THE WRITER AS PRODUCER; OR, THE HIP FIGURE AFTER HBO

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Before I ask: how does a literary work stand in relation to the relationships of production of a period, I would like to ask: how does it stand in them?

—Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer”

Inspired by The Sopranos, and created by Matthew Weiner just before he joined that show, Mad Men was, Weiner would later recall, “obviously written for HBO.” Weiner twice offered his show to the network but “never got a straight explanation for its pass” (Edgerton, “Selling,” 6). Ultimately the series was picked up by AMC, a commercial cable network. All the same, Weiner shot it in the production studios used by The Sopranos and, with the blessing of the Sopranos creator David Chase, employed directors, cinematographers, line producers, and production designers who had been Sopranos regulars. All this to visible effect: Mad Men wears on its immaculately tailored sleeves its debt to the “quality” drama pioneered by The Sopranos, whether in its distinctive visual style and high production values or in its nuanced story arcs and three-dimensional characters. But in this chapter I argue that in addition to being influenced by HBO drama, Mad Men is also about what it means to write for, produce, and market a quality series—despite its focus on advertising in the golden age of broadcast television. As we watch Don Draper manage his copywriters and negotiate his creative vision with clients and account executives, we watch an instance of what
John Caldwell calls “industrial reflexivity,” one that expresses a fantasy about what it means for writers to become the creators and showrunners of their own quality projects (Production Culture, 1).

David Chase was hardly the first to create, write for, and produce his own television series; he was preceded by the likes of Norman Lear, Aaron Spelling, Steven Bochco, Chris Carter, Aaron Sorkin, and many others. In The Producer’s Medium (1983), Horace Newcomb and Robert Alley termed these typically male figures, long considered the auteurs of television, “creative artists.” More recently, that role has involved becoming a “showrunner.” The work demanded of this position far exceeds that traditionally required of producers and includes everything from managing production workforces to marketing “transmedia franchises” that, in the words of Denise Mann, “successfully mobilize a host of ancillary revenue streams, engender merchandising opportunities, and spawn a multitude of spin-offs, including digital content and promotions for the web” (99).

In the case of quality drama especially, these heterogeneous responsibilities transform each other such that it becomes impossible to distinguish between the showrunner’s creative and executive functions; the result is a paradigmatically neoliberal vision of the writer and his labor. To borrow from Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, the showrunner is “top management,” and constitutes “the interface between ownership and management” (14). As Duménil and Lévy have it, “the reliance on top management has been a prominent feature of neoliberalism from its inception,” and has required weaning top management of “sectional behavior” that is born from its identification with lower workforce echelons (14, 8). That reliance has been particularly important to HBO, in part because, as Toby Miller explains, the network has long “wished to avoid the tight nexus that broadcast television had with a unionized workforce and job security.” Miller argues that HBO “represents the disorganized, decentralized, flexible post-Fordism of contemporary cultural capitalism. It relies on a variety of workers, many of whom do not have tenure and benefits, who are employed by small companies even when they sell their labor to the giant corporation of Time Warner” (x). HBO showrunners are the nexus of this reliance: they supervise their contingent labor force on behalf of Time Warner, even as they themselves works as temporary employees, albeit exceptionally well-compensated ones. It’s worth asking whether they prove themselves worthy of this position, and of the financing that comes with it, by proposing series that advertise their willingness to participate in a predatory management structure.

As Caldwell points out, all scripts are, in their first instance of viability,
business plans and branding opportunities; the earliest story sessions and producers’ meetings for television projects will invariably include personnel from the financing, marketing, coproduction, distribution, merchandising, and new media departments of the network in question. Discussions at such meetings do not sacrifice art at the altar of commerce in any simple sense, at least not in the case of quality drama. There is good reason to believe that HBO, for example, takes seriously the artistic ambitions of figures like David Simon, who, in his introduction to a book on *The Wire*, calls the series a “visual novel” akin to *Moby Dick* (25). But a showrunner is not an author in a literary sense; a salaried employee, he or she manipulates for profit “the relationships of production,” to recall Walter Benjamin, *in* which he or she stands, and revises literary precedents accordingly. I am interested in *Mad Men* because its industrial reflexivity revises the novelistic realism to which critics such as Lauren Goodlad and Caroline Levine (both writing in this volume) see it indebted: even as it seems absorbed in its historical milieu, even as it seems, pace Georg Lukács, to anatomicize the “not immediately perceptible networks of relationships that go to make up society” in the early 1960s (“Realism,” 38), it references a network of relationships particular to the television industry and, more specifically, the production and marketing of *Mad Men* itself.

