Black Dreams: A Cultural History of the American Dream in Black Popular Culture in the 20th and 21st Centuries

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation explores how the American dream has been understood in Black popular culture in the 20th and 21st centuries, providing a cultural history of the idea in three distinct periods in Black America: the great migration, the civil rights movement, and the hip-hop era. Although the dream has been an accessible and prevalent way to explore notions of success and mobility in America, it also has been a problematic myth that has not adequately described lack of opportunity in Black America. African American popular culture has therefore responded to the ideology of the dream through both a material lens of upward class mobility but also a moral frame of a struggle for justice and freedom. By complicating our interpretation of the Black American dream, we can better understand the history of this marginalized community and how hope and aspiration were deployed in the Black community from the great migration to the age of President Donald Trump.
Dedication

To my mom and the 6.5 percent of Ph.D. holders in America who are Black.

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Introduction

It was all a dream . . .

—The Notorious B.I.G., “Juicy”

In 1984, writer James Baldwin asserted to poet Audre Lorde that most Black people, including himself, believed in the idea of the American dream (MoCADA, 1984). “Du Bois believed in the American dream. So did Martin. So did Malcolm. So do I. So do you. That’s why we’re sitting here,” Baldwin said (as cited in MoCADA, 1984, para. 1), during a conversation that took place at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. Lorde immediately pushed back, revealing the divide among Black people over the American dream. Her statement showed the complexity of the popular ideology of the Dream in Black America, both how to achieve it and whether it exists.

Lorde: I don’t, honey. I’m sorry, I just can’t let that go past. Deep, deep, deep down I know that dream was never mine. And I wept and I cried and I fought and I stormed, but I just knew it. I was Black. I was female. And I was out—out—by any construct wherever the power lay. So if I had to claw myself insane, if I lived I was going to have to do it alone. Nobody was dreaming about me. Nobody was even studying me except as something to wipe out.

Baldwin: You are saying you do not exist in the American dream except as a nightmare.

Lorde: That’s right. And I knew it every time I opened Jet, too. I knew that every time I opened a Kotex box. I knew that every time I went to school. I knew that every time I opened a prayer book. I knew it, I just knew it.

Baldwin: It is difficult to be born in a place where you are despised and also promised that with endeavor—with this, with that, you know—you can accomplish the impossible (MoCADA, 1984, para. 2-4).

Ultimately, Baldwin was correct; most Black people do believe in the American dream (Luhby, 2020). But Lorde’s disbelief in the dream is interesting as well; it was a product of White heteronormative supremacy, which rendered her experiences with
gender, education, and religion invisible. Her statement also revealed the impact Black
cultural texts, like Jet, a popular Black newsweekly magazine, had on the way Black
Americans understood the American dream and how profoundly it did (or, in some cases,
did not) resonate with them. It showed potential for analysis of the dream in the popular
culture space, since most studies show Black people not only believe in the dream, but
often believe in it more so than any other racial group in the United States. This
dissertation, therefore, seeks to analyze the discussion about the American dream using
the lens of Black popular culture.

Black people have engaged with the idea of the dream for decades. Sometimes, it
meant upward mobility or wealth, while others believed it simply meant doing better than
their parents. Even today, there is no consensus on the dream, no total agreement whether
there is a dream at all or how the Black community members should attain it. Throughout
history, Black Americans have shown they believe in multiple ways to define the
American dream, through riches, religious enlightenment, or as social justice; and even
more paths to achieving it, like education, working for corporate America, or becoming a
politician.

In 1973, communications theorist Walter Fisher argued the American dream
contained two components, (a) the materialistic dream, which promoted individual
wealth, riches, and fame; and (b) the moralistic dream, which was a more spiritual
argument focused on ideals such as equality, freedom, and democracy. Fisher’s argument
led to a debate about which part of the dream was more important in this country, the
moral or material, with several studies finding Black people were more committed to the
moral aspect of the dream. Sociologist Jennifer Hochschild (1995) found that for White
people, the dream often meant economic success, as she noted “socioeconomic status is closely associated with subjective quality of life” (p. 93). But it was different in the Black community. Black people, she found, “do not express greater happiness or more satisfaction with their life as their economic position improves” (Hochschild, 1995, p. 93). English scholar Tsui-Feng Jiang (2009) came to a similar conclusion and argued Black Americans, “owing to their racial memories of pain and denigration…know the American dream signified something more than economic success to them” (p. 7). Jiang found White playwrights and playwrights of color in the seventies and eighties focused on different aspects of the dream. Although the material was a part of the dream, for characters of color, it seemed like, “before they can feel free to pursue their economic success, they are impelled to confront the more imminent issue of the spiritual aspect of the American dream” (Jiang, 2009, p. 6). This dissertation further explores how the American dream has been understood in Black popular culture in the 20th and 21st centuries and whether it has, like Jiang asserted, been more focused on the moral over the material aspect of the American dream.

This dissertation provides a cultural history of the idea in three distinct periods in Black America: the great migration, the civil rights movement, and the post-civil rights/hip-hop era. I seek to uncover what the American dream has meant to Black Americans and how Black popular culture has responded to this idea. Although the dream has been an easily understandable and popular way to explore notions of success and mobility in America, it has also been a problematic myth that has not adequately described opportunity in Black America.
Black people have had a hard time attaining the American dream. Black Americans lag behind White Americans by almost all economic and social indicators and have continuously experienced discrimination both at the hands of the most revered institutions and by overzealous racists (Pew Research Center, 2016). These data have proved that the dream of opportunity for all remains just that—a dream. However, the myth of the American dream, the idea everyone has the same chance to become wealthy or attain equality in America, provided a way for Americans to ignore structural issues and place the blame for failures on individuals instead of structures and institutions in this so-called land of opportunity. The dream has simply provided a way for those on the margins to believe success is possible despite the fact the dream was just not made for them.

A Nation of Strivers

The American dream is one of the most enduring myths in America and one of its most prominent falsehoods. The dream, the idea anyone can succeed and enjoy a prosperous life through hard work, has been around since the founding of the country, despite the reality that it only applied to a limited number of people. Traditionally tied to the ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, as written in the Declaration of Independence (U.S., 1776), the idea reflected the desire for individual freedom from controlling monarchs in Europe through puritanical notions of hard work and thrift, to the exploration of the West, and to the gold rush. It was also seen in Alexis DeTocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1862). DeTocqueville wrote of the components that make up the dream in America, “the love of physical gratification, the notion of bettering one’s condition, the excitement of competition, the charm of anticipated success” (p. 87). An
increasingly capitalistic and consumer-focused society complicated the myth, which H.W. Brands (2008) affiliated with instant wealth. By the turn of the century, with publications like T.S. Arthur’s Ten Nights in a Barroom (1854), Andrew Carnegie’s Gospel of Wealth, (1889), and a range of Horatio Alger stories promoting the rags to riches ideology, the drive for success related to consumption and material riches had taken hold in mainstream America. Success was increasingly tied to ambition and aggressiveness rather than moral virtues, as it was assumed wealth contributed to the common good. At the same time, language connecting poverty to failure gained traction (Hearn, 1977, p. 16), making it difficult for Americans to develop class consciousness. In Europe, most workers identified with the proletariat, whereas American workers were less responsive to that categorization because they saw themselves as a nation of strivers, not workers. Charles Hearn (1977) explained:

As long as there is hope, real or mythological, of climbing the ladder of success or of making possible a better future for his children, the American worker does not want to change the system radically. . . . To think of himself as a distinct class, set apart from other Americans and motivated by different symbols, values, and objectives, would mean giving up the American dream. It would mean conceding that America is not a classless society offering equal opportunity for everyone to reach the top. (p. 16)

Because of this, the American dream was able to flourish in America.

In 1931, during the Great Depression, writer James Truslow Adams worried materialism was taking over the country as Americans began looking to captains of industry like Henry Ford for inspiration. He wanted to remind Americans of what he believed was their unique history of optimism, which was not tied to class or social order and still promoted success. In The Epic of America (1931), he first used the phrase “American dream.” In it, he defined this new phrase to be a “dream of a land in which
life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each
according to ability or achievement” (Adams, 1931, p. 404). Though his description of
the dream was ambiguous and open to interpretation, he was careful to write what it was
not:

It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order
in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of
which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are,
regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (Adams, 1931, p. 404)

It is the same idea Bill Clinton echoed to the Democratic Leadership Council in 1993,
“The American dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one: If you
work hard and play by the rules, you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-
given ability will take you” (Clinton, 1993, as cited in Hochschild, 1995, p. 18). The
dream remains subject to interpretation, though as a whole, there have been few
challenges to Adams’s interpretation.

The Dream in Contemporary Society

A 2017 study by the Pew Research Center showed the popularity and belief in the
American dream, as each respondent defined it, remained high; 46% of Americans
believed they were on their way to achieving the American dream and 36% stated they
already achieved it (Smith, 2017). These data were inconsistent with growing income
inequality, mass incarceration, and stagnating wages despite increases in productivity
(Rank, 2016).

More curious was the myth of the dream persisted in communities whose
economic and social standings in the United States have been repeatedly marginalized. When broken down by race, the study found Black and Latinx communities believed in
the dream with more fervor than their White counterparts (Smith, 2017). Sixty-two percent of Black people said they were on their way to achieving the dream and 51% of Latinxs agreed. Only 42% of White people agreed. More interestingly, only 17% of Black people believed they had achieved the dream, when compared with 32% of Latinx and 41% of White people. Those who had not achieved the dream believed in it the most.

Like other previous research, the study did not exactly define what achieving the dream entailed. This lack of definition means there is no quantifiable measure of who is or is not achieving the American dream, relegating the popular idea to just that; an idea. Even using some of the broadest language possible about the dream, the idea an individual will do better than their parents, has been proven false, not just in the 21st century but through much of American history. At best, the American dream is fantasy, a myth Americans like to believe.

This does not mean the myth should be discounted. In an essay about the television western *Lonesome Dove* (1989), historian Elliot West wrote about the power of myth as a simple story told by people with a “common identity . . . to explain who they are and how they have come to be” (2012, loc. 4132). While it is easy to dismiss this myth as inherently unrealistic and false, West believed even an “idealized myth” could be something even in its sort of “unreality.” “The dream itself was largely illusion, but as an inner reality it was undeniable. . . . the dream was truly there, and because as Americans we instinctively recognize it, it continues [to have] an undeniable power” (West, 2012, loc. 4246).

Even if the American dream is a myth, it remains a reality, an idea recognizable in nearly every aspect of American life, in political culture, popular culture, public policy,
and within the beliefs of the people. The idea of the American dream has been especially prominent in Black culture in the 20th and 21st centuries, though little scholarly research has engaged with this idea in the Black community.¹ By looking at how African American culture has understood, replicated, dismissed, and engaged with the American dream, we can better understand the history of this marginalized community and how hope and aspiration played a part in their beliefs in what Adams (1931) called the “land of promise,” from the Great Migration to the era of President Donald Trump. Since the idea of the American dream is rooted in popular mythology using popular culture can help understand how the Black community has engaged and wrestled with the idea of the American dream in the 20th and 21st centuries.

**Literature Review**

No academic studies have solely focused on how Black popular culture engaged with the idea of the American dream, perhaps because there is a limited amount of scholarly work on the American dream, particularly in the humanities. Historian Jim Cullen’s (2003) cultural and intellectual history of the American dream is one of the most prominent. According to Cullen, academic interest in the concept of the dream peaked after World War II, particularly by Consensus historians in the 1960s, like Daniel Boorstin, John Morton Bloom, and Richard Hofstadter, who were looking to help explain why the United States would not succumb to totalitarianism (Cullen, 2003). There has been more recent interest in the subject, perhaps sparked by the September 11th attacks or the recession of 2008, two moments redefining and reckoning with national ideals, which have been contested in and outside of academia (e.g., Bush & Bush 2015; Cullen, 2016).

¹ Throughout this study, I use the terms Black American and African American interchangeably.
2003; Hanson, 2011; Hodgson, 2009; Jiang, 2009; Jilson, 2016; Rank, 2014; Samuel, 2012). However, a lot of these works have focused on empirical and quantitative questions about accessibility to wealth and upward mobility rather than the questions I ask regarding the race and this national myth.

Sociologist Jennifer Hochschild’s (1995) *Facing Up to the American Dream* provided useful insight into what the dream meant for Black Americans in the 1980s and 1990s, especially those in the middle class, using polling, data, and surveys. Hochschild used advertising to try to paint a complete portrait of the dream but did this in minimal amounts and her research largely remained anchored in quantitative data. I have found a more interesting analysis of the dream in works of cultural scholars like Cal Jilson (2016), Tsu-fen Jiang (2009), and Harold Bloom (2009), though much of this cultural analysis focused on literary studies.

Popular culture seems to be the most useful and vibrant way to understand the nuances and complexities of the dream since, at its core, it is a made-up story. Stories, it seems, help explain this myth even more. In 2000, English professor Kathryn Hume’s *American Dream, American Nightmares*, looked at fictional accounts of the American dream coming from a literary background. She wrestled with how over 100 works of fiction between 1960-1990 dealt with the idea of American failure and disillusionment with the promise of America. This work was in the vein of Vernon Parrington’s 1947 book on American utopias which also used novels to look at the dreams and aspirations of Americans and provided a model and an understanding of how much Americans engaged with ideas around success and mobility (Hume, 2000).
In 1955, Kenneth Lynn studied what he called the success myth. Lynn used the works of novelists like Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, David Graham Phillips, and Frank Norris to examine what the myth meant in a world of the industrial revolution with concern about monopolies, increasing divorce rates, and an onslaught of nervous and mental disorders (Lynn, 1955, p. 9). Through a close read of these works, Lynn found, “Alger is still very much with us,” while also acknowledging that Alger’s version of the success myth in mid-century seemed “primitive and naïve” (1955, p. 253). He concluded, however, by saying that despite problems with the success story, Americans were not willing to disengage with the mythology. Similarly, Charles Hearns’s (1977) study examined the American dream during the Great Depression by analyzing success manuals, sermons, magazines, and other works of fiction and dramas. It was a comprehensive look during one moment in American history (though it excluded works by Black Americans) which found that the success myth of America was tarnished during the Great Depression but not eradicated. Hearns went on to conclude that since the Great Depression, no “popular ideal” had come close to emerging and none will ever likely be grand enough to replace the American myth of success (Hearns, 1977, p. 201).

Historian Cal Jilson’s (2016) work incorporated popular culture even further. Jilson’s juxtaposition of political rhetoric and fiction made an important contribution because his work not only examined the dream as an idea but also its use in popular culture. While economists and sociologists debate whether the dream has come true, more scholarship is needed from the humanities that engage with the notion of the dream itself. Jilson’s work tried to make that intervention and did so successfully with a simple concept—the American dream has been misrepresented by many of our elite leaders.
Jilson found political leaders praised the dream and portrayed it as attainable. Yet, prominent novelists like Mark Twain, John Updike, and John Steinbeck all wrote about the implausibility of the dream. Jilson argued the idea of the American dream had been shaped and celebrated in American society, particularly by politicians, but had been challenged and rejected in literature. In the end, Jilson concluded that we must treat our politicians with skepticism when they claim the American dream has characterized our history and question whether they can expand or restore it.

Aside from Hochschild (1995) and Jilson, who studied a few authors of color, most of these works did little analysis around how race impacted the American dream. Typically, discussions about race and the dream focused on notions around race and economic opportunity (e.g., sociologist Jay MacLeod’s *Ain’t No Makin’ It*; 1987), rather than the ideology of the dream itself. Hochschild had a more quantitative approach to the American dream, believing it provided a perfect context for understanding the relationship between race and class, and attempted to analyze trends through a mix of census polling data, focused surveys, public research data, and advertising references. Hochschild tried to explain why Blacks and Whites saw the world differently, why Blacks were succeeding more and enjoying it less, and why Americans remain “under the spell of a national suggestion” (1995, p. 5). Hochschild’s three primary claims were (a) the American dream is the central ideology of Americans; (b) it faces severe challenges—particularly from middle-class Blacks who do not believe in the dream as much as their poorer counterparts; and (c) it is bolstered by non-American outsiders who say the American dream is clear. Hochschild (1995) concluded that Black and White people believed equally in the dream as a prescription for society, but Black people were
more skeptical of the dream applying to their race. In contrast, White people were more
convinced of Black inclusion in the dream. Hochschild said it was easier for Black
people to cling to the dream personally, but to doubt it collectively. Poorer Black people
believed in the American dream, and even though poverty rates were up, they continued
to trust that hard work and education were key components to success. In the end,
Hochschild was ambivalent about the dream, and argued it taught people to believe in a
society where you could break through patterns of discrimination but that failed to offer
solace for losers. She explained the American dream was the “soul of the nation” and
Black abandonment of the dream would signal a negative transformation in democracy.
Although many non-academic texts by African Americans engaged with the American
dream, such as Invisible Man (Ellison, 1952), A Raisin in the Sun (Hansberry, 1959), and
Native Son (Wright, 1940); aside from Hochschild (1995), MacLeod (1995), and a few
journal articles, there has been little academic work in the humanities that has critiqued
and explored how race intersected with the American dream.

