colloquial comparison, and they contain the replica of trinkets thought to indicate upper-class status. Fussell writes, “Gestures toward exoticism—i.e., the foreign—enter when we move down to the...middle classes” (102).

For the sake of supporting this habit of the middle class further, it is worth venturing away from catalogs for a moment to discuss the rise of the popular chain store Cost Plus: World Market. The phenomenon of purchasing exotic-looking trinkets, made and imported from places they often do not connote or represent, is another way the middle class chases after upper-class imperialist values. It seems currently in fashion to showcase African-looking statues made of dark, sleek wood, or other artifacts that resemble items that may have been prizes of past colonial endeavors. Without having obtained these pieces through travel (and therefore authentic means), their value is negligible and the ownership pointless. The experience behind acquisitions of real artifacts is historical and unique; similarly, the ties American upper-class families have to British values and even imperialism cannot be purchased. The middle class is deluding itself with these trips to Cost Plus and orders from Anthropologie. They are chasing a shadow all the while reaffirming their class status. There is, however, possible harm in this seemingly innocuous action.

The Anthropologie catalog actively reinforces imperialist customs as desirable values. All the photographs were shot on location in Sri Lanka—a former British colony off the coast of India. On the back page of the catalog, sharing space with a native man walking an elephant by a chain along the seashore, Anthropologie thanks the locals who participated in the shoot. The following phrases appear in this thank-you: “the most magical places we’ve ever visited” and “Our local crew showed us the beauty of their home and imbued the photographs with their innate peace and generosity.” This sort of language—magical, innate peace, generosity—is the language found in countless historical texts that record Western colonizers’ initial interactions with the soon-to-be colonized natives. Orientalism thrives on reductive terms like *magic* when describing the “other,” and places power in the non-mystical Westerners’ hands, mainly by associating their customs with reality and practicality. Mysticism is exotic and imperialism is not. Imperialism is a business that only the most serious and powerful cultures can conduct—folklore and mysticism have no place in it. As a result, most of the locals that appear in the catalog photographs are unseen. Perhaps invisibility breeds peace and quiet, which the Anthropologie crew found generous. The locals assisted the Western crew, generously serving their needs. Perhaps this analysis seems overly skeptical, but this sort of imagery at the advertising, packaged-for-consumption level should not go unchecked.

This thank-you paragraph at the end of the catalog is conspicuous and self-aware. Perhaps in showing their gratitude and concern for the Sri Lankan people (after all, the shoot was just before the destructive 2004 tsunami) they were working to diffuse the possible outrage that might have erupted over the imperialist images printed on the catalog’s pages. The paragraph serves to say, “See, they helped, we like them, they wanted to do it”—a very imperialist attitude. In the middle class’s chase for upper-class status there lurks a possible resurgence of stepping on a lower class to climb up into the next one. These values, like the clothing, can be easily imported and are very likely harming the invisible class they depend on.

Works Consulted

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