Quality dramas like *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* depict charismatic leaders—Tony Soprano, the “don” of New Jersey, and Don Draper, a successful “creative”—whose capacity to earn while navigating complex labor relations suggests Chase and Weiner’s ability to do the same. At its inception, *The Sopranos* was to be about a *tv* producer, not a mobster (Lawson, 211). Echoes of that idea remain: in the first season, Chris Moltisanti, frustrated that he is not yet a captain, sets out to write a screenplay titled “Made Men.” One of Chase’s made men, Matt Weiner made good on Moltisanti’s ambition while riffing on his title. Weiner’s show, moreover, analogizes Draper’s position as the creative director of Sterling Cooper to his own as the showrunner of *Mad Men*. Draper never functions as the true showrunner of Sterling Cooper or (in season 4) Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce—jobs that surely belong to Joan Holloway. Nor does he have any desire to run his firm’s accounts (a role he explicitly disavows after the Hilton fiasco in season 3). But he does serve as an extension of the Matt Weiner brand insofar as he derives his creativity from—and not in conflict with—the managerial functions required of him. A successful creative executive, Draper embodies the fantasy that creating a show and running it require the same kinds of labor.
And yet the terms creator and showrunner indicate different relations to a productive process that both Mad Men and The Sopranos understand as inherently exploitative and self-alienating. A “labor leader” who extorts local unions, Tony Soprano extracts value from his equally predatory captains. “You’re supposed to be earners,” he tells his team. “That’s why you’ve got the top-tiered positions” (“For All Debts Public and Private,” 4.1). Chris Albrecht, the HBO executive who developed The Sopranos, might have directed these words to Chase, as Chase might have to anyone on his team, including Weiner. By the logic of these shows, Chase is most like a creator when hearing similar words, and most like a showrunner when speaking them. Tony Soprano is divided in what we might think of as an analogous fashion. As a character, he manages a workforce. But he is also the product that Chase sells to ownership. A fetish, he allows us to witness management relations within HBO being transformed, to recall Marx, into “the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Capital, 165). We might say, in this respect, that Soprano captures the manner in which industrial reflexivity is always also reification—a form of structurally required forgetting. If Soprano’s relations with his captains represent Chase’s “interface” between ownership and management, the character himself represents the site at which Chase’s labor, along with the labor of his workforce, disappears into something subject to ownership by HBO. However, that labor only partially disappears: it lingers in the show’s compensatory fantasy that the right kind of creativity and management might somehow transcend inherent contradictions between the interests of labor and capital.

Don Draper is a particularly reflexive instance of this commodity fetishism, insofar as Mad Men understands him as source of labor and, also, as a brand, as the product that he and his team must create and sell. He is, in fact, a contradictory fetish that taps into and reworks an ignominious cinematic precedent. I want to suggest that Draper’s contradictory relation to management takes shape, to borrow from Michael Rogin, around “the surplus symbolic value of blacks, the power to make African Americans represent something besides themselves” (14). In Rogin’s account of early Hollywood cinema, “blackening up and then wiping off burnt cork” functioned for Jews in the film industry as “a rite of passage from immigrant to American” (38, 5)—one in which the performance of blackness cleansed Jews of their ethnicity and humble class origins and left them able to pass as white. If, as Goodlad argues (this volume), Mad Men codes Draper as “virtual Jew,” it does so in a pointedly self-aggrandizing fashion. For ultimately, Draper’s interstitial racial identity indicates his ability to navigate workplace relations
Don Draper’s thinly veiled contempt for small-minded clients and pandering account executives reflects Matt Weiner’s frame of mind when he conceived the series. Draper articulates the “rage and resentment” that Weiner felt while writing assembly-line scripts for the CBS comedy series Becker.

“Who could not be happy with this?” Draper asks in the second episode of the series, “Ladies Room,” trying too hard to convince himself that he has arrived. Weiner says those sentiments were his, and explains them in light of the fact that while writing for broadcast television he enjoyed a handsome paycheck but felt unfulfilled. And so we must understand Draper’s surreptitious breaks from the office to view art-house films or read Frank O’Hara as a version of Weiner’s own longing for a more creative enterprise; a longing made suddenly coherent, he recalls, when he first watched The Sopranos and felt all at once “less alone” (Edgerton, “Selling,” 6).

Cinema and poetry are crucial insofar as they represent what Weiner felt was missing from his Becker job but saw on offer in Chase’s show. As Dana Polan notes, The Sopranos crystallized “a discourse of television quality” that imagines “television achieves aesthetic value precisely when it starts to look like something other than television—particularly, the established visual arts” (Sopranos, 87). And yet Weiner’s appreciation of the show’s profitability suggests why it mattered that The Sopranos was, in fact, television: “There was such depth and complexity to the show,” he recalls, “and at the same time it was so commercially successful” (Edgerton, “Selling,” 4). Rather than confirm any trade-off between the demands of art and commerce, The Sopranos suggested the necessary interrelation of aesthetic and commercial success. According to Weiner, quality “is a commercial decision,” and is enabled by having to make commercial decisions. “I am of the persuasion,” he