One of the few texts that did so comprehensively is an under-cited work by Tsui-
examined the idea of the American dream in Black, Asian, and Latinx communities by
conducting a close read of three theatrical dramas by members of those groups. Jiang
believed writers of color were more interested in the nightmare scenario than the dream.
Through deep analysis and close textual readings of August Wilson’s The Piano Lesson
(1987), Frank Chin’s The Chickencoop Chinaman (1972), and Luis Valdez’ Zoot Suit
(1978), Jiang (2009) concluded the American dream for Whites was more about
economic success—they already had their rights protected—while ethnic groups were more focused on the moral aspects of success:

The characters in the ethnic writings certainly wish to fulfill their material American dream; however, it seems before they can feel free to pursue their economic success, they are impelled to confront the more imminent issue of the spiritual aspect of the American dream. (Jiang, 2009, p. 6)

This divergence, Jiang argued, existed in the experiences and treatment of non-Whites had in this country: “While Whites had their dream set on riches and fame, ethnic minorities were still fighting for basic human rights and dignity. This is the major difference between Whites’ and non-Whites’ American dreams” (Jiang, 2009, p. 105). Jiang found that before the 1970s, American dream scholars looked at the idea of the American dream through a White lens. While I hoped for more historical context from Jiang about the dream and marginalized communities, her analysis was useful in piecing together how communities of color dealt with the dream. I build on and expand previous scholarship by using both quantitative and qualitative tools to understand the American dream and by looking at a broader range of media within and outside of literary studies (such as comic strips and hip-hop lyrics) to understand the concept. Additionally, in contrast to the previous scholarship, which is most often centered on White Americans, I focus exclusively on Black Americans and Black cultural products. Finally, unlike Jiang, I do not segregate the moral and material aspects of the dream, but rather look at them more as complementary than competing ideas to show that unlike Jiang’s (2009) conclusion, for the last hundred years, Black Americans were most often interested in the material and moral aspects of the dream.
Methodology

In the 20th century, Black people had their “greatest and most profound impacts on American society” (Boyd, 2008, p. vii) via popular culture, which shaped the experiences of the Black community and the broader society. In looking at how Black popular culture engaged with the idea of the American dream and its impact on Black society, I focused on comic strips, editorials, advertising, magazine covers, photography, music, and film.

Boyd (2008) noted the overrepresentation of literature in popular culture studies, and this was true in the limited studies on Black America and the American dream. Several pieces of scholarship have explored how Black writers like Langston Hughes (James, 1963), Richard Wright (Walden, 1984), and Toni Morrison (Jilson, 2016) understood the American dream. But few scholars engaged with this idea outside of literature, aside from a limited number of books and articles about The Cosby Show (Carsey & Werner, 1984-1992) and hip-hop. Studying various mediums that have reached the Black community gives a more thorough and deeper understanding of how Black popular culture dealt with the American dream.

This qualitative study is primarily a cultural history of how Black Americans have engaged with the American dream. Through textual and cultural analysis of primary source popular culture texts, using secondary sources as needed, this dissertation project brings a humanities-based inquiry of race to the conversation around the American dream. This dissertation expands the conversations around race and the dream where Jiang (2009) and Jilson (2016), who both relied more on a literary frame, concluded.
Duality in the Dream

I found Fisher’s (1973) influential framework about the duality of the American dream to be the most useful way to organize this study. Fisher believed the dream to be composed of two national myths that create a pervasive cultural ideology in America: “The American Dream is two dreams, or, more accurately, it is two myths, myths that we all share in some degree or other and which, when taken together, characterize America as a culture” (Fisher, 1973, p. 160). Scholar Joseph Campbell noted myths are merely “public dreams. . . . Myths are vehicles of communication between the conscious and the unconscious, just as dreams are” (Campbell, as quoted in Fisher 1973, p.160). Fisher (1973) believed myths help give “meaning,” “identity,” an “understandable image of the world,” and help support the social order (1973, p. 161). Without them, he said, the country would be without a present, or future. First, there is a myth of materialism grounded in the Puritan work ethic. It is focused on persistence, self-interest, and self-reliance and assumes that if an individual works hard, they will be rewarded with wealth, status, and power (Fisher, 1973). It is, at its core, “compassionless and self-centered” (Fisher, 1973, p. 161). This myth is different from the moralistic myth which is based around liberty, freedom, and equality—ideas found in the Declaration of Independence—and involves values like “tolerance, charity, compassion, and true regard for the dignity and worth of every individual” (Fisher, 1973, p. 161). This aspect of the dream can be brushed off as radical, utopian, and unrealistic. Most importantly, Fisher (1973) noted, neither aspect of the dream is preferable or escapable by Americans: “In dichotomizing the American dream into materialistic and moralistic myths, there is danger that one may assume that there is virtue in one and only vice in the other. . . . this is an inaccurate
view” (p. 163). However, Fisher said, although one is not necessarily better than the other, and both are based on religious Calvinistic principles, often one aspect of the dream tends to dominate when considering the dream. Fisher (1973) viewed this ideology in terms of politics, seeing one candidate as promoting hard work and striving and the other as idealistic. However, this framework also can be applied to how the dream is understood in Black popular culture.

Three Eras of Frustration and Hope in Black America

The Great Migration Era

The first section of this dissertation will look at how the American dream engaged with three popular cultural works during the period surrounding the Great Migration: the cartoons of Bungleton Green in the Chicago Defender, the anti-migration rhetoric in the Norfolk Journal and Guide and the advertisements of beauty entrepreneur, Madam C.J. Walker, and her Walker Company.

The Chicago Defender’s Bungleton Green (Rogers, 1920) comic strip, a cartoon which has been mostly ignored by scholars, not only said much about Black aspiration in the early 20th century but wrestled with how Black people should attain success. Bungleton Green, a fictional character with perpetual bad luck, was a sort of everyman character trying to find success in early 20th-century Chicago, but unsure how to do so. In the longest-running Black cartoon in history, Bungleton Green aspired to achieve the American dream. The comic strip was most often slapstick humor—the cartoon loved a good gag—but it also explored plotlines around migration and racism that contained more nuance about opportunity in Black America. Long after the Defender’s northern migration campaign ended, Bungleton Green (Rogers, 1920) used humor to tentatively
define what the American dream meant in Black America (e.g., was it Bungleton striking rich from oil money or was it fighting racists in the South?) and how it could be found. It never seemed to provide its readers with any definitive answers about the dream, but for over 40 years, the cartoon engaged with a range of ways a Black person could find success: gambling, migration, respectability politics\(^2\), and the criminal justice system. The themes often vacillated between the moral and material aspect of the dream.

In Chapter 2, I review editorials from a more conservative newspaper, the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* (i.e., the *Guide*), based in Tidewater, Virginia. I show how the *Guide* used the myth of the American dream in their editorials to encourage Black people to stay in the South. Using a mixture of Booker T. Washington’s narrative of self-reliance, the *Guide* invoked the idea that hope, opportunity, and freedom could be found in the South, while also trying to reassure its readers of the material riches that one day could be found in the region. My analysis of the *Guide*’s anti-migration editorials fills a gap in scholarly research that often focused on the Chicago *Defender*’s pro-migration narrative. I not only looked at the newspaper’s belief that Black people should stay in their “home” of the South but I also examined the paper’s evolution on the issue of migration. Though the paper maintained a hard line on migration over the years—even when it was apparent their efforts had failed—editors shifted blame on the mass exodus from “docile” migrants

\[^2\] Respectability politics could be defined as trying to hold marginalized communities to the standards of the mainstream community to protect them for larger systematic injustices. In narratives around success and the American dream, the politics of respectability was frequently deployed to demonstrate how Black people, especially women could achieve success through policing their behavior. See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1994) for further analysis.
who were leaving, to denouncing southern society for “pushing” them out due to racism and discrimination.

In the final chapter of this section, I look at how advertisements in the Black cosmetics industry were impacted by the American dream. The cosmetics industry was important because it helped sustain the editorial content of papers, like the Defender and Guide by providing 30 to 40% of advertisements in Black newspapers (Piess, 2011); and also, because their advertisements were able to reach a large segment of the Black population. The advertisements for industry leader Madam C.J. Walker’s beauty products often were not as explicit as either the Defender or Guide in calling for opportunity based on location. However, they repeatedly advanced the notion that success and upward mobility—and even the American dream—depended on beauty care. Walker’s advertisements were often about the material success hair culture could bring to Black people, especially Black women. Yet, Walker was honest that her wealth was not just about achieving the material gains of the dream, but also about helping her race win social equality. Her advertisements wrestled with the complexity between the moral and material in early 20th-century America and helped me understand how not just race but gender impacted the articulation of the American dream in Black culture, since the experience of Black women and men and the dream were sometimes different.

**The Civil Rights Era**

Section 2 includes the civil rights era that began in the late 1940s and coalesced after the Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) ruling and the death of Emmett Till in the early 1950s. In Chapter 4, I look at the covers of Ebony Magazine and discuss how glamour was used to convey an understanding of the American dream during this time of
great transformation in the Black community. As cultural writer Virginia Postrel (2013) concluded, “glamour contained the promise of a mobile and commercial society that anyone could be transformed into a better, more attractive, and wealthier version of themselves” (p. 138). *Ebony* embraced glamour, or more specifically, what I call Black glamour, to relay messages of upward mobility and the American dream to its readers. I review the cover images and cover text of *Ebony* from the start of the civil rights movement to its unofficial end in 1968, following the death of Martin Luther King and the rise of Black power. I explore *Ebony*’s depiction of the so-called glamorous Black American dream and how it changed between 1955 and 1968 moving from material depictions of the American dream to a more moral one over the years.

In Chapter 5, I explore the multiple ways *Life* magazine engaged with the American dream in Black America through three different narratives: (a) a series of pictures taken by Gordon Parks, but written by a White writer in 1956 on segregation in the South; (b) the letters from a Black family about the consequences of that story and their inability to experience the dream; and (c) a piece written and photographed by Parks in 1968 about poverty in Harlem. While Parks’ images deserve a powerful analysis on their own, the three narratives all reveal different ways Black people were living and understanding the American dream during the mid-20th century. Ultimately, the chapter examines how the Black American dream was presented in a mainstream publication produced for White America and how the Black cultural producers and subjects engaged both the moral and material aspects of the American dream during different eras.
The Hip-Hop Era

The final two chapters focus on the post-civil rights world, starting with the creation of hip-hop, through the election of the United States’ first Black president, Barack Obama, to the movies that came out during the first term of Donald Trump’s presidency in a nation more divided than ever. Chapter 6 looks at the American dream in the lyrics of three mainstream New York City hip-hop artists, focusing on three different periods and three different boroughs. I argue while mainstream hip-hop has often been criticized for its unabashed materialism, the genre has continuously questioned what the dream means while acknowledging the complexity of the moral versus material contradiction. I begin with an analysis of the first successful mainstream hip-hop group, Run-D.M.C, who found rising success in the early 1980s. The group, composed of three middle-class young men from Queens, often rapped about just wanting to have fun, while also (often more subtly) exploring issues of race and inequality in America. Next, I look at the lyrics of acclaimed Brooklyn rapper, the Notorious B.I.G. (nicknamed Biggie Smalls), who is often touted as the greatest rapper of all time (“The Best,” 2015) and his perpetual rags to riches narrative, paying special attention to songs that articulate his American dream story, such as “Juicy” (The Notorious B.I.G., 1994, track 10) and “Sky’s The Limit” (The Notorious B.I.G, 1997, track 20). I conclude the chapter with an analysis of the lyrics of Cardi B, a young Black and Latinx woman from the Bronx, who found fame after working as a dancer and as a reality show personality. She has been called the representation of a new millennial American dream (Ellis-Peterson, 2017). In 2019, a writer for Vogue.com wrote:

In many ways, Cardi B represents a new generation of the self-made American Dream, rising from reality TV to the top of the Billboard charts, all while
remaining unapologetically true to herself and her voice (which we hear loudly and proudly through her epic Instagram feed). (Bobb, 2019, para. 2)

Despite having songs like “Money,” Cardi B, like others, questioned what the dream meant to a nation of people who saw the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, protested police brutality and assaults on undocumented immigrant families, and exposed the pervasiveness of sexual assault against women through the #MeToo hashtag. All of these artists have engaged with the dream in a myriad of ways. Sometimes they uphold the moralistic aspect of the dream, while other times seem more interested in the material, leading to a very complex and nuanced vision of the American dream.

Unlike in other eras, Black popular culture shifted its depiction of the American dream in a different way after the election of Donald Trump, giving less focus to the material aspect of the dream, and more focus on a socially just rendering of the moral component of the dream. Therefore the conclusion begins with close read of five mainstream Black dramas during the first three years of the presidency of Trump: superhero blockbuster Black Panther (2018), written and directed by Ryan Coogler; Jordan Peele’s horror film Us (2019); If Beale Street Could Talk (2019), a love story written by James Baldwin and adapted by Barry Jenkins for the screen; communist rapper Boots Riley’s Afro-futurist film Sorry to Bother You (2018), and Lena Waithe’s screenplay, Queen and Slim (2019) that was directed by Melina Matsoukas. All filmmakers looked at the dream in different ways and from different genres, but their engagement and commitment to the dream across the board was less about attaining riches or wealth and much more about the moral component of the dreams. None of these films ignored the material aspect of the dream, but in an age where fear and anxiety are commonplace, they seemed to be more closely engaged with systemic failings that have
treated Black people as less than. The last part of the chapter looks at the impact of the American dream on Black popular culture, how Black Americans have defined and continued to redefine the dream and why a more precise understanding of the dream in the broader society is important.

This dissertation examines how Black people interpret, retell, and re-think the idea of the American dream and how race intersects with the dream. By combining a popular culture framework, textual analysis, and historical and archival research, I bring a humanities-based inquiry of race into the conversation around the American dream. Instead of solely focusing on fictional literature, as many scholars have done previously, I look at a myriad of texts—comics, magazines, music, and film—to understand what the American dream has meant and continues to mean in Black popular culture.

As questions about the viability of the dream linger, it was important to look at what the dream has meant in Black America and how Black people believe it can be realized to truly understand why these ideas are so salient in the Black community. By trying to understand the experience of this specific marginalized group, I contribute to a small body of work around the dream and give insight into how and why this idea and optimism have endured in such times of fragility. Moreover, I also add complexity to the debate about the moral versus material aspects of the dream as it concerns Black America. Instead of seeing the debate as an either-or, I bring more nuance to the argument, showing two main ideas. First, that often for Black Americans, the American dream is about the material aspect, even more so than the moral. Black people, like other Americans, sometimes took pleasure and pride in material possessions and it seemed, placed value on finding individual success and wealth, a rendering that is clear in their
popular culture. Second, I also believe that when it comes to this group, it is hard to divide the material and moral aspects of the dream because the material aspect can also be a symbol of the moral part of the American dream. While it can seem like a different aspect of the dream, the material dream can also be a part of what is perceived as a fight for equal rights and status in America because achieving material success is also a moral triumph over racism and discrimination. Overall, my analysis suggests that there is no single American dream that can be seen in Black culture, but rather, multiple parts to the dream. This dovetails with Fisher’s (1973) understanding of a multifaceted dream, which seems to mirror the experience of Black Americans over time.

Still, I did not find the dream to be something that should be upheld in Black America. Rather, this highly problematic myth gives false hope to Black people looking for “success” in America in whatever way they define it. America has denied Black people both access to democracy and economic mobility. The attachment to the American dream in Black popular culture can be read as what literary scholar Lauren Berlant called a theory of “cruel optimism,” which she defined as “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (Berlant, 2011, p. 24). Black America’s continued attachment to the idea of the American dream, while important to a community that has been marginalized for so long, also seems both critical and detrimental to the survival of Black Americans. To survive as an oppressed people, as Lorde and Baldwin explained, Black people have been forced to embrace the promise of American while also living through the reality of its failings to them. This problematic paradox can be most clearly seen in the Black engagement with the American dream in popular culture.
Chapter 1

The Evolution of Respectability Politics in the *Chicago Defender’s* Bungleton Green

*Bungleton Green* (Rogers, 1920), the longest-running Black cartoon in history, was published for over 40 years (1920–964) by the *Chicago Defender*. Through the comic, the artist provided a wealth of insight into how Black people engaged with important issues from the height of the Great Migration to the civil rights era. Stories of bad dates, racism, superheroes, and “silly” women filled the panels of the gag-a-day comic strip that was supposed to make its readers forget their troubles. But the comic strip was also about the protagonist, Bungleton Green, trying to fulfill his American dream. Over the years, that dream was defined in many ways; sometimes it was about Bungleton becoming rich or living a middle-class lifestyle, while at others, it was about fighting for social justice, living abroad, and eradicating racism. *Bungleton Green* (Rogers, 1920) helped me understand what the American dream looked like through the eyes of several different artists (i.e., Rogers, 1920; Brown, 1930; Jackson, 1934; Commodore, 1956), starting in the early-20th century through the civil rights movement. *Bungleton Green* (Rogers, 1920) explored the American dream through the moral and material and highlighted the conversations that Black Americans were having as they figured out how to be successful in America. The cartoon also reflected the debate that Black America’s most prominent thinkers, W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington were having at the time about whether material and economic achievement represented success. In the *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois spoke out against having “material prosperity” be seen as “the touchstone of all success” (Du Bois, 2018/1903, p. 64) and chastised Washington for his ideology stating that his doctrine of “Work and Money”
could “overshadow the higher aims of life” (Du Bois, 2018/1903, p. 64). However, Washington too had his supporters. Responding to one of Du Bois own surveys one person wrote that while they ultimately agreed with him, they believed that the attainment of wealth was the true way for Black people to achieve the dream in America. “Never lose sight of the fact that in the United States the dollar makes the man-although the doctrine is false as Hell.” (Banks, pg. 67). Bungleton Green engaged with these ideas by not advocating for one over the other, but rather allowing for a complex and nuanced rendering of these thoughts using humor. Taken over its forty-year run, the cartoon ultimately reflected these debates and revealed that there is no monolithic vision of the American dream for Black Americans and no singular understanding of how the dream should be realized but that it often vacillates between the moral and material and often responds to cultural events, attitudes, and personal beliefs. Most importantly Bungleton Green explored the diversity of thought and nuance in Black America during a period when Black people, particularly in the larger popular culture were often not given the space to be complicated or worse, were simply reduced to stereotypes.