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that—in Weiner’s self-pitying design—render the firm’s creatives akin to black labor serving white ownership. Draper holds in abeyance the contradictory demands of labor and management (and functions, thereby, as both a writer and a producer) by seeming both black and white and, at the same time, neither—by seeming, in the lingo of the early 1960s, a hipster, a “white Negro.” Mad Men’s famous style, in other words, inheres in more than just the cuts of its suit lapels, the clean lines of its midcentury modernist furniture, or the “American décor” that Weiner associates with Jackie Kennedy. It inheres also in the fetishistic racial fantasy with which Weiner asserts his own ability to create, produce, and market quality drama.
has said, “that budget constraints are very, very good for creativity” (Edger-ton, “Selling,” 8, 13). In this account, so congenial to ownership, “creativity” inheres, ultimately, not in the product made, but in the managed relations that govern production.

The question at the heart of a range of other quality dramas, I would add, is not whether or not to sell, but what and how to sell, and to whom. From this perspective, Mad Men’s interest in advertising distinguishes it from dramas on both pay and advertising-dependent networks whose claims to quality involve not just seeming as if they were “not TV,” in the words of HBO’s advertising slogan, but as if they were unlike the mainstream commodities sold on TV. In fact, many of these dramas are about the production or supply of illegal substances and services: heroin and cocaine in The Wire, marijuana in Weeds, vigilante justice in Dexter, crystal meth in Breaking Bad, munitions in Sons of Anarchy, vampire blood in True Blood, alcohol in Boardwalk Empire, and prostitution in Hung.

Preoccupied with contraband, The Sopranos is the touchstone for this trend and begins to explain why the organized supply of illicit consumables—as opposed to the kind sold on Mad Men—should speak to a dramatic form pioneered by a pay television network. For decades HBO has offered material beyond the purview of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which no longer exerts strong regulatory control over cable programming. In 1977 HBO convinced the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia that the FCC had exceeded its authority in regulating cable industry programming. Central to the ruling was the notion that because cable TV was purchased and not “freely distributed” like radio and broadcast TV, it was, in essence, like newspaper publishing and thus subject to First Amendment protection (Santo, 21, 25). That ruling was pivotal to the evolution of pay television and finds repeated expression within The Sopranos. Toward the beginning of the show’s pilot, we see Tony picking up a newspaper at the end of his driveway, an action he will repeat throughout the course of the series, often while suspiciously glancing up and down the block as he scans for government agents. Securing lines of communication and distribution beyond federal jurisdiction is important to both the character and the network: circumventing the FBI is as central to Tony’s fortunes as circumventing FCC regulations was to HBO’s. Quality dramas produced in the wake of The Sopranos recognize as much when they understand themselves as responses to the reality, expressed by Vincent Rizzo on the second episode of The Sopranos (“46 Long”), that “as long as the human being has certain
appetites for gambling, pornography, whatever, someone’s always going to surface to serve these needs, always.”

In the media business, underground products require underground content. HBO has tended, when not telling stories about industry insiders (The Larry Sanders Show, Curb Your Enthusiasm, Entourage), to take as its dramatic subjects those who are alienated, not fully enfranchised, or living in varying degrees of conflict with the mainstream: prisoners (Oz); mobsters (The Sopranos); closeted morticians (Six Feet Under); outlaws (Deadwood); circus freaks (Carnivàle); polygamists (Big Love); and vampires, werewolves, witches, and fairies (True Blood). Even a drama about the police in Baltimore would become, in The Wire, a drama about the marginalization of one police unit within a larger system of relations ultimately hostile to its goals. No doubt Mad Men seemed, to Weiner, an appealing project for HBO because it begins on the threshold of the 1960s, the decade singularly associated with the explosion of the marginal into the mainstream. Draper is a cool-hunter before the letter: an alienated white-collar executive who prowls New York’s bohemia, he works for an industry that would begin to package and sell subcultural styles to conventional consumers in the 1960s—as HBO has done since the 1990s. Of course HBO might have thought, in turn, that Draper appeared too unapologetically on the wrong side of these developments, too smugly invested in the status quo, and that Mad Men was, as a consequence of its commitment to his ultimately hegemonic subjectivity, insufficiently “hip.”

Hip is not “a marginal fillip but a central current in American culture,” John Leland reminds us (288). Remarkably elastic, that current today polices the boundaries of countless cultural forms, fashions, and lifestyles—calibrating distinctions between the authentic and the ersatz and calculating degrees of proximity to the fountainheads of significant change. The particular hip I have in mind, however, provides the ultimate horizon for all aspirations to underground status within the United States, and is a variant of the peculiarly American tradition of blackface minstrelsy. In Eric Lott’s formulation, minstrelsy was a “theatrical practice, principally of the urban North, in which white men caricatured blacks for sport and profit” (3). A “clumsy courtship” animated by complex motives, minstrelsy allowed white men to negotiate the “panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure” attendant upon their identification with black men (50, 6). To Lott, that courtship persists: “Every time you hear an expansive white man drop into his version of black English, you are in the presence of blackface’s unconscious return”; the legacy of
blackface “is so much a part of most American white men’s equipment for living that they remain entirely unaware of their participation in it” (5, 53).

Hip culture was certainly part of the equipment for liberal novelists writing at the end of the 1950s and the start of the 1960s, whether they were purveyors of serious fiction like Norman Mailer, Ralph Ellison, and John Updike, or pulp novelists like George Panetta and John Schneider, both of whom chronicled the advertising industry in terms that prove remarkably germane to Mad Men (in Viva Madison Avenue! [1957] and The Golden Kazoo [1956], respectively). These writers, I argue elsewhere, participated in a “coalition culture” — evident most famously in the period’s jazz, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll — that militated on behalf of new unions between black and white voters and, in particular, the institutional needs of a changing Democratic Party (Hip Figures). Arbiters of hip for readers who were not, these novelists branded the liberalism of their moment. HBO works with this same model. As Avi Santo points out, citing the critics Mary Kearney and Jim Collins, networks like HBO are “designed to build coalition audiences” (30). HBO unites those audiences under the aegis of a hip house style, inaugurated in 1984 by its CEO Michael Fuchs and long central to the network’s ongoing efforts, to understand itself as a kind of edgy and sophisticated MTV for adults. AMC unites its audiences in a similar fashion: its efforts to emulate HBO involved adopting the slogan “Long Live Cool.”

One audience has always mattered more than others. As Jane Feuer has argued, quality television has long been addressed to “quality demographics”: affluent and white consumers between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine (“MTM Enterprises,” 4). But we might add that HBO-style drama understands the typically white members of that demographic as themselves internally divided coalitions, each of them constitutively ambivalent about his or her “quality” and therefore possessed of a paradigmatically hip double consciousness. A familiar conceit in this drama involves the protagonist who straddles two lives: one pedestrian and conventional, the other racy and dissident. There is the pot-dealing suburban mom in Weeds, the meth-producing high-school teacher in Breaking Bad, the serial-killer husband and father in Dexter, the gigolo high-school coach in Hung. Each of these series caters not to true outcasts, but to affluent whites who long to be both inside and outside the mainstream. Chase differentiates The Sopranos, the godfather of these shows, from the “corporate fascism” of broadcast television, which reverently depicts “authority figures” who are “looking out for us,” such as doctors, judges, lawyers, and cops (Lawson, 214). But Chase’s series was remarkable because Tony Soprano was the mob boss as husband,
father, barbequing suburbanite, and therapy patient: at once radically out-
cast and wholly representative of HBO’s law-abiding viewership. In just this 
way, Soprano was both white and off-white. On one occasion, he complains 
to his analyst Jennifer Melfi about “Wonder Bread wops” who are as boring 
as “your average white man.” She asks, “Am I to understand that you don’t 
consider yourself white?” His reply: “I don’t mean white like Caucasian” (“A 
Hit Is a Hit,” 1.10).

It was David Simon, and not Chase, who would fully elaborate hip as racial 
discourse and thereby extend HBO’s inaugural brand, first consolidated in its 
global broadcast of the “Thrilla in Manila,” the title bout between Joe Frazier 
and the ever-hip Muhammad Ali in 1975. According to Ishmael Reed, The 
Wire exemplified the network’s tacitly racist desire to seem hip, not simply 
because it was “tawdry,” “one-dimensional,” and “riddled with clichés,” but 
because it aimed to offer affluent whites a portrait of what life is really like 
in black inner cities and thereby advance the career of its creator, Simon 
(30, 31). There is much more to say than this about The Wire’s treatment of 
poverty and race, but it is undeniable that the show’s urban anthropology 
provided white liberals, in addition to many other things, an opportunity to 
slam from their living rooms. And Reed, who considers Mardi Gras a deca-
dent Confederate pageant, would no doubt find as much evidence of min-
strelsy in Simon’s next project, Treme, an extended love letter to the black 
musical traditions of New Orleans. Boardwalk Empire, created by Terrence 
Winter, who also worked on The Sopranos, is of a piece with The Wire and 
Treme in the relish with which it makes African Americans the mascots of 
an à la mode Jazz Age consumerism able to satiate illicit desires and unify 
the otherwise diverse constituencies—ethnic whites, women, blacks, and 
wasps—that its protagonist struggles to appease. Indeed, like Mad Men, 
Boardwalk Empire depicts blackface performances.