Under-examined by scholars, the cartoons of Bungleton Green (Rogers, 1920) were ripe for exploration of how narratives of upward mobility, success, and respectability intersect to formulate a narrative about the American dream. It featured a character who believed in the promise of America, while remaining frustrated by the reality. Bungleton represented the thoughts of many Black Americans’ in the early and mid-twentieth century, embodying the very experience that economist and sociologist Gunnar Myrdal articulated in An American Dilemma (1995/1944):

The American Negroes know that they are a subordinated group experiencing, more than anybody else in the nation, the consequences of the fact that the Creed
is not lived up to in America. They, like the Whites, are under the spell of the great national suggestion. With one part of themselves they actually believe, as do the Whites, that the Creed is ruling America. (Myrdal, 1995, p. 4/1944)

In this chapter, I look at how the cartoon engaged with the idea of the American dream in Black America by looking at six distinct series beginning in the 1920s and ending in the 1960s, which showed the various paths used to help the protagonist achieved the American dream. The cartoon was written primarily by four different artists during its run. Relatively little is known about the artists’ motivation and writing of the strip, so I use textual analysis and a close read of the comics as my primary sources of material.

In the first section, I discuss the strip in the 1920s. Written by the creator, Leslie Rogers, the strip largely focused on gag-a-day, get-rich-quick schemes for a poor new migrant from the South, until he left America for France. In France, where he relished equality, Bungleton made it his mission to fight southern racists abroad.

Next, I look at the Henry Brown years, from 1929 to 1934, where Bungleton engaged in an African fantasy where he became “King of the Congo,” and brought wealth back to Chicago. In the third section, I examine three series under the direction of Jay Jackson, who wrote the strip from 1934 to 1948. At first, under Jackson’s helm, Bungleton remained a middle-class business owner who lived a “respectable” life and policed migrants who were not used to life in the North. He scolded an old girlfriend, Honey Lue, who visited him in Chicago looking for wealth. However, Jackson’s Bungleton quickly turned away from the politics of respectability to two series focused on racial equality. Next, in two episodes quite radical for their time, Bungleton visited a racist land from the future named Vert and also became an uber-masculine superhero, fighting against racism in the Jim Crow South. Finally, I analyze Bungleton Green under
cartoonist Chester Commodore during the 1950s and 1960s, who turned Bungleton Green into a largely apolitical strip focused on suburban middle-class conformity. Unlike Jiang’s (2009) analysis that Black people were overwhelmingly dedicated to the more spiritual aspect of the dream, *Bungleton Green* (Rogers, 1920) showed that there was no monolithic understanding of what the dream was or how to achieve it, rather these artists over the years articulated the dream in many ways over the years, sometimes highlighting the material aspect of the dream, other times the moral, and sometimes advocating for both of these ideas simultaneously. The diverse ways that the series portrayed the dream showed that for Black Americans trying to balance the fantasy and reality of America, there was no one path to achieving the American dream.

**A History of Black Cartooning**

In the late 19th century, newspapers around the country began using art, especially comic strips, to accompany their print content (Jackson, 2016). Comic strips grew in popularity after the publication of *Hogan’s Alley* (Outcault, 1895) in Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* newspaper. This strip about a ragtag group of kids from the wrong side of the tracks, and its lead character, the Yellow Kid (named after his yellow dressing-gown; Wood, n.d.), used humor, social commentary, and satire to talk about everyday life in America. It was a new national way of communicating humor and an important one as the country moved into modernity and commerce became king (Wood, n.d.). The Yellow Kid became a commercial success and newspapers around the country began to try to emulate its popularity. Soon, comic strips began appearing in newspapers nationwide. Comics were one of the first widely consumed commodities as media became a mass phenomenon and were a way, according to historian Ian Gordon (1998)
for people to understand what was happening to them through humor as the country transformed into a modern society. Comic strips, Gordon noted, were a way through which people not only saw themselves reflected but also a way in which they “constituted” themselves in society (Gordon, 1995, p. 51).

Early comics were created in the shadow of vaudeville and minstrels for the masses and sought to reflect the ethnic and class diversity of the country; jokes at the expense of these groups were common. Black people were not absent from these strips, which were often used by White mainstream newspapers to reinforce stereotypes. According to historian Banley-Haley (2014), these strips were often “grotesquely drawn” and voiced in a “crude dialect” (p. 101) to both entertain and continue to perpetuate many commonly held beliefs about Blacks. Some Black cartoonists worked as artists for mainstream White publications and included diverse characters in his work, like George Joseph Herriman’s Krazy Kat (1913-1944). However, the Black press ignored the cartoon frenzy during its infantile days, most likely due to financial cost (Burma, 1947; Jackson, 2016; 1998).³

The first Black newspaper, Freedom’s Journal, created in 1827, was a four-column, 4-page, text-heavy, standard-sized weekly that filled its pages with current events, editorials, and conversations about pressing matters of the day like slavery and colonization abroad; comics or any illustration used for humor failed to make it to the pages (Freedom’s Journal, 1827; Jackson, 2016). It was not until 1865, when the Black Republican and Office Holders Journal began to offer art with their articles, that a Black

³ Lenthall noted that this changed with the syndication of comics in the 1920s, when comics had to appeal to broad audiences. They deemphasized ethnicity overall. Race was taken out of comics by 1940; “African-Americans ceased to exist within the panels of mainstream comics.” Lenthall noted that that Blacks were not even portrayed as stereotypes, but completely rendered invisible (Lenthall, 1998, p.47)
comic tradition began in newspapers and even then, it was only hand-drawn line illustrations and cartoons (Jackson, 2016). In 1888, Edward E. Cooper’s paper, The Freeman, an Indianapolis-based outlet, became the first Black newspaper to have a significant number of cartoons (Jackson, 2016). The paper, which rebranded itself as the National Illustrated Colored Newspaper a year after its inception, strove to portray “the colored race as it is, and not as it is misrepresented by many of our White contemporaries” (Williams, 2015, p. 124) through visual culture. The paper was reimagined in the style of publications geared to White audiences like Harper’s Weekly and Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper and was filled with political cartoons and comics strips, though early on, as Andrea Williams (2015) noted, problematic images of Blacks filled the pages. Similar to comic strips drawn by White people, The Freeman often showed African Americans in a stereotypical light. These comics were a contrast to the boasting of Black achievements that were often present in the editorial pages.\(^4\)

\(^4\) Cooper thought his readers would enjoy the comics’ satire and the more subversive elements on

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4 On October 18, 1890, a few years after Edward E. Cooper launched the Indianapolis Freeman, the editor found himself in the middle of a controversy over the use of racial caricatures in the paper. Just a year earlier he hired artists Moses Tucker and Henry Jackson Lewis to create illustrations using caricatures and minstrel like humor to portray the “colored race as it is.” Cooper thought that the cartoons’ sophisticated satire would resonate with his audience, but readers became incensed that the paper would publish stereotypical images they believed mirrored racist depictions of Blacks in White media and for two years protested the paper. The editor vehemently fought back, criticizing his readers’ lamentations by noting that there was a difference when these types of visuals were drawn by Black artists for a Black publication. One editor said that the cartoons of those in The Freeman by Henry J. Lewis contained a “grotesqueness, vulgarity, and sacrilege that even Negro minstrel shows would have too much decency to put on stage” (Leavenworth (Kan) Advocate, 1891, as cited in Lawrence & Bates, 2014, p. 140).

Scholars like Windy Lawrence and Benjamin Bates argue that the cartoons of editors like Lewis as radical and perhaps more subversive than they were given credit for by readers at the time. They showed Black people as physically stronger, being able to find equality through Victorian social norms, and political equity through patriotism (Lawrence and Bates, 2014). Yet, the cartoons were also about conformity, a view that was in line with Cooper’s values and belief that newspapers should educate the less “respectable” Black classes. He doubled down on criticisms of the paper noting that he was employing Black people as well as engaging in pedagogical work, brushing off the “sensitiveness” of some people that did not like his paper. “We all do not see or think alike, and that is very certain,” he wrote. “One thing we are conscious of and that is, that the intelligent members of the race—the real educated and refined—take no exceptions to our productions” (Freeman, 1890, as cited in Williams, 2015, p. 135).
uplift since they were drawn by Black artists, but they did not (Williams, 2015). He pushed back at the criticism, igniting a conversation about the role of Black art.

“Cartooning is a civilizing influence: it stimulates us and forces into our people refining principles by goading them into a consciousness of their foolish practices; sensible people regard cartooning as a great educational device. Let us be sensible” (Williams, 2015, p. 134), he said in 1890. The audience was not convinced and remained frustrated with the images and readership declined. The controversy did not end until the cartoonists and Cooper left the paper.5

Still, even after the Freeman and the Baltimore Afro American began publishing more art, cartoons widely did not appear in the Black press until 1910 when larger papers such as the New York Amsterdam News, Chicago Defender, and Pittsburgh Courier began hiring editorial artists full-time and as freelancers (Jackson, 2016). Cartoonist Tim Jackson noted that most artists were not skilled at drawing cartoons for the Black press. However, that slowly began to change as papers began to hire people like artist Louis N. Hoggatt to match the sensational editorials they were publishing (Jackson, 2016).

The Chicago Defender was founded by Robert S. Abbott, on May 5, 1905 (PBS, Black Press, n.d.-a). Abbott was a descendant of former slaves who had been told he was “too dark” to make his law degree effective, so instead, he decided to go into the newspaper business. He started small, using a printing press in his landlady’s home. Within five years, the paper was thriving so much that Abbott was able to hire his first

5 Cooper thought that the controversy had ended in January 1891, but as soon as his proclamation about the “cessation of complaints about our cartoons” he was involved un more attacks on the paper’s illustration. Williams noted that it was the departures of Lewis (who died in 1891), Tucker (who was committed to an insane asylum), and Cooper (who sold the paper to George L. Knox) that the controversy fully abated. (Williams, 2015)
employees and send the paper to the South. Abbott talked about hotbed issues in the South, like lynching so much so that White distributors refused to sell the paper there. Always inventive, Abbott sought the help of Black Pullman porters to distribute the paper through the region. The paper was unlike its predecessors that were often tools of political parties or catered to special interests and unique because it catered not to the elite, but to the African American masses (Ross & Mckerns, 2004). It is most often known for its vigorous northern migration campaign between 1915 and 1920, urging Black people to move out of the oppressive South.

The *Defender* grew so fast that it began to outsell other papers in the country. By 1920, its circulation was over 100,000 (Nelson, 1999). The paper used images and splashy headlines to attract readers, but soon turned to comics as a political tool. Abbott hired artists like Fon Holly, Phil Joyce, and Langston Mitchell (Jackson 2016) to help him creatively communicate more effectively the issues of the day. While these Black artists were finally given a chance to hone their talent and cultivate storylines, it was not until 1920 that Abbott’s paper produced *Bungleton Green*, a certified hit and the longest-running cartoon featuring a Black person in history.

**Bungleton Green**

**The Leslie Rogers Era**

Little is known about why *Bungleton Green* (Rogers, 1920) was created or what role editor Abbott played in the creation of the strip. By all accounts (primarily articles published in the *Defender*), *Bungleton Green* was an almost immediate success, starting as a gag comic in 1920 with clear roots in minstrelsy. Bungleton is a short Black man, with a needle nose, tattered hat, large overcoat, and checkered pants (Figure 1). His lips
are large and unshaded compared to the rest of his penciled in face and body. Bungleton is lazy, likes to drink a bit too much liquor (despite Prohibition), seems averse to settling down and finding a stable relationship, and is a frivolous spender. He is, in short, the embodiment of characteristics the Black middle class believed one should not embrace to become successful and achieve the American dream. He is, as Cooper (2015) stated about comics, the “consciousness of . . . foolish practices” (p. 134).

While it is unclear if there was any mass pushback about the comic, there seemed to be some tension about the character, as Leslie Rogers, the creator of *Bungleton Green*, wrote a column about the cartoon and some of his antics in March of 1922. Writing as “Bungleton” under the headline “Bungleton Green,” Rogers (1922b) in the voice of Green, explained that Bung, as he was nicknamed, came about one November day when boredom overtook the newsroom and the managing editor walked over to him and said, “this paper needs some pep. We’re carrying too much dry stuff. Dope out a good character and we’ll run a comic strip. If you haven't got one for the next issue, you may as well pack” (Rogers, 1922b, p. 14). Rogers said after five or six attempts at drawing a character he was satisfied with, the strip debuted a week later to praise, especially from women who thought the cartoon Bungleton was “cute.” In the piece, he rebuffed critics who objected to his character’s drinking habits noting, “comic strip characters are the product of men” (Rogers, 1922b, p. 14). Rogers then acknowledged some of the systemic reasons preventing Bungleton from achieving the American dream, through Bungleton’s voice:

My life is just one piece of bad luck after another. I am perpetually without funds, and just as I am beginning to think that I am going to get ahead a new character is put in to the strip and before things are over I am fleeced out of all I have. (Rogers, 1922b, p. 14)
This complaint explains much of the Black experience in America, and it seems Bungleton was supposed to represent much of that experience. While Rogers (1922b) explained the need for humor in the face of adversity, it is clear Bungleton, at least initially, was supposed to represent an everyday Black man who consistently tried to get ahead and failed, partially due to his own failings but mainly because of a system rigged against Black people. The more subversive nature of the series can be seen here.

Bungleton’s behavior was problematic, but it was only so because of his complete lack of access to this dream he so desired. Rogers (1922b) said people laughed at Bungleton because “people will laugh at the discomforts of someone else” (p. 14) though they often hate it when the same scenario happens to them. In some ways, his assessment of Bungleton echoed the title of poet Langston Hughes’ book, *Laughing to Keep From Crying* (1976). Bungleton, while often a gag comic character with many disreputable qualities, was also a figure in pain. As the strip constantly reminded us, he was dealing with the frustration and trauma of being Black in America as in “Luck,” (Rogers, 1920), “Home of the Slave,” Rogers (1929), “Fight for Freedom,” (Jackson, 1943). Yet, like many others in the Black community, he also had no other option but to make the best out of the United States. Bungleton never committed to achieving the American dream in one way. Through many of the series’ artists, Bungleton offered several paths to the dream and made it clear that Black people were divided about how the dream looked.

In the first strip of the cartoon on November 20, 1920, Bungleton, in his tattered hat and oversized clothes said, “Blowin’ in town with no jack is kind of tough. Wonder where I can pick up some quick change” (Figure 1). While Bungleton was not a particularly hard worker, the readers also knew the impact of employment discrimination
on the Black community and how this often thrust them into poverty at disproportionately high rates. In his lamentations over lack of “jack,” he exposed the lack of funds Black men like him had. Yet, Bungleton also was deployed his agency. He did not wait for anyone to solve his problems; in the true spirit of the often-conservative American dream, he took responsibility for his own lack of money. Unlike the rags to riches tales of Horatio Alger, which often superficially advocated the bootstraprer narrative, but were about luck (a component of the dream often ignored), Bungleton often ended up with less, not more than he sought out (Wright, 1945), showing how the comic simultaneously promoted and remained skeptical of the American dream myth. When a friend of his (also drawn in the minstrelsy style with big lips and a long nose) said he “hit some luck” after a car ran into him and the driver was forced to pay him $500 for the accident, Bungleton tried to replicate the same “luck” by laying on the street hoping a car will run over him (Figure 1). After, a White judge and court officer, drawn without traits of minstrelsy, gave an injured Bungleton time in jail for 60 days. It was this sort of gag that defined the early comics in the Rogers era.

![Fig. 1](image)


Rogers set up Bungleton as a person who stole (1921b), illegally drank (1921a), always had run-ins with the law (1922e), often eschewed church (1925), and gambled on
horses (1927). Bungleton was often pictured with women (frequently displayed as taller, with sharper features that look similar to White women) with tempers. His birth locale seemed to be unclear; sometimes he was from the South, and at other times, he was thought to be from the North (usually Chicago). One strip said Bungleton was born in 1919 (making him a child if true), who upon graduation from “Mike’s Pool Room” had been in Sing Sing and had “committed every crime but murder” (Rogers, 1928b). While the cartoon often showed how heinous he is, Bungleton had softer moments as well, including being charitable and giving his money away; in one case, he gave money to a stranger named “John D. Rockefeller” who clearly did not need his pennies (Rogers, 1928a).

By depicting a character that reinforced what the politics of respectability did not look like, Rogers reinforced ideas about Black respectability. The cartoon, as he saw it, was what the editor of the Indianapolis Freeman was trying to convey three decades earlier, “the consciousness of foolish practices.” Bungleton is someone you are supposed to laugh at because, as Rogers (1922) noted, “people are pleasantly amused at the sight of another’s wretchedness” (p. 14), while also being relatable to the mass Black audience the paper was courting. Rogers made Bungleton more authentic by having him, as most Black people did at the time, engage with both the moral and material aspects of the American dream and the American nightmare, by giving him agency, and by also showing how it was taken away. By flaunting his lack of respectability, Bungleton could be read as challenging the way of life defined by White ideals. But his antics also could

6 The politics of respectability is as a moral discourse that often holds marginalized communities to the standards of the mainstream community often to protect them for larger systemic injustices. See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1994) for further analysis.
be seen as reflecting the ways in which the system, no matter how hard Bungleton tried, did not often reward him for his hard work.

In 1928, *Bungleton Green* (Rogers, 1928d) took a slight turn from its gag style commentary when the character decided to take a trip to Europe. This trip made the nightmare scenario even more explicit by highlighting the structural impediments due to racism in Bungleton’s life and finally gave readers a glimpse of what his real dream in life is at this time: freedom. The trip represented an opportunity for him to both escape oppression in America and to meet Jacqueline, a long-lost love living in France, a place where Bungleton believed “a man is a man” (Rogers, 1928d). It was the first time the cartoon so directly engaged in issues of race and openly stated that to make Bungleton’s dream of freedom come true, he must leave the United States. “I am going to France where men are men, and where color means nothing,” Bungleton said, with a single strand of hair sticking up (Rogers, 1928d). This was the first panel of a months-long series that ran between December 1928 and July 1929 that explored Bungleton’s life as an expatriate. The series seemed to mirror the experiences other Black people had or dreamed about as they grew frustrated with racism and discrimination in America.