My goal is not to adjudicate Reed’s dispute with HBO, but rather to dem-
onstrate how series like The Wire, Boardwalk Empire, and Mad Men encode 
the conditions of their production and consumption by deploying “the sur-
plus symbolic value of blacks.” For Winter and Weiner especially, African 
Americans symbolize the double body of the commodity: at once concrete 
and abstract, they conjoin labor power and exchange value. Put more specifi-
cally, they represent the downward mobility of the workforce that the suc-
cessful showrunner must manage even as they underwrite the aspirational 
hip of the market that the series aims to reach.

The very first scene of Mad Men invokes African Americans as a test mar-
et (echoing an analogous scene in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Last Tycoon
The camera pans toward Draper’s back, and moves over his right shoulder, reproducing the line of sight in the series logo, whose black and white tones prefigure the conversation Draper here strikes up with a black waiter in a segregated bar. At ease with the worker in a way that seems exceptional to a racist white supervisor at the same bar, Draper tries to discover what it would take for this man to give up his preferred Old Gold brand of cigarettes and switch to Lucky Strike, the account on which Draper is then at work. The worker won’t be budged; he will remain loyal to his brand (“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” 1.1). Ultimately, over the course of the series, Draper will convert to his brand. But his conversion is only stylistic, for this resolutely white series is not really interested in winning black viewers. Rather, it means to chronicle Draper’s historically inevitable conversion to the period’s liberalism, and the corresponding acceptance, among Draper’s class fragment, of hip sensibilities—such that it will seem utterly unremarkable in season 4 when Draper’s firm, which worked for the Richard Nixon campaign in season 1, hires as its art director a countercultural photographer who helped the Lyndon Johnson campaign dramatize the southern resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. At no point will that acceptance require that Draper become overtly preoccupied with the fate of the African Americans who surround him and provide the labor on which he unthinkingly depends. Nor will it require him to become overtly committed to explicitly black styles. The point is rather that he will prove able and willing to consume those styles, in derivative form, as he does when he slums in an integrated Greenwich Village.

In the Greenwich Village scenes in season 1, Draper is not exactly what Norman Mailer called a “white Negro”: he disdains the ethos of the Village and makes no effort to understand or identify with black culture. But he is something of a hipster manqué during these surreptitious visits to the New York underground. The Jewish heiress Rachel Menken suggests that he is as alienated from WASP society as she is; in response, he spouts sentiments straight from Mailer’s essay: “You’re born alone, you die alone, and this world just drops a bunch of rules on top of you to make you forget those facts. . . . I’m living like there’s no tomorrow,” he says, “because there isn’t one” (1.1). As Mailer made clear, existential gestures like these deracinated the hipster’s more overt stylistic affectations, insofar as they likened the plight of whites worried about the bomb to that of blacks faced with racial violence. Such gestures render “authenticity” both authoritative and subject to exchange. They obliquely invoke racial characteristics even as they decouple race from its ostensibly literal moorings and suggest that it is, in-
stead, something performed: a mantle to be assumed or discarded, a way for members of one group to become members of another and yet remain themselves, a figurative rather than a literal means of seeing color.

These stylistic gestures were of great value to a changing Democratic Party: they offered white male suburbanites a low-cost way to view themselves as simultaneously inside and cast out from the center of political power—in short, as possessed of both white and black skin and thus as both like and unlike the African Americans who were then joining the party in record numbers. No doubt similar gestures remain valuable to the professionals and managers who watch Mad Men, especially those eager to overlook the disciplinary nature of their class position. These viewers, we might speculate, would forget that they belong, in the words of Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich, to a group of “salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production and whose major function in the social division of labor may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations” (12). Mad Men negotiates these class relations by adumbrating a particularly American vision of capitalist culture, one in which the white mental worker’s blackness signals, in contradictory fashion, his creativity on the one hand and his vulnerability to mechanization and replacement on the other. For the professional-managerial class, relations strain at the point of their hyphenation: a class comprising both professionals and managers must necessarily demonstrate how and why professionals (typically governed by guild-bound strictures) and managers (typically governed by organizational efficiency) can form a single interest group. Draper’s ideological function is to demonstrate, against all indications to the contrary, that far from being in tension, these commitments are one and the same thing; he proves capable of executive creativity by teaching his creative team how to be, and how not to be, black.

**SOMETHING MORE THAN SHOESHINE**

Written by Matt Weiner, the season 2 premiere, “For Those Who Think Young,” depicts Draper at loggerheads with Herman “Duck” Phillips, the head of accounts at Sterling Cooper. Phillips wants Draper to hire younger, hipper creative personnel and wants individual accounts worked by small collaborative teams of writers and artists. Anticipating Draper’s resistance to his autonomy as writer and creative director, Phillips approaches Roger Sterling, who urges Phillips to talk to Draper directly. “Look,” Roger says, “Don is talent. You know how to deal with that, don’t you? Just assume that
he knows as much about business as you do. But inside there’s a child who likes getting his way.” Draper will resist Phillips because of his own childlike propensity to “think young.” Phillips wants young creatives because he thinks they think young in the way that the young consumers he hopes to reach think young. But as Draper tells Sterling, “Young campaigns don’t necessarily come from young people.”