E. Franklin Frazier said the Black press often depicted tales of life in Europe to “satisfy the craving of the Black bourgeoisie for recognition” (1997, p. 192). He noted, “the majority of Negroes, including even those who are educated, still regard Europe as a faraway fabulous land” (Frazier, 1997, p. 192). Yet while the cartoon embraced some of the fantastical infatuations with European life, it also challenged whether expatriation was truly the answer to salvation for Black America (Frazier, 1997). While in France, Bungleton became re-acquainted with Pierre, a White man he met during the war.
Dressed in a bowtie and a top hat, Pierre promised to help establish Bungleton into French society. From his clothing, it was clear that Pierre was an elite. This was significant because it depicted Bungleton being treated as a peer from a gentleman of high society, something the Defender’s readers knew would never happen back in the United States. Rather than call him boy, Bungleton was treated with compassion and respect by his French friend. It seemed plausible many Black readers would have understood the revolutionary nature of this treatment alone—depicting a Black man as an equal—yet Rogers (1929d) continued to push the plot further. In one scenario, Pierre introduced Bungleton to “Meester Redneck,” an angry-looking White man with a bowtie, bug eyes, and a small nose, who proclaimed to Bungleton, “in America we ignore your folks” (Rogers, 1929d). In the next panel, Bungleton cursed the man and ran after him with a club. Bungleton, however, was not supposed to be seen as a disrespectful figure for inciting violence. He was supposed to be read as finally being able to utilize his manhood by standing up and fighting a White man, without any repercussions. It was implied that back in Chicago that kind of behavior would be impossible. Thus, Bungleton not only accessed the moral part of the American dream through migration but also by standing up for equality.

Bungleton said he believed discrimination was brought to France by American southerners as he lamented about the lynching epidemic in America (Rogers, 1929a). Frustrated by racism in his home country, Bungleton spoke directly to his audience, “If America is a democracy the North pole is a fiery furnace” (Rogers, 1929a). Bungleton continued to express his frustration about the state of racial affairs in the United States, with one particularly funny panel noting Bungleton was once thrown out of a circus
because he did not tip his hat to a white elephant. “I love America and Freedom” he said, but in the next panel stated that “America and Freedom hardly go together” (Rogers, 1929b). Bungleton vowed to use his newfound freedom to work to eradicate racism (Error! Reference source not found.) and the cartoon showed he did so through both legal means (e.g., he somehow becomes a magistrate) and physical violence (e.g., by fighting with southern White racists at any chance he gets). We see Bungleton running after a man who called him Sambo and another who said he did not like eating with “monkeys” (Rogers, 1929e). As a magistrate, he sent a man from Alabama to jail for insulting a darker-skinned man (Rogers, 1929c). It is a new kind of freedom for Bungleton and the readers, too, are seeing their fantasy of equality visualized on paper.

Figure 2. Reprinted from “Home of the Slave,” Bungleton Green [Comic strip] by Leslie Rogers (January 19, 1929). The Chicago Defender. Retrieved from https://search-proquest-com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/docview/492204213
The response to the series in France revealed the ambivalence readers had about Bungleton engaging with issues of racism and the moral component of the dream. In a cartoon created to respond to readers’ letters, Bungleton directly engaged with critics that wrote to the Defender and asked why Bungleton was fighting in France (Rogers, 1929d). In character, Bungleton stated he hated Black people who think the “crackers” should just beat him up. More context is soon given for his rage. Readers learn that Bungleton’s family, like much of the Defender’s audience, experienced racial violence in America (Rogers, 1929d). Bungleton had an uncle mobbed in Mississippi, a grandfather that was lynched in Alabama, and a nephew shot on the streets in Waco, experiences that, given the disproportionate amount of violence faced by Black people, many of the Defender’s readers could relate to. At the end of the panel, however, he reaffirmed his love of America, “Give me America, but at the same time give me freedom” (Rogers, 1929d). By June of 1929, Bungleton expressed frustration about being away from home. He stated that although he could choose his own hotel and where to eat in France, a place where no one has mentioned his color, he may just go back to America.

Like Bungleton, author James Baldwin (1993/1961) wrote that he left France because he realized it was not his reality: “Havens are high-priced. The price exacted of the haven-dweller is that he contrive to delude himself into believing he has found a haven” (p. 12).

The strip did not explain more about Bungleton’s decision to move; it did not have to. The readers of the Defender understood in the same way Baldwin (1993/1961) articulated; Bungleton wanted to find his dream at home. These strips show that Rogers understood the fallacy of the dream in America and the problem of racism, particularly in
the American South. Through these strips Rogers implied that it did not matter how much wealth Bungleton could attain in America, whether through a get rich quick scheme or through more legitimate means, if he was not seen with any sort of humanity because of his race, the dream would be a complete fallacy.

**The Henry Brown Era**

While Rogers may have captured the moral component of the American dream by sending Bungleton to France, Henry Brown, who replaced Rogers in 1929, soon took the character into the depths of another dimension of the dream—the material—by having Bungleton, back at home in America, and once again broke, become rich from oil. However, Brown complicated the dream narrative by adding a moral component to it. Bungleton could only become rich it seemed, after his disreputable behavior was explained- his drinking habit came after he lost all of his money purchasing land that was said to have oil. (Brown, 1929). Almost immediately, the drunken, womanizing antics of Bungleton disappeared and he began to live out an American dream fantasy. With the words “Oil! Oil! Oil! Money! Money! Money!” headlined in the first panel of the strip, Bungleton became a wealthy man that indulged in all the accouterments of money. His tattered coat was replaced with a Black jacket, a top hat, cane, and smoking a pipe and he lived in a big house held up by three columns, chairs from the “charter oak” of old England and drapes from “the temple of the Persians” (Brown, 1929). During a honeymoon trip “Africa,” Bungleton defeated a lion and became a strong-willed king—another American dream expatriation story that combined the moral and the material with the Black American fantasy of Africa. The fantasy of Africa was significant in this period after Marcus Garvey lobbied for another back to Africa movement in the 1920s. “Africa”
showed another way out of the American nightmare and was part of the dream Black Americans believed in as they struggled to find their better day. Garvey’s back to Africa movement, like others in the past was unsuccessful at sparking mass emigration of Black Americans back to their African homeland, but the fantasy of Africa in the Black American mind continued as northern migration to failed to be the promised land Southern Black people desired. Brown’s Africa was of the Black American imagination, a place historian Joseph Roach said that was at once “remembered and reinvented” (Graham & Ward, 2011, p. 685), but it was an important place where Bungleton could engage with multiple aspects of the dream that was inaccessible to him in the United States, whether it was strength, riches, power, or masculinity and the comic sent the character to visit the continent again in 1931 and 1935 as he searched for the American dream. Yet even in Bungleton’s world, Africa was a temporary space, a place that signified a dream, not a reality, and so eventually, he returned home.

The Jay Jackson Era

Perhaps because of the Great Depression, the cartoon took a turn and Bungleton became more relatable to everyday people. Instead of a rich man far removed from the problems of his people, on October 31, 1931, it was revealed that the rich Bungleton was a part of an elaborate story he was telling his son Cabbage and Bungleton continued with his past antics from the Rogers era (Jackson, 1931).

In 1936, in the middle of the Depression, Jay Jackson became the new artist of Bungleton Green. By that time, according to art history scholar Amy Mooney (2014),

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7 Occasionally the Jackson’s assistant Daniel Day or an illustrator Jack Chancellor would take over during this period contributing to inconsistent styles at times (Jackson, 2016).
The Defender had become a paper that both advocated for racial solidarity and articulated Washington’s narrative of self-help, again showing the multiple notions of the dream in Black America. The paper had abandoned its advocacy of Northern migration for Southerners and had turned to policing the behavior of Southern migrants instead. Historian James Grossman (1991) wrote of this trend, “Fearful that the migrants, with their rural southern manners, would disrupt the community and embarrass the race, middle-class Black Chicago tried to protect its respectability by instructing newcomers in acceptable forms of behavior” (p. 140). Abbott, one of the city’s elite decided that the paper should help “educate” the new migrants and the Defender often used satire to carry out his message (Mooney, 2014). His new artist, Jackson, though more sympathetic to the plight of the migrants, largely followed along in Abbott’s “unique blend of conservatism and progressivism” (Mooney, 2014, p. 115) and by the late thirties Bungleton was portrayed as the apotheosis of migrant life. He became engaged to a woman named Beebe, sold insurance stock, and eventually became a landlord after he bought several buildings (Jackson, 1939a), more pre-occupied with middle-class antics than working-class get rich schemes. He had achieved the dream through material wealth and because he was a “moral” and upstanding citizen. This turn of character marked an important shift for the comic strip, particularly since Bungleton was often depicted as a southern migrant. Jackson soon introduced another character to “educate” new migrants about how they needed to act if they wanted to achieve the dream like Bungleton.

Honey Lue

Honey Lue Washingpound, Bungleton’s long lost love from rural Chidlin’ Switch Hollow found out about his newfound wealth and decided to travel to Chicago to reclaim
her man but more than that her American dream (depicted as a picture of a nice house surrounded by trees). She was shown to be different than his current love interest Beebe (Figure 3) who was light skinned, skinny, had straight hair and fine features. Rather Honey Lue was shown to be darker-skinned, with curly hair, a wide nose and broad lips. She smoked a pipe, was overweight, and used improper English. When Honey Lue arrived in Chicago, Bungleton was horrified by her appearance. She was wearing a printed tattered garment covered in patches and she was not wearing shoes (Jackson, 1939b). It soon became clear that Honey Lue represented the poor rural migrant woman that Abbott was concerned about partially because she did know how to dress in a “respectable” manner. Bungleton who wore a three-piece suit, told Honey Lue to get “sharpened up” before he would even entertain a conversation with his former love.

![Bungleton Green](https://search-proquest.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/docview/492620547)

*Figure 3.* Reprinted from “The Arrival of a Rival,” Bungleton Green [Comic strip] by Jay Jackson, October 7, 1939. Retrieved from https://search-proquest.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/docview/492620547

When Honey Lue reappeared, her skin is lighter and her clothes are more “refined,” as reflected by her wearing a top hat, high heeled shoes, and a scarf around her neck (Jackson, 1939b). In some ways, she may have been seen as a newly independent blueswoman—a woman who defied orthodoxy, in her slightly androgynous attire with a top hat and bow (Davis, 1998), since she was not exactly fashioned in the Eurocentric
mold of Bungleton’s girlfriend. Honey Lue still had short hair and big hoop earrings, but with her high heeled shoes and new skirt, it was clear she was now respectable enough for Bungleton’s world. The fact she could not even speak to Bungleton unless she changed her attire is highly problematic and revealed Bungleton and Beebe’s desire to police Honey Lue, but Jackson also showed that Honey Lue was trying to escape oppressive wage conditions in the South (starting salary for a common laborer in 1935 was about 32 cents an hour, compared to 53.2 cents in the North) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1937) and had very little interest in rekindling a relationship with Bungleton, especially after she found a job. Additionally, Jackson did not portray Honey Lue as a sexually undesirable Mammy figure (Jackson, 1939b). She had a boyfriend who was in love with her and followed her to the city (He too was told he was ill-dressed for the city) (Jackson, 1939c, 1939d). This series is important because Jackson connected appearance and success with the American dream, a theme he continued to repeat (and one we will see later on with the advertisements of Madam C.J. Walker). However, as the years go by, Jackson seemed to increasingly lose faith that appearance, and any sort of respectability politics, would be the path to the dream for Black Americans.

Vert

During the first twenty years or so of the comic, Bungleton understood the fallacy of the American dream while embracing some of its principles; he wanted to achieve it no matter how unrealistic he thought it was. He understood that as a Black man in America, he lived in a world where his opportunity for success was often predicated on forces out of his control and he often relied on luck, get rich quick schemes, or gambling to find financial success. While this was supposed to represent his disrespectability, it
also showed a man who was tired of the system, had given up, and was in some ways engaged in what I earlier said was “cruel optimism.” At times, he does not seem to be struggling for equality in America, but merely the ability to survive in a White dominated world. Yet Jackson changed that sentiment.

As World War II enrolled over 1.2 million people in the war effort (Clark, 2020), Black people were once again frustrated by the call to fight racism and oppression abroad while it still existed at home in the United States. A Double V campaign began that promoted victory and freedom both overseas and domestically. The comic strip followed and turned away from narratives about middle class individual success and respectability and turned to the need for equality and justice. In one series that ran from 1942 to 1945 Jackson showed what another vision of the American dream was through the eyes of Bungleton Green—a society without racism, where discrimination did not matter, where women and people of color were in charge, and where integration was seamless.

Simultaneously, he also portrayed the American nightmare, by creating Vert, a planet where green people discriminated against White people because of their skin color, implying Black people in the 1940s were living a nightmare.

In 1942, Jackson decided to take Bungleton out of his largely segregated world to embark on a multi-racial adventure story. Instead of Bungleton as the central character the strip moved towards focusing on the narratives of a more integrated bunch of troubled youth, named the Mystic Commandos. This was a stark change from his past, where White characters were generally only depicted as authority figures and could have reflected the growing number of interracial coalitions in the labor and civil rights movement in America. The comic then entered a fascinating period where the characters
became superheroes who fought for democracy and freedom around the world, by fighting agents in Nazi Germany (Jackson, 1943a) and supporting a slave revolt in the 19th century (Jackson, 1943b). During this time, the strip was rebranded as *Bungleton Green and the Mystic Commandos*. Perhaps more than any other time, Bungleton became explicitly political and as Jackson wrestled with the ideas and contradictions of America, including the American dream, he used a new popular archetype that had become: the superhero.

In 1938, Superman debuted on the cover of *Archie Comics* (Johnson, 2012) to rave reviews and soon the Black press was trying to replicate that success by turning *Bungleton Green* into a comic about racial justice and the American dream by looking at America a hundred years into the future. In Memphis 2043, America was shown to be a place where women are leaders, “fairness and equality” was the law of the land and peace reigned. It was a place, as one of the Commandos noted, that seemed like “heaven on earth” (Jackson, 1944a). At the same time however, due to an earthquake, another continent was created, and green people decided to take residence there. The green people believed they were superior to other “colorless” people and started a nation which was based on 20th-century racism and Jim Crow laws. Green people had all of the power, as well as some Blacks and colored people, but “colorless” people had no rights. In this land called Vert, Whites were discriminated against and faced racism for their pale skin

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8At the end of the Depression, superheroes were portrayed as advocating for change and more liberal social policies in the shadow of President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal (Johnson, 2012). In the 1940s, with war with Europe imminent, characters like Superman and Batman, who previously were seen as vigilantes with complicated relationships to law enforcement, now became tools of law enforcement trying to help the state against America’s enemies. By the end of the war, this changed again and by the 1950s, mainstream comics were about protecting the status quo. War was no longer a threat and with middle class American wealth rising, superheroes did not need to change the world. Sales also declined. (Johnson, 2012).
color (Jackson, 1944a). It is another depiction of the Black fantasy of the American dream.

The green people, whose hair looked like two-pointed devil horns, perhaps a peon to the White devil mantra, often looked to U.S. history books to determine how to run their racist land. For example, when a White man entered a green establishment using the “greens only” door, he was chastised for his error. The proprietor said he could not leave through the “green only” door but was not sure how the White man should exit the establishment. Confused about the proper protocol, he turned to a U.S. history book to figure out what to do (Jackson, 1944b). It was a scathing indictment of color politics in America while also revealing the silliness of racial segregation. It also was a critique of the so-called liberal North.

In another strip, a young White man, Jon, wanted to stay in Southern Vert to help bring the races together. He was told it was too dangerous and was advised to go North where it was less racist and Whites had a better chance to have “life, liberty and happiness” (Jackson, 1944c). Jon is excited about his new so-called freedoms in the North, but Bud, one of the Black commandos, remained cautious. When they entered a “members only” restaurant in the North, (Figure 4) Jon was asked for his membership card and asked to leave. Bud does not have a card but is permitted to stay. At this point, the two realized that while it appeared White people had more freedom in the North, they were just subjected to more subtle forms of racism there.
While much of the series highlighted the inequities that Black people faced in America in the mid-20th century, it also pushed back against the idea that respectability politics would help Black Americans achieve the American dream. At the end of one strip a communist type figure named “Red Greeman,” (Jackson, 1944e) lectured the White man not to have a “chip” on his shoulder. In another, a White person said White people need to learn how to act and advocated respectability to gain favor. “We must show them we are better,” she noted in one strip (Jackson, 1944f), while she advocated for the oppressed Whites to stay “in our place” if they wanted to survive (Jackson, 1944g). It was not until the threat of a worldwide White rebellion did the green president finally act to liberate the White people, a nod to the idea that some sort of pan African protest could lead to true freedom in America. In the end, the Commandos decide to stay in the future America with one noting, “Here, we are not mistreated because we are colored! You must be crazy to want to go back to Jim Crow and prejudice of 20th-century America.”
century America!” (Jackson, 1945). The series was supposed to show that prejudice can end even in a place like Vert, but it also gave the clearest indicator that the promise of America could also be the American nightmare. Jackson’s next series elevated this idea even more, without the happy ending.

**Going South**

Bungleton, missing his (now) wife Beebe and transformed into a tall, good looking superhuman, superhero muscular man in the vein of Dick Tracy, in another sci-fi twist, went back willingly to the 1940s to help law enforcement fight racism particularly in the South. But even as the most physically powerful man in the world who worked with law enforcement, Bungleton could not defeat racism and White supremacy. If anything, the southern series proved that despite Bungleton’s respectability, good looks, strength and commitment to equality, the American dream for him, like for so many Black people, remained elusive. Unlike the Vert storyline, this superhero lacked the ability to make his dream of equality come true, revealing to readers that the strength of White supremacy was stronger than any Black power.