This is a version of the logic behind the historic Pepsi campaign to which Draper dismissively refers: as Stanley Hollander demonstrates, that campaign sold an ideal of “youthfulness or what might be labeled youngness” to young and old alike (Leiss et al., 319). Writers, Draper thinks, are labile. “Stop writing for other writers,” he tells Paul Kinsey. Writers should instead write for themselves, since they contain multitudes. “You are the product,” Draper later instructs Peggy Olson, “you feeling something.” Lynne Joyrich (this volume) reads this line as a recognition of the fact that for broadcast television, “the viewers themselves—not the programs, nor even, exactly, the objects in ads—have always been the true commodities: the industry operates by selling audiences to advertisers.” On this view, Don’s advice articulates the difference between the “first-order commodity relations” and the “second-order commodity relations” at work respectively in subscription-based and commercial television. In essence, subscription TV sells programming directly to subscribers, while commercial TV uses programming to sell its imagined viewers to advertisers (Rogers et al., 46). But Joyrich’s reading does not make full sense of the context in which the line is spoken. Draper admonishes Olson to understand herself as essential to the business and account execs who do not sufficiently value her creativity. The complaint he levels at Sterling when asked to think young, which he will repeat elsewhere, is that “clients don’t understand.” Draper’s vision of creativity aspires to first-order commodity relations: he would sell directly to consumers whom he ostensibly understands better than clients or account men like Duck. Of course Draper is not urging Olson to preoccupy herself with those consumers; his point is that she is true to consumers when true to herself and her work. This is the credo of the professional: heed your craft and its requirements and the rest will take care of itself.

And yet Draper is not Olson. She writes the copy for Mohawk Airlines while he supervises her efforts. Draper does not enjoy an ownership stake in the ad agency that employs him until the end of season 3; but already, here, his executive position complicates his account of creativity. Weiner’s DVD commentary likens Draper’s supervision in this instance to that of a showrunner overseeing a writing team. In fact Weiner likens Draper to David
Chase; he observes that he once enjoyed the same mentoring that Draper is here providing Olson. And on another occasion, Weiner recalls that Chase spoke of the television writer just as Draper does to Olson: “David viewed himself as the audience and the people in the [writing] room” (Edgerton, “Selling,” 6). Chase’s capacity to view himself as both the audience and a staff writer indicates not his recognition that his audience is the true object of sale (The Sopranos depends on first-order commodity relations), but his willingness to understand himself as both the creator and consumer of a product that is, ultimately, him. His is the brand that HBO sells, just as Draper’s is the brand that Sterling Cooper sells to prospective clients. Olson can never truly be the product: like all the other copywriters, she works for Draper, selling his brand.

The episode “Think Young” understands these labor relations in racial terms. At one point, two black deliverymen wait for Joan Holloway to decide where to place the Xerox copier they have just delivered (fig. 5.1). Those standing about greet her first thought, the break room, as an intrusion of work into leisure. But her second thought—somebody’s office—is still more ominous, and makes plain that the instrument of mechanical reproduction and the black labor that delivers it together capture the obsolescence that threatens the older “copy” writers, who worry they are about to be replaced.
with younger, newer models of themselves. At the conclusion of the first creative meeting of the episode, we cut to Carla, the Drapers’ black domestic worker, cleaning dishes. “Carla, Bobby’s turning blue out there,” Betty Draper observes with her usual hauteur. Black and blue: the episode likens Betty’s authority over Carla to Don’s over his team, and Bobby’s change of color suggests that those team members (who have just called themselves “the little ones”) are in the process of becoming black. After Draper interviews a very young creative team (“He’s such a hipster,” Weiner says of one of them in his DVD commentary on the scene), we cut to a black and a white mover with Joan and the copy machine, now in the hallway. The interracial movers are different from the first two, and the message is clear: the black workers are as replaceable as the older copywriters.

The secretaries who will operate the new machine share the most with its working-class movers. Olson has only recently left this clerical workforce and is, as a consequence, especially proximate to black labor. That proximity is the buried message in Draper’s exhortation that she imagine herself “the product.” After evaluating a mock-up for Mohawk Airlines that Olson and Sal Romano have produced to his specifications, Draper declares himself “uninvolved.” The ad’s racy appeal is too “obvious.” Olsen confidently counters, “Sex sells.” Draper replies, “Says who?” The question is singularly odd, because Olson’s assertion reproduces almost verbatim Draper’s earlier claim to the same effect: Draper is who. It is as if, in this moment, as he evaluates the product of his own oversight, he cannot recognize that part of him that created the ad. He continues: “Just so you know, the people who talk that way think that monkeys can do this. They take all this monkey crap and just stick it in a briefcase completely unaware that their success depends on something more than their shoeshine.” It is at that point he tells her that her feelings are what sells, “not them” and “not sex. They can’t do what we do, and they hate us for it.”