Jackson expanded on his commentary about the North and White liberals from the Vert series and showed that despite the South’s racist reputation, White supremacy and privilege was spread around the nation. In one strip, Bungleton was forced by a bus driver to sit in the back (Jackson, 1946a) after they crossed the Mason-Dixon line, though the real indignity seemed to be when a White “liberal” sympathizer began to talk about how frustrated he was that the half-White educated daughter of his “Black Mammy” refused his offer of a maid’s job. Later Bungleton seethed because the liberal did not understand why the woman was offended. “A maids’ job for perhaps his half sister! . . .
Liberal . . . Bah!” (Jackson, 1946b). In another panel, he continued his conversation with the liberal White man who talked about his love for his Black workers:

Liberal: My colored help… They are so “smiley” and anxious to please… Much more so than my White help…
Bungleton: That could be an economic condition… it’s not necessarily a racial characteristic. You see we know there is a strong tendency in this country to keep the darker brother in a state of continuous insecurity. We get the worst jobs at the lowest pay… we are hired last and fired first…when fired, we have fewer places to look for re-employment than other races! That “grin” of ours comes from the stomach a lot times instead of from the heart…Any other race on the same spot would react the same! It’s a job saver… even a life saver! (Jackson, 1947a)

When Bungleton asked the liberal if he would promote the Black workers at his plant, the man scoffed, “My White employees might object!” (Jackson, 1947a). Another strip depicted a conversation Bungleton had with an angry migrant that was returning back to the South (Jackson, 1947b). “That jive you Northerners put down about freedom and equality is a gang of trash,” the migrant said in frustration. The migrant said he went to the North thinking about freedom and equality but “what do I rate? The same old Jim Crow! Only there I ain’t forced to call him mister!” He explained that while there were no signs that said “sit here,” as a Black person, you still know that you cannot go anywhere you want. “One thing I appreciate in Peckerwoods is that they never let us forget ‘our’ place! Yankees tease us with the old equality come-on . . . but stick out the eager mit to try an’ cop a hunk of it and’ you’ll lose an arm!” When Bungleton mentioned the fact that there were still lynching’s in the South, the migrant mentioned a recent murder of a Black man by police officers (Figure 5). Jackson, as in the past had
painted a more complicated picture of how the American dream could be had with no clear answers about where or if America’s promise was true.

Soon after, a sullen Bungleton quit the police force (Jackson, 1947c) and a few strips later, woke up to discover that he had been dreaming since the days of the Mystic Commandos (Jackson, 1947d). The dream device perhaps was Jackson’s way of explaining the disbelief on the part of Black America that any real success could occur, whether it was attaining riches in Africa or fighting racism. It also could reveal that to Jackson and others, any radical action on the part of Black people was strictly fantasy. Or it could simply could have been an easy device to change storylines. It is hard to know the truth behind the storyline without direct comments from the artist, but it was clear the editors were ready for another iteration of the comic strip. With a new suit, spiffy hat, and lips more shaded and less minstrel-like, Bungleton was updated to reflect the new postwar middle-class dream many Black and White Americans were now living.
The Chester Commodore Era

By the end of the 1940s, the country was far from perfect, but some people felt that the American dream was closer than it ever had been for Black Americans (Johnson, 1988). The civil rights movement was gaining steam and several court cases had been won around schooling, housing, employment, and military service. Additionally, due to the migration and increasing urbanization of Black Americans, there was substantial gains in the earnings of Black people since the North was a higher wage market. For example, the average median salary (in 2020 dollars) for a Black male in 1939 was $9,947. In 1949, the mean wage was $19,012 and in 1959, it was $25,451.49 (Maloney, 2002; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.).

In the 1950s and 1960s, Bungleton Green returned to insular narratives about the segregated lives of Black people. In 1954, Chester Commodore took the cartoon over (Salmzman et, 1996) and Bungleton Green’s transformation seemed complete. Bungleton was not concerned with race relations or dreams and had fewer run-ins with the law. He had what appeared to be a corporate job (at times they specify advertising), went to church, and was sometimes married and living in what seemed to be suburban bliss. He had secretaries, took vacations, and had little that would distinguish him from his White counterparts. There were occasional panels about horse betting and bouts with the law, but more often than not, he was shown as a suburban anywhere man, less tied to Chicago and city life and more about the ordinary problems of the middle-class. He had been turned into an utterly boring universal character, who was focused on his individual problems of home life and work success. He does not have to fight racism. He does not have to take fancy trips abroad or migrate to other regions, but instead is happy right where he is.
Bungleton’s world continued to be segregated but perhaps this iteration of the comic revealed another aspect of the American dream for Black Americans. Showing African Americans doing and living their so-called “ordinary” (meaning middle-class, heterosexual) lives was a refreshing alternative to the depictions of the dysfunction, stereotypes and misery presented by the mainstream media of that era. Nonetheless, I wonder if the Bungleton Green of the 1950s and 1960s was too out of touch with the masses, since his biggest problem often seemed to be problems like the fact that his wife could not cook a steak properly (Figure 6) (Commodore, 1951).

![Bungleton Green comic strip](https://search-proquest-com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/docview/492815883?accountid=13626)

**Figure 6.** Reprinted from “Steak”, Bungleton Green [Comic strip] by Chester Commodore, May 12, 1951, The Chicago Defender. Retrieved from https://search-proquest-com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/docview/492815883?accountid=13626

In one of the last series, we see Bungleton as a pilot (Commodore, 1961). Migration and movement always were a source of exploration for the strip and flying in the open skies seemed to be another place that Bungleton could truly find freedom. After a few of his usual adventures it was revealed that Bungleton flew in Pearl Harbor in 1945 with the Washington Air Patrol, with what appears to be an all-Black regime (Commodore, 1962). That series was the exception rather than the rule. Commodore’s Bungleton continued to police women-- Bungleton chastised his co-worker for dressing
inappropriately and commented to a date about how little clothing she wore—but commentary on race, migration or aspiration, barely existed anymore.

Historian Bruce Lenthall said that comics never described an “America as it existed, but an ideal America—America as readers imagined it” (Lenthall, 1998, p. 42). Lenthall noted race, and to a lesser extent class, was eradicated from mainstream comics following World War II in an effort to portray a unified country; in so doing, they erased Black people and class differences. “The America of the post-war imagination was a middle-class suburb” (Lenthall, 1998, p. 42). Perhaps this middle-class bliss was the way Black people wanted to finally see themselves. Perhaps they too were tired of stories around racism and oppression, though it was a part of their reality, and wanted to see the world not as it was but as they imagined America to be.

*Bungleton Green* disappeared after 1963 until 1968 when the strip briefly returned with Bungleton in a short afro, beads, and a leisure suit. The comic was still a gag-a-day commentary, with Bungleton making fun of larger women (Figure 7) and cheating with women, but it is far from the social commentary strips of Jay Jackson and Leslie Rogers. Commodore (Nelson, 1999) implied there was some kind of evolution of Bungleton
during this era, but any real changes seemed to purely superficial. In a documentary about the Black press, Commodore told the filmmakers that:

Bungleton Green changed durin' the Civil Right's era real quick and sharp because after Martin Luther King's assassination, that was shockin' in itself, and it made me join with the crowd and, ah, Bungleton came up with a — a 21-incher with a little — them little hats they were wearin' then and a dashiki on and getting down with the brother. And I — from then on, I had fun 'cause I was as free as the sayin' that Martin Luther King had, “Free At Last.” I could come in sharp (Nelson, 1999).

Any sharpness that Commodore had was short lived. As the government began to persecute members of the Black press for its radical positions, the mainstream press started hiring more Black journalists (offering better salaries and more exposure) and corporate interests caused papers to take a more moderate tone for financial security, the Black press started to decline (Nelson, 1999). Bungleton Green then faded away, with irregular publication dates and increasingly weak content. No longer was the Black press the behemoth it once was, and Bungleton too became a relic of the past during the Black power era PBS, n.d.-c).

**Conclusion**

The character, Bungleton Green, like many Black Americans, continuously defined and re-defined what the American dream looked like for a Black person in America, while evolving an understanding of how Black people should achieve those dreams. Over the years, the comic strip vacillated between the moral and the materialistic aspect of the dream, while at times it was both. The changes in artists seemed to often reflect a change for the strip, though, in most periods, they articulated an American dream that is neither wholly committed to the moral or material.
In the 1920s, under the helm of Leslie Rogers, after a string of get-rich schemes and horse racing failures, Bungleton attempted to reach his American dream through expatriation to France. There, feeling freer than ever, he decided fighting racists was a part of his dream scenario. When Henry Brown took over the strip in 1929, he engaged readers with a more materialistic version of the dream, literally having Bungleton become a millionaire. Four years later, Jackson continued that storyline, albeit with a more modest approach. Bungleton became a member of the middle class by becoming a “respectable” citizen with a fiancée, housing, and several small businesses. In this iteration, part of the path to the dream, Jackson implied, was adapting to certain codes and mannerisms. Jackson further articulated this when Bungleton began to “police” a southern migrant, Honey Lue, who sought to seek out her American dream of wealth through marriage to Bungleton. Showing the constant fluctuation in attitudes about the dream, Jackson also embraced the moral aspect of the dream. In 1942, amidst the Double V campaign, the comic strip was mainly dedicated to social justice and equality. The cartoon artist embraced ideas about the moral aspect of the dream similar to Rogers’ Parisian Bungleton, which meant pushing back against the system and calling out racist behavior.

Finally, as middle-class conformity became in vogue in the aftermath of the war, this too became the dream for Commodore’s Bungleton, as his main worries centered around his wife, household, and job in corporate America—in short, the materialistic and individualistic aspects of the dream. As the civil rights era came into prominence, for the first time, the character remained stuck in the past, clinging on to an American dream that seemed out of step with the reality of many African Americans by the late 1960s. Perhaps
this explains why Bungleton fell out of favor and finally disappeared at the height of the Black Power movement.

Over the years, Bungleton’s dream and the means to its achievement clearly shifted, with equality and racial freedom being a prominent part of true success in America. While much of Bungleton’s time was spent in a segregated world, it was the very radical cartoons of the forties, spent in an integrated community, that showed Jackson’s commitment to integration and simultaneous critique of Southern Jim Crow and Northern liberal racism. Jackson’s comments on life in the North was a particularly important trajectory to note given the Defender’s radical stance on migration in the early 20th century, but also their more conservative position around Black middle-class migrants and respectability later on. These diverse strips showed how several Black artists continued to wrestle and engage with ideas about what the American dream looked like in Black America. Most telling was the radical group of fighters, the Mystic Commandos, who decided to stay in future America because they did not want to deal with discrimination. Even more interestingly, when a more respectable Bungleton was depicted in the 1940s by Jackson, the dream still seemed to be out of reach as he never attained true freedom and constantly had to endure segregation and discrimination. Perhaps as Berlant said, “fantasy is an opening and a defense” (Berlant, 2011, p. 49) since in several strips readers saw Bungleton disengage and detach from that optimism to look at the structural impediments to his life more clearly, trying to make sense of the American dream.

Bungleton was always shown as having agency, with the ability to impact his future, even when he was making poor decisions and put in jail. Though luck played a
role in many of Bungleton’s early adventures, like becoming wealthy via oil or winning at the horse races, Bungleton was never a passive character. Bungleton was an everyman, a failure, a hero, a radical, and ultimately, a man who wanted a good, job, house, and relationship. The strip shows how hard it was to attain the dream in many eras, wrestling with failed dreams and the hypocrisy of America, yet it was revolutionary in its simple portrayal of a Black man with dreams.

Most of all, Bungleton Green (Rogers, 1920) was able to balance comedy and serious social justice issues of the day as it offered challenges and critiques of the status quo. When the mood of the country shifted and more than comic relief was needed for a Black community that was angry and restless, like in the forties when Black people began to fight more vehemently for equality, Bungleton too became a champion for social justice. This era most clearly displayed a commentary on race, hopes, and dreams as it also wrestled with unionism, communism, and integration in the North. However, while those moments may appear to be the most strident representations of the American dream, I argue that even in the 1950s and early 1960s, as Bungleton settled into middle-class American life, the comic strip presented an image of opportunity and success in America.

_Bungleton Green’s_ (Rogers, 1920) character was able to live out and act out his wildest dreams and many of Black Americans’ dreams. While certainly not representative of the total experience of this marginalized community, the cartoon represented a diverse range of ways to succeed and showed the importance of luck in America for Black Americans. Bungleton seemed to understand the role of luck in achieving the American dream, particularly for Black people. Aside from text, one can surmise the importance of
luck through the placement of seemingly random numbers in the strip starting in the 1930s. Numbers would be subtly placed at the edge of various panels, which readers in turn would presumably use to play lotto or an illegal numbers game. This shows even when Bungleton was depicted as an advocate for the race, or in a corporate board room as an advertising executive, luck, via these numbers, remained necessary for Black Americans. The use of these numbers showed the power of luck over bootstrapping narratives of hard work people all too often knew was not the reality for Black people.

Moving from respectability to oil mogul to politician to an “African” king to middle-class building owner to superhero race crusader, *Bungleton Green* tried to bring to life the many dreams of Black America. Taken at face value, *Bungleton Green* (Rogers, 1920) can look like a silly gag comic that does not reflect the experiences of Black Americans or say anything about their aspirations and frustrations, but when read more closely, the cartoon seems to give its readers powerful written and visual representations of the American dream for Black Americans during the Great Migration and beyond. Bungleton Green provided a way for Black Americans to engage with notions of the dream and the fallacies of it.
Chapter 2

Fighting for Home: The Call for Southern Black Solidarity and Rhetoric Against the Great Migration in the Norfolk Journal and Guide

A man’s home is his castle and he will fight for it.

On March 16, 1827, the first African American owned and operated newspaper made its debut the same year New York state abolished slavery. Founded by two Black free men, Samuel Eli Cornish and John Browne Russwurm, *Freedom's Journal*, reflected the need for African Americans to control their own narrative, noting on the cover of the debut issue, “We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us” (“The first African American Newspaper Appears,” n.d., para. 3). The paper lasted for two years.

It was not until Reconstruction nearly 40 years later, when the number of Black owned and operated newspapers began to flourish, both in the North and the South. Between the Emancipation Proclamation and the turn of the century, over 500 Black-owned newspapers were started, creating a new era where Black people were able to control their own narrative and react to the world around them. Historian Christopher Reed said the press was critical to Black America during this time,

I would rank the 19th century African American press as one of the major forces in producing one of the major miracles of that century, pulling African Americans together after slavery into cohesive communities. Whether you're talking about Kansas or Mississippi, ah, New York, it doesn't make any difference -- Washington, these newspapers informed people, elevated morale, built a sense of racial consciousness. You can't, ah, overstate the importance of newspapers. (Nelson, 1999)

By the 1920s and 1930s, the Black press reached its zenith. During this period, a range of Black papers had unprecedented influence in Black life, namely the *Chicago Defender*,

whose circulation had reached 230,000 in 1929, and the *Pittsburgh Courier* with a circulation of over 300,000 during that same period. The papers had a vast range of distributors, a readership many claimed was higher than their circulation numbers, and editors who were seen as highly influential.

**The Great Migration**

In the late 19th century, Black-owned newspapers like the *Wesley Cyclone* and the *Colored Visitor* called for Black labor outside of the South, noting how welcome Black folks were in these regions (West, 2003, p. 129). Yet it was not until labor shortages created by World War I and coupled with a failed cotton crop that migration to the North and West started to become a movement that swept the attention of the nation. Led by the *Defender*, newspapers actively called for Black people to move to the North, a place, where they claimed tired workers could gain respite from the racial oppression they were suffering while making higher wages. The *Defender*, which had a large reach in the North and South, harped on the migration theme by aggressively encouraging Black people to leave the South for the “promised land” of the North, especially between 1915 and 1919. Much of that narrative centered on stories about Black upward mobility and capitalized on the myth of American dream to sell migration but the rhetoric also varied greatly with Black people divided about the benefits of migration. The Black press was no different.

The Black press, much like the Black population, was not a monolith. The *Defender’s* model of sensationalism and militancy, with editorials that sought to make “the crackers’ squirm under the lash” (Grossman, 1991, p. 86), was not shared by all of the Black press. While much of the Black press in the North framed the migration in a
positive light, Black southern newspapers were sometimes more ambivalent that a mass exodus of the South was the salvation Black people needed to thrive as a community. Among these papers, which included the Savannah Tribune (Kaalund, 2018), the Delta Leader and the Star of Zion of Charlotte (Jones, 1986), was the Norfolk Journal and Guide (renamed The New Journal and Guide in 1991; also referred to as the Guide), the most popular Black newspaper in the South (Humes, 2015). Unlike the Defender, whose migration campaign formally ended in 1919 when race riots began to plague the North, the Guide took a hard stance against the Great Migration from 1916-1970, consistently arguing that hope and opportunity for the Black race could be found at home in the South rather than in the North. Most studies of the Black press of this era focus on the Chicago Defender and its aggressive campaign in the North (DeSantis, 1998), less is known about the press that advocated against the migration (Jones, 1986) (DeSantis, 1998; Jones, 1986; Chatelain, 2015; Grossman, 1991; Wilkerson, 2010 Michaeli, 2016).

The Defender was known for selling the North as the harbinger of the “American dream” in the early 20th century (DeSantis, 1998), but other papers, like the Guide, had a different vision for Black Americans. Instead of hailing Chicago and the North as the so-called promised land, the Norfolk Journal and Guide, one of the largest Black papers in the United States (Jones, 1986), dispelled ideas the North was any sort of dream and advised readers, through a number of editorials, to stay home if they wanted to achieve the American dream. The Guide fundamentally believed in the equitable vision of the Founding Fathers and that America had a moral obligation to ensure its citizens were treated equally. The editors also believed that government would eventually provide this, and that the best way to achieve happiness in the South was to not ruffle too many
feathers and instead focus on one’s self, while remaining committed to the region. They argued the South was the best place for African Americans and called belittled migrants that left weak, while simultaneously advocating for better conditions for and treatment of Blacks in the South (“Not Going Anywhere,” 1956, p. 8.). Yet the editorials of the Guide ultimately failed to articulate the narrative of hope that was often so instrumental to the American dream.