Draper’s conceit blackens the worker alienated from his labor. “Monkeys” code “African Americans”: the product of the copywriter’s labors becomes “monkey crap” and then “shoeshine,” a word that might refer either to the act of polishing a shoe (labor then associated with African Americans) or to the polish itself (then associated with blackface routines). Self-alienating labor is black labor; Olson risks becoming a monkey when she reproduces the assumptions of a production regime that would understand her work as mechanized and easily reproduced. Appropriate, then, that upon leaving this meeting, she returns to her office, where Joan has decided to place the copying machine. Lest we miss the implications of Joan’s decision, we cut to
Draper standing next to a black elevator operator and riding to street level. The scene captures the racially inflected downward mobility that threatens Olson and, by extension, the firm’s copywriters, male as well as female.

From one perspective, everybody at Sterling Cooper faces the threat of downward mobility. Pete Campbell’s father insists upon the advertising industry’s intimacy with blackness. Mrs. Campbell is a member of the blue-blooded Van Dyke family, which once owned all of the land north of what is now Manhattan’s 125th street. The Dyke has burst: this land is now Harlem, which is presumably why Mr. Campbell seethes that his son is moving too far north up the island. Mr. Campbell’s objections to advertising are more explicit. Dripping contempt, he lampoons his son’s work on Madison Avenue. “Wining and whoring,” he spits; “no job for a white man” (“New Amsterdam,” 1.4). Mad Men understands this claim in contradictory fashion. Paul Kinsey, Sterling Cooper’s most conspicuously liberal copywriter, extols the wonders of the market to Freedom Riders: the consumer has no color, he announces to his disbelieving black companions. Back north, Kinsey dates a black woman and writes a short story about a night he spent in Jersey City “with all these Negroes.” “We all got along,” he brags. “Can you imagine how good that story is?” (“5G,” 1.5). But Kinsey falls prey to his own hipness: he supplies the names of young talent to Sterling without realizing they are on offer as his replacements.

Draper, in contrast, rises to the heights that he does because he transmutes his proximity to black labor and overcomes the self-alienation implicit in it. Identified throughout the first season with blacks (as well as Jews and gays), he lives in terror of being outed as a deserter and the illegitimate son of a poor farmer and prostitute. At the end of season 1, Campbell discovers these secrets and relays them to Bert Cooper, who later uses it to blackmail the once proudly unfettered Draper into signing a contract with the firm. But in time, that firm will become synonymous with Draper. The season 4 premiere, “Public Relations,” dramatizes that ascension: “We are all here because of you,” Olson tells him. “All we want to do is please you.” In a metadiscursive conceit that drives this home, Olson and Campbell service the Sugarberry Ham account: they strategize how to sell “Hamm,” the star around whom they are arrayed. “There’s always a name in every partnership that defines who they are,” a reporter from the Wall Street Journal tells Draper, in an interview that marks his overdue acceptance that he must sell himself for the good of the firm. Embracing this role, Draper channels his proximity to black labor into market magic: his interview ends the episode, and his voice dissolves into the song “Tobacco Road,” performed by the British Invasion
band the Nashville Teens. Erskine Caldwell’s Depression-era novel about white tenant farmers living alongside African Americans is transformed here into a power-pop hit: “Bring that dynamite and a crane, / Blow it up, start all over again.” In this context, Draper’s humble origins are less a liability than a condition of his success, a condition almost conjured, we might speculate, by the product upon which his firm is centrally dependent: tobacco.

Draper’s hip creative destruction requires breaking down distinctions and absorbing them. It is his idea to start a new firm at the end of season 3, and he facilitates his plan by kicking down the door of the art department. In his commentary for “Think Young,” Weiner describes the comingling of writers and artists on creative teams as an overcoming of segregation. He might also have described the creative and accounts departments at Sterling Cooper as segregated—so insistently does Mad Men associate copywriters with blacks and account executives with WASPs—and Draper’s overcoming of that segregation as an incipiently hip act of racial integration. This dynamic assumes its most properly symbolic form in the third-season episode “My Old Kentucky Home” (3.3), as we cut between an exclusive country club and the Sterling Cooper offices. At the club, Roger Sterling sings in blackface to his young wife Jane, as Campbell, Cooper, and Draper look on (fig. 5.2). At the office, Kinsey and Olson smoke pot. Draper attends the country club but calls the increasingly enfeebled and ridiculous Sterling “foolish” at the end.
of the party. In “Think Young,” Phillips describes Sterling as “the bridge between accounts and Don.” But Sterling’s power wanes as Draper’s waxes. Draper, and not Sterling, will bridge creative and accounts, and he will do so less by assuming Sterling’s responsibilities and style than by recasting them in an appropriately hip idiom. Sterling performs his minstrel routine “with a little shoe polish” (3.3), but Draper embodies a different kind of polish: Sterling’s polish reappears, dematerialized, as Draper’s deracinated racial style.