In this chapter, I look at the history of the Norfolk Journal and Guide’s anti-migration campaign. I examine how the newspaper’s editorials went from placing blame for the migration on “docile” migrants, to denouncing southern White society for driving them out due to racism, discrimination and violence. I show how the Guide attempted to convince readers that the South was the locale where the American dream could be realized during its anti-migration campaign in three ways: (a) by heavily focusing on the moral aspect of the American dream that they said was not just about equality but about the “duty” and obligation of Black people to not run away from problems when they occur; (b) by framing the region as a progressive “New South,” not as a place to escape, but a place of home; and (c) by revealing the South as a potential as a site for equality. While the Defender was successful in its outreach to southern Black people, the Guide, despite its constant invocation of the American dream, was not. In the final section, I

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9 This project will not examine sociological theories of the Great Migration, rather it will look at how these ideas where covered in the newspaper. It should be noted that the push-pull theory that maintains that Black people were pushed” from the South because of economic conditions remains to be the dominant explanation for why people left. Historian Lawrence Levine said that economic conditions are often overvalued. The sentimental theory said that migrants moved because of racial and political conditions of the south, but also moved to be with loved ones (Desantis, 1998).

10 Using archival material cataloged by ProQuest through the New York Public Library, I examined the history of the paper’s anti-migration rhetoric from the beginning of the migration in 1916 to its end in 1970. To make this search more manageable, I utilized ProQuest’s search tools to search for editorials with 21,711 results. I then looked for editorials that featured the search terms “migration” (171 articles),
look at how the *Guide* evolved on its position surrounding the migration and what happened as the Great Migration came to an end, analyzing why the American dream failed to convince Black southerners the New South was the place of their dreams.

A Moral Call to Duty

As previously noted, in 1973, communications professor Walter Fisher said the American dream was composed of two similar but differing ideas. First there was the material component of the American dream that focused on material success. This part of the dream was grounded in the puritan work ethic and promote the idea that hard work is rewarded with wealth, status, and power (Fisher, 1973, p. 161.). The second is a moral part of the dream based on ideas around liberty, freedom, and equality—ideas that can be seen in the *Declaration of Independence*. This ideology places value on notions like compassion and charity and favors cooperative efforts to help the less fortunate. Most often, Fisher noted, while one is not necessarily better than the other, and both make up the American dream, the moralistic or materialistic aspect of the dream tends to dominate.

The *Guide* most often adhered to a notion of the moral aspect of the dream that was predicated on Black institutions and the elite’s notion of the American dream, based on ideas such as duty and obligation. The *Guide*’s editorials used ideals like self-preservation to encourage these would-be migrants to stay, but it seemed hard to be effective amidst so much segregation, discrimination, and injustice (e.g., particularly...
among the working class for whom sharecropping under Jim Crow had proven to be another version of slavery). The *Guide* pushed back on the religious theme of the exodus that Abbott initially invoked in the *Defender*, (Kaalund, 2018) using its own Protestant imagery, telling readers if they had faith and patience, deliverance via economic success would come. By staying in their birthplace, the newspaper subtly noted, they were carrying out a duty that would be rewarded.

Cultural scholar Alan DeSantis (1998) used Fisher’s (1973) moral and material frame to analyze the *Defender’s* pro-migration campaign, but it is also useful in understanding the *Guide’s* anti-migration rhetoric. DeSantis argued the *Defender* was the most successful at convincing Black to move North when they articulated both the moral and material aspect of the American dream, therefore he, like Fisher, believed that both aspects of the dream were important for Black people to have success in America.

In dichotomizing the American Dream into materialistic and moralistic myths, there is danger that one may assume that there is virtue in one and only vice in the other. But this is an inaccurate view. Both are based on traditional values. (Fisher, 1973, p. 163)

The editors at the *Guide* seemed to at least partially share this belief as they tried to sell the idea of the American dream during their own anti-migration campaign by engaging with both of these ideas. Editors told their readers of the material riches they could have by remaining in the South and also by calling on their moral duty to stay and fight for equal rights in their homeland. But the *Guide* often overutilized the moral aspect of the dream. Unlike the *Defender*, they failed to balance their coverage with the moral and materialistic arguments about the American dream, leading to what I believe was a failure in their campaign. The newspaper heavily focused on the moral component of the dream, using it as a call for Black people to stand up and fight for their equity, prosperity, and
justice in their homeland, while simultaneously relying on the idea that equality in the
South could be created through the good of southern Whites who would improve
conditions for Black people. Their campaign that argued for Black people to stay in the
South and abandon the migration to the North was a defensive one failing to convince
migrants that wealth, jobs, and a better, more just, quality of life could be had in the
South. Most importantly, it failed to give hope to unsatisfied Black people in the region.

The Guide underestimated both the agency of the Black migrants and their need,
not just for a dream, but for a way to make that dream materialize. The consciousness of
Black America as an imagined community was rising, and for the first time, Black
America saw itself as Black people who were thoroughly American (Anderson, 2006).
For centuries, Black Americans had looked for a way to better their lives in America. The
migration narrative in newspapers like the Defender gave would-be migrants hope, along
with a practical way of making their dreams come true, instead of the “New South”
vision of the South, created by a White man and meant to continue the oppression of
Black people.

**Origins of the Norfolk Journal and Guide and Plummer Bernard Young Sr.**

The Norfolk Journal and Guide, founded in 1900, was initially published by the
fraternal organization known as the Supreme Lodge Knights of Gideon and was known
as the Lodge Journal and Guide (“New Journal and Guide,” n. d.). It was taken over a
decade later by Plummer Bernard Young, Sr. Born in 1884 in Littleton, North Carolina,
Young almost immediately began working in the printing industry, first as an office
assistant at a White newspaper, then teaching printing at St. Augustine’s College in
Raleigh (Suggs, 1979). In 1907, after his son, Plummer Bernard, Jr., was born, he took a
job as a foreman for the *Lodge Journal and Guide*, at the rate of $12 per week. In 1910, the bank that held the *Lodge*’s mortgage collapsed, the newspaper shut down, and Young decided the time was right to get into the editorial business. He borrowed $3,000 from banks and opened the newspaper again. Having had experience as a printer at his father’s paper and success after publishing an editorial for the *Lodge Journal and Guide*, Young was confident his new endeavor could become fruitful. He renamed the paper the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* and expanded its page count (Suggs, 1979).

Under Young’s management sales increased dramatically and the paper became known not only as one of the top-selling Black newspapers in the country, but one of the best edited and well-written of its time (PBS, n.d.-b; Suggs, 1979). They were particularly heralded for their well-researched editorials and organization. The newspaper, however, was not created in the vein of papers like the *Defender*, with splashy headlines and sensational content. The *Guide* was conservative, both in its content and character, and was considered a “moderate” paper by most across the lines of race (PBS, n.d.-b). The paper was often more conciliatory on race relations, though partially out of a necessity to avoid a White backlash as the paper was based in the Jim Crow South and its editor often worked with the White community to improve bonds between the races. The paper’s conciliatory tone led to more advertising from White companies (even nationally) than some of its more militant counterparts in the Black press (PBS, n.d.-b). Commentary and reporting about racial equality often shied away from conversations around integration, though Young saw himself as an advocate of racial justice. He believed the role of the Black newspaper was to serve as a vehicle to advocate economic and civil rights in the Black community, “In the assertion of one’s
rights, it is not necessary to be vulgar or bumptious. . . . Let us make the most, not the least of the splendid opportunities we have and insist that the rights of others cease where our begin, and that our rights cease where the rights of others begin” (Suggs, 1979, p. 49).

The Guide used various types of media (letters to the editor, cartoons, reported pieces, advertisements) to rally against the migration, but the most effective representation of its views were its editorial pages (Jones, 1986). Editorials provide the clearest sense of a newspaper’s identity. According to media scholar Elisabeth Le (2010), an editorial “depicts how media perceive and react to the world around them...each editorial defines at a given time how media construct their socio-cultural environment and where they position themselves in it... they are snapshots of media socio-cultural identities” (p. xi). Further, Le (2010) noted how easy editorials are to digest because they are “short, easily obtainable, and particularly interesting for their persuasive strategies” (p. xi). Therefore, the editorial page was a useful place to begin attempting to comprehend how Black Americans in the South understood ideas around the American Dream. This analysis centered on the editorials of the Guide and their rhetoric around the Great Migration.

I analyzed this source with several factors in mind. The editors of the Guide, like many of those in Black press, represented an elite, often middle-class segment of the Black population. They usually had more education, more wealth, lived in more urban environments, and occupied a more established position in the Black community that differed from the working-class masses who usually lived in rural communities (Jones, 1986). Plus, the newspaper’s particular position on the Tidewater coast, home to a vibrant
shipping industry, meant salaries in the area were often higher than in other regions of the South. Companies like Texas Oil and E.I. Dupont, manufacturing industries, and federal military installations provided stable jobs with decent pay and opportunities, particularly during the war years. According to Lewis (1991a), Norfolk experienced an annual population growth of 7.3% between 1910 and 1920 and was a destination for migrants leaving the deep South and for those wanting a respite from the North. This may have skewed editors’ views on migration and the economic conditions of Black people.

The newspaper often seemed to give more weight to matters around respectability and looked for guidance on race issues from scholars like Booker T. Washington (who was friends with the paper’s owner and editor, Plummer Bernard Young Sr.), rather than the more liberal W.E.B. Dubois. Norfolk could boast of what Earl Lewis (1991b) called a “modest entrepreneurial middle class” (p. 38), many of whom had built their success from nothing. The newspaper’s staff often assisted the many new migrants who came through Norfolk, giving the writers a firsthand view of the migrant experience (Jones, 1986). While Booker T. Washington’s mantra of self-reliance had fallen out of favor with scholars in the late twentieth and twenty first centuries, many in the Black community agreed with his moderate positions on race and the philosophy of self-help in the early twentieth century. Writer Ta-Nehisi Coates (2009) has said that the response from Black Americans to Washington’s famous “Atlanta Compromise” speech, which argued for racial uplift but against integration, was “at worst mixed, and a best quite positive” (para. 1). This means the Guide was not completely out of step with the segment of Black America who believed in the promise of a “New South,” a term coined by White Atlanta newspaper editor Henry Grady, that promoted economic and racial reconciliation.
between the North and the South and a society where Black people and White people coexisted in segregated worlds (Jones, 1979).

It is probably no surprise the *Guide*, a paper whose motto was “Build Up, Not Tear Down” would advocate for Black people to stay in the South (Suggs, 1979). The newspaper, and particularly its editorials, reflected the conservative philosophy espoused by Washington of “land ownership, economic self-help, and racial solidarity” (Suggs, 1979 p. 366), that its founder and editor believed in. While it is unclear who wrote the majority of the editorials until mid-20th century when the paper employed columnists, it is implied by P.B. Young’s biographer, Henry Lewis Suggs, that Young wrote the bulk of the early editorials himself as many of the pieces reflected Young’s class position, belief system, and aspiration (Suggs, 2017). Young believed since Black people would face discrimination anywhere, they would do better in the South, a place where they understood the people, economics and social customs and could find their American dream right were there already lived. Particularly during the first wave of the migration, Young believed the vast number of employment opportunities were temporary and would end as the war closed. He believed if Black people would just focus on raising themselves up economically in a land where their labor was needed, and where they represented a high percentage of the population, White people would eventually offer their “encouragement” and “support” (Suggs, 1979, p. 36). His belief in the new South as the American dream let him hope for economic prosperity and a chance to develop a political base and unity between the communities (Suggs, 1979). Young also thought under Jim Crow segregation, Black people could create unique spaces for themselves in a place where there was stable work without interference from immigrants (Brooks, 2017).
It seemed as if readers at the time agreed with the newspaper’s position, as several letters to the editor praised the paper’s editorial position. On June 30, 1917, J. S. Jones, a cashier at Mutual Savings Bank said the paper’s editorials on migration “left an impression that will serve to stir the souls of all men that love freedom justice and a square deal” while noting that the editor was one of the “staunchest champions of the race in the entire country” (Jones, 1917, p. 4). Another letter from August 13, 1932 reinforced the paper’s ideology, stating:

There is not an intelligent man in the city that does not know that it is better “down home” on the farm than it is in Newark standing in a soup and bread line for many hours in the bleak winter days. (“Newark” 1932, p. 6)

Others followed in this suit.

It is tempting to attribute the newspaper’s position on migration to regional bias but other papers in the South, like The Richmond Planet, were content with Black people leaving for the North and West,11 showing once again how Black people often had different visions of how to attain the American dream (Suggs, 1983). The Planet’s editor, John Mitchell, believed in similar ideas around vocational training, thrift, and home ownership as Young, but often clashed with him over his views on migration and social justice issues. Mitchell took a more “militant” approach to race relations and called for Black people to organize and protest, a position reflective of his more urban and “aggressive” readership. Young on the other hand, favored more conciliatory views on race relations that often reflected the sentiments of his newspaper’s older, rural, and more conservative audience (Suggs, 1983, p. 169).

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11 Its founder and editor, John Mitchell Jr., believed, at least for a while, that migration was a private and personal decision. While he did not want to leave the South, he believed that if the North was as bad as some of the southern press claimed, migrants would call on their families to stay home rather than come North.
More than location, Young’s friendship with Washington seems to have influenced his position on migration. Yet, while Young respected Washington’s philosophy, as the years wore on, he worried about the continued disenfranchisement of Black voters (Suggs, 1979). As violence against Black people continued and they remained alienated from the political system, Young reexamined his beliefs and softened his stance on racial issues. When World War I broke out, the editor became a more outspoken about inequality in the Black community (Suggs, 1979). He never became a militant and remained conservative in many of his views, including fighting hard against the exodus of Black people from the South but Young seemed more open to different ideas.

According to his biographer, Young believed the northern migration would end as soon as the war was over since Black people would be the first ones fired from the very jobs that they had flocked to (Suggs, 1979) and steadfastly advocated that Blacks continue to fight for economic independence in the South. He hoped the “better elements of the White society” would improve their treatment because of the need for Black labor (Suggs, 1979, p. 370). He called for the better conditions of Black people and launched campaigns against lynching and for improved water quality and equal voting rights and continued to preach the idea of uplift through self-help to members of his race (Suggs, 1979).

When Abbott began “The Great Northern Drive” on May 15, 1917, in the Defender, he stated his goal was to “exhort southern Blacks to come to Chicago, in order to make money and live under the legal benefits of citizenship” (Lemann, 1992, p. 16). The Guide, on the other hand, seemed to have another set of goals predicated upon
keeping the migrants in the South. Young, like Abbott understood Black people needed to be allowed to dream, to dare to have hopes and desires, so he too shaped his newspaper’s editorials around those ideals which can most clearly be seen in the Guide’s anti-migration rhetoric. By using the idea of the American dream, the Guide seemed to have six main goals. These were:

1. to keep migrants from the North by convincing Black people that the South was a better place for them;
2. to argue Black people needed to fight for their homeland;
3. to talk about the horrid conditions in the North;
4. to convince White people in the South that Black labor was valuable;
5. to rally against any policy proposals that would remove Black people from the South; and
6. to persuade Whites to treat Black people better in the South.

They advocated for these ideas using the ideals of the American dream (Desantis, 1998), particularly a moral call to fight for equality in the South, but in the end failed to give hope to the Black masses.

**A Call Back to the New South**

The vision for the future of the South was created immediately after the Civil War by a White newspaper editor, Henry Grady, who had decided the South needed a new image (Jones, 1979). He coined the phrase “the New South” to embrace his new dream for the region that was based on an ideology of economic transformation and success. Instead of the agrarian foundation that had been run on a slave economy, Grady wanted the New South to be a haven which embraced industrialization and commerce and served as a site of reconciliation between the two formerly dueling regions. But despite Grady’s economic progressivism, his New South was still predicated on a paternalistic White supremacy ruling in the South. The New South in short, would be a place where “the people love the Negro and delight to protect him” (Jones, 1979, p. 225). Though this
perspective seemed at odds with the Black-owned *Guide*, at the core, this vision aligned with Booker T. Washington’s conciliatory strategy around race relations.

In 1909, Young went to hear Washington speak about the progress that the country was making in regard to race relations (Suggs, 1979). Based on that speech, Young began a correspondence, and later a friendship, with Washington who visited Norfolk multiple times (Suggs, 1979, p. 369). In an excerpt from a speech to the Negro Organization Society in Norfolk on November 12, 1914, Washington said that Black people and White people had made great strides, and both would live in the South together eventually understanding each other and forming friendships. He believed that there were also specific advantages Black people had in the region:

> We have advantages right here in the South in the way of soil and climate and White people who understand us and whom we understand. . . . True, we sometimes have evidence of racial friction… the wonder is that there is not more racial friction instead of less. . . . We are going to live here because we do not want to leave and because the White man does not want us to leave. (as cited in Washington, 1914, pp. 660-661)

The *Guide* argued that Black people in the South were understood and could be who they wanted to be, even if it was subtly implied, they were not able to do everything they wanted to (Fisher, 1973, p.162). Young continuously articulated this conservative vision of a New South where Black people were equal, but not integrated, in the vein of Grady, though it was clear at times the paper itself was not always convinced the New South was the haven it was said to be (Suggs, 2017). It is understandable why. The New South was supposed to be a place of progress, but according to Erin Chapman (2012), “Combined with its actual sexual, economic, and political oppression, the New South’s proclamation of progressivism ultimately prevented African Americans from achieving the bright goal of ‘Civil Rights’” (p. 65). Chapman argued that the idea of interracial solidarity between
Blacks and Whites in the region was based on conservativism, conformity and respectability, and more often than not constricted and oppressed Black people, particularly those of the avant-garde who considered themselves “New Negroes” who were seeking transformation in the South. Yet, despite the fact the region often became a symbol of “all that was backward, wrong, and wanting in American racial politics” (Chapman, 2012, p. 65), the idea of the New South, and the conservative dream it represented, was very much a part of the American dream the Guide was trying to convince its readers could exist in the region. Though the newspaper often seemed just as unsure about the possibility of that dream becoming true, it remained committed to the idea of the New South throughout the Great Migration. This was due to Young’s friendship with Washington, Young’s conservative approach to race relations, and his belief the government would eventually live up to its ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (Suggs, 2017).

No Disposition to Leave—Attacks on the Migrants

The first editorial of the Norfolk Journal and Guide about migration was published on the fourth page of the Sunday edition on November 25, 1916. It followed two front page pieces on the migration. The first, at the center of the page, was a “special report” published by Booker T. Washington’s widow, Margaret Murray Washington, where she advocated for Black people to stay in the South (she also simultaneously argued Black people needed to ensure they had clean and beautiful homes). The other, a reported story about the Southern Farmers Conference by A.M. Vann that concluded with the question of migration. Vann wrote that thousands were going North in search of employment and wondered if it “Is it best for the Negro to leave the South?” (Vann,
1916, p. 1). Vann stated that the people leaving were “largely of that worthless, indolent and thriftless class which has excused the conditions of the South to exist as we now have them” (Vann, 1916, p. 1). They were, Vann noted, “the worst looking type of the race” (p. 1) and he vowed to say more at a later date (Vann, 1916, p.1). The newspaper, however, did not wait for that time to come and went to expand on Vann’s ideas about migration in a pointed editorial. It was a position it would uphold over the next 50 years.

An editorial headlined “The Labor Exodus” ran in the same edition mentioned previously (“The Labor Exodus,” 1916, p. 4). It started, as the case of many of the Guide’s editorials (Jones, 1986), with a factual analysis of the problem, statistics from a report, and then moved to the newspapers’ point of view (Jones, 1986). The editorial cited a range of reports from one of their correspondents in North and South Carolina who stated hundreds of laborers were leaving for the North because of the war, as immigration had been suspended. It then explained Black labor extremely valuable, because Black people were “more docile,” “less resentful,” and a “better manual laborer” (“The Labor Exodus,” 1916, p. 4) (than White and immigrant workers, the article implied). That elitist tone continued as the editorial presented a class analysis on who was moving and who was staying, arguing the colored laborer being recruited North was a floating freelance class, not the people who were “buying homes and farms, or those engaged in trades” (“The Labor Exodus,” 1916, p. 4). Despite the writer’s optimism that the exodus would mean better wages for those who chose to stay, they were mostly concerned southern Whites were not taking the matter seriously. Instead of trying to figure out how they could prevent their valuable Black laborers from leaving by treating them better and giving them more opportunities, the piece noted, White lawmakers were
passing laws that banned employment agents and arrested Blacks who purchased tickets to the North.

The Negro has gotten along very well as a laborer in the South, and the present indications of a new era of industrial activity in this part of the country gives promise of more labor and better wages than ever. But in order to keep the Negro laborer in the South, which is desirable both for the best interest of the South as well as for the Negro, more practical and sensible methods must be adopted than those now in use. (“The Labor Exodus,” 1916, p. 4)

The paper then described many of the tenets of the American dream—namely hope and opportunity—that DeSantis (1998) listed as the reasons for the exodus:

The Negro is human, and no matter how poor or how ignorant he may be, there lingers in his breast that instinctive human desire to have a better chance, to live in a better house, to send his children to a better school, and in short, to get more out of life. (p. 4)

The paper acknowledged life in the South was not always ideal for Blacks, warning their White readers that Black people would only halt the migration when they were treated better. It was a delicate dance trying to acknowledge the fears and concerns of migrants, poor conditions, and potential for opportunity in the South. Because of this equivocation, the editorial was not fully convincing.

The idea of the American dream was very clearly invoked to convince Black people to change their lives. The Guide editorials on migration between 1916 and 1970 directly attempted to play into that dream narrative, and while they often leaned on the moral part of the dream, their anti-migratory stance was notable; it showed the power and rhetoric of the dream can be shaped and shifted depending on the cause. It is hard to know the motivation for either the Guide or the other newspapers that advocated for migrants to leave, whether it was a pure ideological reason or a financial incentive.

Communications scholar Felecia Jones (1986) cautioned that Northern Black papers had
a financial incentive for seeing the population grow. Before the migration, she noted, there were few Black media outlets because there was a small number of Black people; increasing population would lead to higher circulation. The conservative stance of the *Guide* on the other hand could also be attributed to wanting to continue to court more lucrative advertisers and maintain their social position among leaders in Norfolk (Jones, 1986).

**The First Great Migration**

In the early days of the first Great Migration (1910-1940), the *Guide* focused on four main points: the value of Black labor, the economic (not political) cause for migration, the lack of character and respectability of the migrants, and perhaps more subtly, that the migration was reserved for a “different” class of Blacks (e.g., impressionable drifters with nothing to lose) not for the propertied and respectable elite. They simultaneously used these points to articulate a narrative of the American dream and also argue against Black people leaving the South.

The newspaper, at times, gave an aspirational message for the working class, but also continuously insisted the Black elite had no reason to leave. “The Negro people as a whole, have more and better opportunities to better their condition in the South than in any other section of the country” (“The Facts of Labor Migration,” 1917, p. 4), one editorial stated, while reiterating their elite sentiments on the migration. Black people who found success, who have “prospered and are reasonably contented with their surroundings have no disposition to leave . . . because they have a stake in the places where they are” (“The Facts of Labor Migration,” 1917, p. 4). At the same time, the newspaper continued to put forth the notion that the migration was tied to the economy
and labor crisis, not the oppression of Black bodies. If Blacks were feeling so oppressed it noted, they would have left the South long ago. “All of the nice talk about ‘fleeing from southern oppression,’ and going where ‘equal rights and special privileges’ wait for them is ‘pure buncombe’” (“The Facts of Labor Migration,” 1917, p. 4).

It was an argument that, at best, stretched the reality for the majority of its readership. The newspaper’s task of admitting the lack of upward mobility in the South for Blacks, while simultaneously drawing a picture of the possibility of the region, was a difficult challenge. While the editorial board continued in these early days to make an economic argument about the South being a good place for Blacks, they, too, had little faith in the outcomes. Instead, their editorials against the migration often turned to the moral aspect of the dream, noting, for example, the material wealth that could be attained, if one was “moral” by staying and fighting for their rights:

[They are not ] going to leave their homes and accumulations of half a century as a solution to their problems. They are going to remain here and fight out their problems and insist upon having their constitutional rights afforded to them here in the land of their birth. (“The Facts of Labor Migration,” 1917, p. 4)

On January 13, 1917, one editorial painted a picture of all the wealth Black people would have if they stayed, noting those who fought off the boll weevil would “share richly in the production of cotton and other forms of prosperity which are sure to come in the South” (“The Facts of Labor Migration,” 1917, p. 4). Amidst such a broken region that was suffering economically, it was a hard argument to make. Rather than constantly promote the possibility of economic success, the Guide seemed more comfortable responding defensively rather than offensively about the migration. Editors noted, for example, how unstable the labor market was in the North, even pointing out in one piece
that a northern newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, also warned there were no new privileges for Blacks in the North over the South (“The Facts of Labor Migration,” 1917).

The editorials against the migration were scarce after 1917, but they ramped up again at the end of 1922, when it was clearer the migration was not as temporary as once thought. The newspaper slightly changed their position and an editorial dated December 30, 1922 noted they did not want to magnify the importance of the exodus because it might turn out to be a “good thing for the South and a good thing for the Negro race in America” (“New Exodus,” 1922, p. 1). As in the past, they continued to believe that Southern White people needed to listen to the complaints of Blacks.

**A More Permanent Migration**

A few months later, in 1923, one of the most prolific years for the *Guide’s* editorials on the migration, the newspaper admitted the migration was causing labor shortages and disrupting the economic system in the South (“Inviting the Migrant,” 1923). Compared to the past, the editorials increasingly mentioned the number of White people moving to the South, and published parts of editorials from other newspapers, like the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* that reported stories of “successful” Black farmers in the South to reinforce the idea that the American dream could be found in the region (“Inviting the Migrant,” 1923). The *Guide* chastised the White press, both for not understanding the roots of the migration and for their anti-migration stance. While still holding their position, the *Guide* began displaying a greater understanding of the migrants and their desperation. However, their anger now seemed to be primarily directed towards White mainstream newspapers and their anti-migration position. These newspapers, the editorials implied, offered a double standard by asking Black people not
to leave the South, while also condoning their mistreatment for centuries. This rage fueled a range of editorials on the migration.

Responding to a piece from *Commercial Appeal* urging Black migrants to stay at home (“Inviting the Migrant,” 1923), the *Guide* lashed out at the hypocrisy of the newspaper, which it said had never listened to the voice of the Black community. The newspaper also responded to other Black newspapers, like the *Baltimore Afro-American*, which printed an editorial in 1925 admiring the migrants leaving the South, calling them “radical pioneers” (“Leaders Who Desert,” 1925). The *Guide* scoffed at the statement and doubled down on what they believed was the disreputable character of the migrants, noting that the ones who left the South were “far removed from being the pick of the southern race group. They have been the ‘down and outs’ in intelligence and property” (“Leaders Who Desert,” 1925, p. 14). Falling into stereotyping Blacks as childlike, their elite position intensified as they claimed that both in the South and the North, people had a hard time dealing with this group. The *Guide* again mocked the migrants for abandoning the South, invoking moral and religious proclamations of duty and responsibility.

The idea of duty meshed with respectability and racial uplift, have been long part of Black culture according to religious scholar Rosetta Ross (2003). In the Black religious tradition, social responsibility is often equated with morality. Ross (2003) wrote, “Religious duty includes responsibility for social structures, since social context significantly influences the meaning and experience of being human” (p. 5). “The more full conception of social responsibility in an African American religious worldview is what Peter Paris calls the ‘quest for human freedom and justice, that is, the equality of all
persons under God’” (in Ross, 2003, p. 5). The Guide played on this sentiment and repeatedly wrote copy proclaiming the migrants had “not been the strong men and women of the race who stand by their inheritance in the human and economic values in the South” (“Leaders Who Desert,” 1925, p. 14). As the oppression of Blacks continued, it seemed many members of the race did not respond to these critiques and it was increasingly hard to solely rely on this notion of duty.

**Moving Between Suns: The New South and the Conciliator**

In 1923, the Guide started embracing the term New South in its editorials. The phrase, New South, was not often used in the editorials of the newspaper, particularly as they related to the Great Migration, but the ideals of progress through economic advancement and racial cooperation came through clearly. This is not a surprise since Young was seen as a conciliator with Whites (Suggs, 2017). In the limited times the idea of a New South was mentioned, it encapsulated the spirit the newspaper seemingly wanted to convey—there was hope for healing and the possibility of progress in a land filled with so many racial wounds.

The first editorial that used the idea was in reference to a proposal for a statue of a Black mammy that members of the Daughters of the Confederacy wanted to create in honor of all the “Black mammys” of the old South. The statue was controversial, yet the Guide did not mind the proposed display. “It is possible, and even probable, that the New South will do more as the years go by to ensure civic justice and industrial opportunity for the lineal descendants of the black ‘Mammy,’” they wrote on Feb 10, 1923 (p. 4). It seemed fitting the newspaper was able to praise a piece of art that would be a tribute and a reminder of the pain, stereotypes, and exploitation of Black women, while also taking a
conciliatory tone that alluded to the promise of a better day for Black people. It continued to depict the notion the New South was simply that—a possible, even “probable,” place in the sometime distant future where Black people could find justice. It is clear from these editorials and their work around the Great Migration that the newspaper wanted to believe that change could be made in the region.

The Guide, it seemed, felt backed into a corner by trying to sell a dream of material opportunity in the South that its readership knew was false for the majority Black people, so they turned to a more aggressive practice of advocating for equality in the South and reporting on incremental progress. But this strategy was complicated by lynchings that continued to occur, a matter the newspaper, no matter how conservative, was outraged about and fought back vehemently. On July 12, 1924, an editorial reported a decline in lynchings. There were only five in the first 6 months—a 40-year low—they wrote, while commenting on the fact that people now wanted to come to the South. It seemed as though the editorial was trying to convince Black people to stay, and White people to value of the Black labor (“Decline in Lynchings,” 1924, p. 12).

Almost a month later, on August 9, 1924, the Guide ran a piece about a group of Japanese people thinking about buying land in the Mississippi Delta because of discrimination against them in the California (“Japanese Seek,” 1924). Rather than chastising Black people for leaving, this editorial was a call for the southern Whites to wake up because Blacks had other options. It depicted a stronger Black migrant who had agency and used the same wording—docile—in the opposite way than in the past.

Negro workers are far from being so docile as in other days, when they had not learned the ‘westward, Ho!’ call. They will not now stand for the bad treatment in employment and the savage acts in vengeance, or imagine injury that they
formerly did. They don’t have to. They move away between suns.” (“Japanese Seek,” 1924, p. 3)

Attacks on the North

As the migration intensified, the Guide turned to yet another moral strategy in 1926—rather than just talk about how the American dream could be had in the South, the paper began amplifying rhetoric about how it could not be found in the North because of increasing problems. The Chicago Defender had stopped its pro-migration campaign, partially due to racial violence in the North. Yet, Black people were still leaving the South in droves. The increasingly overpopulated cities, cramped housing conditions, and hostile environments created by unions and employers gave the Guide room to focus on the problems of migration and what they believed to be the false claim of finding the American dream in the North. An editorial on May 1, 1926 (“Employment Scarce”) focused on the problem of labor by reporting that Urban League was urging people to be cautious about migration. Editors hoped the Southern laborer “will think twice about moving ‘to seek opportunity where it does not exist’” (“Employment Scarce,” 1926, p. 14). The Guide reiterated their belief that the “wholesale migration” of Black people did not mean an “ultimate gain for his race” (“Employment Scarce,” 1926, p. 14). As in previous editorials, the newspaper editors hedged, as they could not deny that some Black people were finding success in the North. In a significant turn, the author stated, “This paper submits that there are possible benefits for the Negro in the migration movement, but it holds that it is doubtful whether these benefits outweigh the inevitable losses” (“Employment Scarce,” 1926, p. 14). The author then entered the Washingtonian argument that entrepreneurship, farming and owning land was the key to American
dream, a theme will continue to see in narratives about the dream, instead of being a hired hand:

Moreover, we do not concede that a good farmer, a landowner, reduced to a hired factory laborer constitutes a gain for himself or his race, nor do we admit that the hope of the Negro’s future rests in his congregating in the conscienceless industrial regions of the North against taking his advantage of the many opportunities still his in the South. (“Employment Scarce,” 1926, p. 14)

The editorial did not admit the disadvantages of sharecropping that Blacks were forced into in the South. Still, it continued to state the northern industries had reached a saturation point and wondered what would happen when unemployment fell upon these migrant dreamers.

A Call to Masculinity

The Guide’s editorials often did not explicitly talk about gender in relation to the migrants, but their argument was ultimately very gendered and spoke to male readers of the paper. Instead their editorials used words often associated with masculinity like “fighter” and “manliness” as they wrote about how migrants could secure their American dream. The editorials often portrayed Black men that were strong, able to fight for their cause and buy property as the “ideal” man. For example, an editorial on April 23, 1927, noted with “determination . . . through thrift, industry, education, and a real manly spirit to work to the end that the south will prove a better place in which to live” (“Negro Migrants Not Wanted in Massachusetts,” 1927, p. 12). This was different from a paper like the Defender. The Guide’s editorials used what historian D’Weston Haywood (2018) called “old southern models of manhood” that were advocated by Washington and focused on land ownership and “self-produced commodities” (p. 42), while the Defender centered it’s notions around manhood on urban life, where leisure, consumption and
consumerism was depicted as a freeing new American dream for Black men. (Haywood, 2018).

**Youngs’ Evolution**

While the *Guide* continued to sell notions of masculinity to its readers, it was obvious that Jim Crow was an impediment to any American dream story that could potentially be had in the South by Black people. In both 1926 and 1927, editorials talked about the problem lynching posed for the promise of a New South. An editorial in 1926 stated, “if the South can keep on stomaching its ghastly, sickening lynching record we have misjudged the New South” (“More Lynchings,” 1926, p. 14). In January of 1927, the tone was more upbeat, with an editorial stating there had been a “perceptible gain” in the South, although the “1926 lynching record casts a shadow of disgrace over the whole South” (“The South’s Lynching Record,” 1927, p. 12). While the *Guide* was still firmly against the movement, the editorials in the mid-1920s had an increasing amount of sympathy for the migrants leaving the region and even railed against White newspapers who could not understand why Black people were unhappy in the South. One editorial said,

> When the Negro goes, his White neighbors immediately lay the responsibility for his going on external forces, when as a matter of fact internal promptings serve to accelerate migration of colored people from the South with as great a force as external allurements. (“Why Migration Continues,” 1926, p. 12)

While another noted,

> What does most to crush the heart of hope in the Negro of the South is the near-peonage system prevailing in a wide area of his section and blighting his every chance to aspire to decent living standards, combined with the perpetually harassing jeopardy of his life and property. (“Why Migration Continues,” 1926, p. 12)
The *Guide* continued to make a moral appeal to Southern governments to provide a more equal and just society for its citizens—when Black people were able to feel safe and that there was place for their dreams could be had in the South they would stay.

The editorial direction of the paper changed during the Depression era when Young switched from the Republican to the Democratic party and Young devoted more pages to helping improve the conditions of Black people in the South. Rhetoric around migration shifted to conversations about how to cure the ills behind this mass movement of Black people, not on whether migration was happening, or its causes. However, the debate about whether the American dream could be found in the North or the South continued with the *Guide* at times conceding to the North:

> New England, it is true, doubtless offers more genuine freedom for the colored man than any section of the United States, but it is also true that in this section his opportunity to earn a living is more proscribed than it is in the most prejudiced parts of the South. (“Negro Migrants,” 1927, p. 12)

The *Guide* remained determined to obscure how bad the conditions were in the South. In one editorial, they proudly boasted about how the newspaper had “never compromised in defense of the irritating conditions in the south from which many of our group migrate north to escape,” noting they still failed to “see in migration an exclusive specific panacea for our ills” (“Negro Migrants,” 1927, p. 12). The tone of this editorial, which seemed directed at their Black audience, was different than some of their rage-fueled ones that appeared to be directed at White southerners. When they spoke to Black audiences, the oppression of the South seemed livable, merely irritating, but when writing pieces geared to White audiences or in response to White papers, their tone differed. Only then was the South oppressive and sometimes worthy of escaping. This tone shift reflected the difficult task of the newspaper to sell the American dream to suffering Black
southerners. While the *Guide* made clear they risked their reputation and being called a “traitor to his race” by not advocating for migration (“Employment Scarce,” 1926, p. 14). It seemed they were not completely sold on the benefits of the South and still adamantly believed that the Black American dream was a Black Southern American dream.