Sterling’s blackface figures the embarrassing and outré manner in which Sterling endeavors to think young and, by extension, mediate between creative and accounts. Draper will learn to mediate between departments as a creative, though a creative with a clarified sense of his role. In “Public Relations” (4.1), when he is confronted with his reluctance to sell himself to a reporter, Draper asks the partners, “Who gives a crap what I say anyway? My work speaks for me.” But it does not speak the way he thinks it does. Bert Cooper replies, “Turning creative success into business is your work. And you have failed.” He succeeds, the episode makes clear, when he sells the work of others as his own, a process that will require him—in a manner that reworks Sterling’s blackface—to be simultaneously white and black. He has already refused to acknowledge Olson’s contribution to his award-winning commercial for Glo-Coat floor wax (in a plotline that subtly revises Weiner’s own troubled relationship to Kater Gordon). But this episode finds him polishing his image and transforming himself into a marketable brand in ways that revisit the racial metaphor with which he described the labor of creatives to Olson. When, alone in his apartment, Draper shines his shoes while watching this commercial, the echo of “Think Young” is pointed: he has become one of those who “take all this monkey crap and just stick it in a briefcase completely unaware that their success depends on something more than their shoeshine.”

Olson’s labor disappears into Draper’s shoeshine: burnishing his own image at the expense of hers, he symbolically arrogates to himself the status of both black worker and white owner. Advertising copywriters sell their labor for a wage to advertising firms, which extract surplus value from that labor by reselling it as “creative work” to corporations that generate surplus value, in analogous fashion, by reselling at a profit the congealed labor of those who manufacture their products or provide their services. Similarly, writers for commercial television sell their labor to production companies that resell that labor as creative work to networks, which sell airtime to corporations lured by the prospect of reaching those viewers who consume the creative work in question. Draper closes the loop. The agent as well as the
recipient of the shine, he extracts surplus value from Olson, and yet experiences it as the extraction of value from himself: in this, the comforting self-delusion of the professional-managerial class.

The instrument of his own dispossession, he is, polish in hand, implicitly in blackface. As Susan Willis reminds us, blackface functions as “a metaphor for the commodity. It is the sign of what people paid to see. It is the image consumed, and it is the site of the actor’s estrangement from self into role. Blackface is a trademark, and as such it can be either empty or full of meaning” (189). Draper is self-estranged and trapped within the commodity form. But Mad Men understands that self-estrangement as both the cause and effect of his capacity to become a creative executive: symbolically black, he is exploited, but possessed of an outsider’s purchase on the fantasies of white Americans; manifestly white, he converts that perspective into capital. As Ta-Nehisi Coates remarks in an article titled “The Negro Donald Draper,” Draper is, “in the parlance of old black folks, passing.” Coates is quick to add, however, that “the irony that animates Mad Men” is the fact that Don’s “double consciousness,” derived from being symbolically black, “makes him, indeed, doubly conscious, doubly aware. Don Draper sees more.”

That double vision, which would convert alienation into empowerment, finds expression at the start of every episode. Wolfgang Haug describes consumers lured in by shimmering and promissory phantasms that drift “unencumbered like a multicolored spirit of the commodity into every household.” These phantasms, Haug maintains, promise consumers a “second skin” (50).
The opening credits of *Mad Men* depict something like this scenario, but in reverse, as the interior of a room opens outward into a world of multicolored spirits. A silhouetted outline of a man walks into an office, stares at his desk, and places his briefcase on the floor. The camera lingers on that briefcase, which is as pitch black as the man himself and which, at least by the start of the second season, will figure as black the creative labor that white executives convert to capital. Somehow heavier than the man who carries it, the briefcase falls through the floor first as the office dissolves, just before the man too falls downward, past barely outlined buildings adorned with the alluring images of women used to sell products. The buildings then dissolve as well, until the camera falls straight through a title that reads, “Created by Matt Weiner.” Having passed this symbolic threshold, the falling figure emerges from his vertiginous descent in easy possession of his space, sitting casually, smoking, somehow liberated by the white collar that seemed before to constrain: meet Don Draper, showrunner, brand, and trademark, at once empty and full of meaning (fig. 5.3).

**NOTES**

1. These issues were pressing: “For Those Who Think Young” aired months after the conclusion of the 2007–8 Writers Guild of America strike, during which writers risked replacement while pressing employers to grant them a greater revenue share from DVDs, and other electronic “copies” of their work.

2. Gordon was Weiner’s personal assistant before he promoted her to staff writer. The two earned an Emmy for cowriting the season 2 finale, but he fired her before the start of the third season.