By 1938, the positivity about a New South increased even more with the *Guide* predicting “new mental attitudes and spiritual quickening” would finally help usher in the “election of new candidates without racial bigotry” (“No Longer Tenable,” 1938, p. 8), as Black people were winning offices in Black communities. However, the question of progress was still being debated and in the next decade and the newspaper continuously wrote about the tension between the old and New South. They were optimistic the “New” way of life would win out, but also made it clear how far off Black Americans in the region were from achieving any kind of American dream whether moral or material (“Old South vs. New South,” 1941, p. 8). This sentiment revealed the problem with their editorial strategy as they continued to tell of Black troubles in the South while still also seemingly giving up that the American dream could be had for Black people anywhere in the country, “Why many southern colored people live daily in the hope of getting across the Mason and Dixon line?” (p. 8), one editorial asked on March 7, 1942, titled “Population Shift.” “In the South, most of them live on their knees. In the North, many of them die on their feet. What’s the difference?” (“Population Shift,” 1942, p. 8).

Victories like the Scottsboro case, when nine young men were acquitted of inappropriate sexual contact with White women, re-energized the editorials in the *Guide* as they seemed to believe that they finally had some evidence change was coming and that the American dream could still be found in the South. In an editorial on May 1946,
Young noted there was a “general improvement in race relations” (“Mistakes,” 1946, p. 1), and continued to urge Black people to stay in the South and fight, where they could “eliminate the situation rather than flee from it” (Suggs, 1979, p. 312).

The editorial page continued to promote ideas around interracial friendships and moderation as the keys to progress for Black Americans into the civil rights era. Young, who remained the chief editorial writer for the newspaper, which had a circulation between 45,000 and 50,000 during the 1950s, repeatedly said “neither side is ready” after the Brown v. the Board of Education (1954) decision to desegregate the school system (Suggs, 2017, loc 4628). Young never became a radical activist and generally adhered to principles around conservatism and moderation when it came to race relations. As civil rights came to the forefront in the 1950s, his views would occasionally diverge. He reluctantly supported an NAACP campaign to end legal segregation—a position Suggs said he endorsed to maintain support of the growing middle class in the South, a group he needed support from. Young was still a member of the elite, but as the decade passed, his health declined, and his views were increasingly out of step with the emerging Black middle class in the South ready for change. “They regarded him as a conciliator, a race man, a person the mayor called if a black presence was needed” (Suggs, 1983, p. 190). Still, as the owner of the largest Black newspaper in the South, he was considered important.

**Not Going Anywhere Involuntarily—Attacks on the System**

As the Black community increasingly became more conscious and demanding of their civil rights at large in the 1950s, the Guide’s editorials became more about fighting the establishment that let this migration happen. While there was less criticism of the
migrants themselves, an elitism remained in their editorials, placing the group as “different.” One editorial blamed the conditions of the South for the troubles migrants were having adjusting to the North, “No people can develop fine traits of character, and skills with their hands, if they are permitted to grow uneducated, or half educated, and in addition are denied the most elemental human rights” (The Negro Exodus,” 1956, p. 8), emphasizing feelings of displacement and up rootedness would not have emerged if the South had been fair to Blacks.

On April 10, 1948, under the “With a Grain of Salt” column, Arthur P. Davis sought to explain some of the behaviors the migrants were being criticized for, noting it was an “unconscious reaction” to their new freedom (p. E10). He argued the mannerisms people found peculiar or disagreeable, like the migrants not tipping, were not always because of matters of frugality. It was considered unconscionable in the South for Black people to tip a White person. However, Davis still fell back on the ignorant migrant stereotype, revealing the newspaper’s elitism when he concluded the piece with an explanation for Black people standing in front of the bus over the white safety line painted on the floor. Davis maintained Black migrants often took small act of resistance simply because they were not allowed to do so in the South, as a protest against their previous system. Davis said their protest was not a “conscious action” because “they [emphasis mine] are not the type to analyze motives” (Davis, 1948, p. E10). Another piece took a different approach, blaming the southern Whites who migrated North for the plight of the Black southern migrants, noting they carried their own prejudices with them and were trying to “cultivate” their discriminatory mannerisms in other regions (Davis, 1948, p.E10).
During this second era of the Great Migration at the *Guide* it seemed like even more editorials on migration were written for White southerners rather than Black people. There was a militancy in the tone of these editorials that often talked about Blacks not going anywhere “voluntarily” and of the stifling conditions in the South. The newspaper now clearly admitted the reason for the migrants dreams: “better jobs, better opportunities all around to improve their lot” (“Not Going Anywhere,” 1956, p. 8).

On May 19, 1956, an editorial titled “Not Going Anywhere, Involuntarily” urged Black people to stand up to White supremacy by noting that potential migrants would not be run away by the Klu Klux Klan, White citizens councils, or lynching. The statements seemed like a call, not just about duty, but also about masculinity and “manliness.” The *Guide* probably thought that this appeal to Black men would be successful because they were often struggling to figure out their place in an America that often left them behind and were looking to reclaim some agency in their lives. “Negroes are not going anywhere, involuntarily. . . . They are at home in the South. A man’s home is his castle and he will fight for it” (“Not Going Anywhere,” 1956, p. 8.). This idea of men fighting, as we saw in the case of Bungleton Green, has been and remains to be, an important part of the way Black Americans understand the American dream. They also fought for their rights in the South, making the masculine appeal these editorials took, particularly at the omission of women, troubling.

By 1959, the newspaper became even more confident a new day was on the horizon and the dream was coming: “It was the Old South that gave Klanism its new birth, but it was the New South that fought it to a standstill” (“New South Becomes More Vocal,” 1959, p.8). The editorial urged people not to lump together the South all as racist,
and to see that the New South was progressive, yet moderate place where Black people could recognize their American Dream. The paper, once again, tried to convince its readers change was just around the corner: “There is a New South that is more and more vocal for civic righteousness. When we speak of the South, which South are we talking about? There is an Old South and there is a New South!” (“New South Becomes More Vocal,” 1959, p.8).

A Somber Reality

As the Great Migration began to end, the tone of the newspaper became more analytical on the topic of the migration. On April 8, 1961, the Guide finally explicitly explained the cause for the first wave of the Great Migration: the failure of the sharecropper, the lack of vocational and apprentice training, and a dearth of opportunities for educated Blacks. It did not blame the migrants for their exodus (“A Solution,” 1961). Furthermore, the piece said the second wave of the migration that started in the 1940s was different and accelerated by political, social, and economic conditions which had made the South “an undesirable, and in many instances, an unsafe place for Negroes to live” (“A Solution,” 1961, p. B12). Perhaps the change in tone from the previous anti-migration rhetoric was also due to the death of P.B. Young, Sr., in 1962 as his son, Thomas White Young, had taken over the operations of the newspaper.¹²

At this point, the Guide seemed less convinced the South was the place for Blacks or that any American dream could be found there, and their outlook became more somber. Two editorials noted the percentage of ambitious Blacks leaving and the overwhelming segregation (“The Great Migration,” 1962; “South Losing Finest Talent,”

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¹² P.B. Young Jr ran the paper until his death in 1967 (PBS.org, n. d.-b)
1962) that persisted in the South. Finally, the newspaper gave up its attempts to keep Black people in the South. The Guide seemed to understand the freedom and opportunity claims these migrant dreamers were seeking and sought to help its readers understand their plight by publishing a story by Amons Williams, the first Black person to graduate from Old Dominion University (“South Losing Finest Talent,” 1962).

In this story, Williams frankly reported he would not return to Virginia because of the lack of opportunities and the discrimination in the South. He talked about friendship with White students and having a good time in Charlottesville, but said ultimately, he was forced to lead a double life, because it was still the South. Publishing this account from a “respectable” person in this editorial was a huge departure for the paper that had spent decades trying to convince its Black readers the American dream could be achieved in the South. The Guide, at this point, seemed resigned to the fact the South and its treatment of Blacks was not getting better. The idea of the New South had not come to fruition. Instead of advocating for people to stay, the newspaper tried to find reasons for people to come back.

In the mid-sixties however they occasionally still tried to convince its readers a New South was coming and the American dream could be found in the South, but they reiterated it would take time and it was “not reasonable” to expect the South to advance past the North so quickly (“The New South in Action,” 1965, p. 6). The Guide’s efforts seemed halfhearted, as the newspaper reiterated that without change, people would not come back “singing carry me back to old Virginny unless they happen to be sentimental White southerners rehearsing for a minstrel show” (“South Losing Finest Talent,” 1962, p. B1).
Nothing to Nothing

On March 28, 1970, in one of the last editorials during the final year of the migration, a piece titled, “Nothing to Nothing” stated the Black migrant was a victim of both racial discrimination and class oppression—grouping the Black migrant with the hillbilly and stating that together, they were being exploited because of their class position (“Nothing to Nothing,” 1970). It quoted a report stating migrants were having a hard time finding opportunities in both the North and the South and that, in all too many instances, people were running “from nothing to nothing” (“Nothing to Nothing,” 1970, p. 6). The editorial blamed the government for not doing anything to help migrants in rural areas of the South and for not helping them prepare for life in the North (“Nothing to Nothing,” 1970). The problems Black people were having in northern ghettos, it said, was the direct result of their treatment in the South and compared the issues they faced to “an infected sore when it is treated carelessly in one spot . . . and breaks out in another place” (“Nothing to Nothing,” 1970, p. 6). While the Guide continued to depict the migrants as a disrespectful class, it seems the newspaper finally understood the problem Black people were having was not necessarily going to be fixed by staying in the South or moving to the North, but by changing attitudes in the entire country.

Conclusion

The Norfolk Journal and Guide failed to sell the American dream to increasingly conscious Black Americans, who were looking to improve their lot in life, based on the notion of future change. The masses were tired and frustrated by the South that had stolen them from their native land and left them poor and destitute, after allegedly freeing them from bondage. The Guide had no evidence that any dream could be had there, rather all
they had was the fantasy of the American dream and a promise about the possibility of the region. The best the Guide could do to ensure the dreams of Blacks in the area came true was to try to help them envision the South as a better place, to see its potential and possibility.

This idea of possibility was not solely relegated to the Black experience’s in the South but was deep within the American psyche. Americans, French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville said, loved the idea of possibility (De Tocqueville, 2000). He said the notion of restlessness, constant desire for newness, and to achieve the next best thing was essential to the character of the American:

> In addition to the goods that he possesses, at each instant he imagines a thousand others that death will prevent him from enjoying if he does not hasten. This thought fills him with troubles, fears, and regrets, and keeps his soul in a sort of unceasing trepidation that brings him to change his designs and his place at every moment (De Tocqueville, 2000, p. 511).

So, it could be understood why the newspaper would so heavily rely on this strategy. However, it proved to be too much of a leap of faith to ask this community filled with working-class Blacks to remain in the Jim Crow South, while they toiled away with worn and blistered hands. The masses, it seemed, were simply unmoved by the newspaper’s delicate message about hope and dreams in a region where they had perpetually been shunned.

The concept of the American dream was articulated in many of the editorials of the Norfolk Journal and Guide, stressing both its material and moral aspects. The material components included homeownership and entrepreneurship, and moral aspects included self-determination, duty, masculinity and obligation. The Guide’s editorials, while strongly advocating for Blacks to stay in the South and build a better life there,
were not able to convince readers of its vision for the Black community in the way that newspapers like the Defender had. Their moderate vision of Black liberation and their portrayal of freedom for Blacks were often unpersuasive. Their competitor, the Defender could show and tell its readers what the dream meant, what higher wages, better homes, and schools looked and felt like, with concrete examples, anecdotes, and visuals. In contrast, the editorials in the Guide often put the onus on readers to imagine a better South, not the actual South they were living in, and they instead tried to appeal to readers’ sense of moral and masculine sense of duty to homeland. On top of everything, the Guide’s vision often excluded women, a huge part of the population when it portrayed their version of the American dream. Excluding women, I believe, had dire consequences and caused them to seek out the dream in other ways and through mediums that were more inclusive in of their own unique plight (the Defender for example answered would be migrant women’s letters in its paper about opportunity in the North) (Chatelain, 2015). I look at more closely at how Black women engaged with the American dream in Chapter 3.

P.B. Young’s vision of the dream was based on material opportunity and ownership, but when that failed, it was based on moral obligation. At best, some of that vision was accessible to the Black elite, but not the rural masses who made up the migrant class. The newspaper often depicted Young’s ideas of the American dream by utilizing the politics of respectability, calling the migrants “docile,” easily impressionable, and unmanly for running away from their responsibilities at home (“The Labor Exodus,” 1916, p. 4). By using these derogatory terms and questioning the intelligence of the migrants, Young and the Guide articulated conservative respectability
politics that was in fashion among the Black middle class at the time but did not always resonate with the larger Black working class. Moreover, the Guide was stuck in a negative and uninspiring anti-migration campaign, with the moral component failing to inspire hope and its material component unsuccessful in convincing people that better wages could be found in the South.

If the editors at the Guide talked about the problem of Southern government more forcefully from the beginning and did not embrace a New South aesthetic that focused on perpetual segregation, perhaps their arguments would have been more convincing, but that was not the case so the Guide ultimately was forced appealed to the White power structure for better wages and treatment. They also then had to convince Black readers that life in the South was not so bad. It was a complicated strategy that was predicated on the behaviors of White people in a time when many Black Americans wanted a simple path to freedom that did not solely rely on the White man. Instead, the best the Guide could do was give an alternative vision of the world they knew may never come. Black people were tired of waiting and asking for the things they knew they were entitled to from Whites. White people had taken 400 years to give them their freedom—something never theirs for the taking anyway—and now it seemed Black people were ready, once again, to show their agency and to take control of their lives. The Guide offered a passive path to the American dream that was predicated on the benevolence of White people and the luck of the land. For many weary Black Americans, that just was not enough. They were through with waiting for their turn and instead were ready to seize the day and determine their own fate.
Chapter 3
Madam C. J. Walker, Beauty Culture and the American Dream

Attractive faces and beautiful hair are the symbols of success.

Madam C. J. Walker always believed in the power of dreams. And she, like so many other Black women, turned to them when her life was at its lowest. Around the turn of the 20th century, Walker’s dreams were focused on how she could change her present conditions. She had aspirations of a more prosperous life, but as an uneducated 30-year-old widow with a child, who could never make more than $1.50 a day as a washerwoman, she had no idea how to make her wish a reality and worried about her future.

I was at my tubs one morning with a heavy wash before me. As I bent over the washboard and looked at my arms buried in soapsuds, I said to myself: ‘What are you going to do when you grow old and your back gets stiff? Who is going to take care of your little girl? This set me to thinking, but with all my thinking I couldn’t see how I, a poor washerwoman, was going to better my condition. (Brown Bros., 1917, p. T4)

She also worried about her hair. Walker’s hair had been falling out since she married her abusive second husband, laundry worker John Davis, in 1894. Davis liked to drink too much, work too little, and take up with other women. Add in economic insecurity and Walker, then known as Sarah Breedlove Davis, was stressed out, so much so that soon she was almost bald (Desta, 2020). Hair loss among Black women was common at the time due to infrequent washings, poor diet, harmful hair treatments and the constant anxiety they faced as marginalized people in society. Walker did everything to heal her condition (Bundles, 2001), but with neither the over-the-counter remedies nor home cures worked. So instead she did the only thing left she knew how to do—she prayed.
According to Walker who told this story to her acolytes several years later, her prayers were answered one night in a dream. In that dream, a “big Black man appeared” and told her about a treatment using ingredients from “Africa” to help grow back her hair (Bundles, 2001, loc. 918). In a few weeks, she saw results and decided she would sell the treatment to help others in her position. It was beginning of her journey towards the American dream she had been envisioning. Or, at least, that is how the story goes.

From the beginning, Walker understood both the power of stories and the power that dreams had in the lives of Black Americans and used both to sell her successful hair and beauty line, so much so that at times, it is hard to decipher fact from fiction in her biography (Bundles, 2001). To this day, questions remain as to whether Walker’s recipe for her hair product came from a dream or if the true source of her “inspiration” was her time working for entrepreneur Annie Turnbo Malone, who created the Poro System Scalp and Hair Treatment. In a biography of Walker, her great-great-granddaughter, Bundles (2001) noted that one of the main ingredients in both Malone and Walker’s products was a sulfur-based solution prescribed since the 1600s to cure hair ailments and dandruff.

During Walker’s life, even Malone herself accused her new rival of imitating her product (Bundles, 2001), but it did not seem to matter. Walker knew how to sell her products in a way that combined desire, storytelling, aspiration and the American dream that resonated with Black women during the early stages of the Great Migration, offering up her product as a key to the dream desperate for both upward mobility, desirability and acceptance. Walker’s advertising campaigns revealed yet another way Black people understood the American dream during this period. Walker engaged with the American dream by using the rising consumerism and the growing attention women were paying to
beauty to sell the American dream in a field that had largely excluded Black women—beauty culture. Walker explicitly tied to success and upward mobility to beauty culture using the idea of the American dream in her advertising. It was a resounding success.

Walker’s advertisements relied heavily on messages centered on materialism and self-reliance, telling a different version of the American dream story for Black Americans. Instead of solely focusing on the moral aspect of the dream, Walker focused on selling a dream of materialism that first led to financial freedom for Black women, which in turn, she believed, would lead to independence from men (Bundles, 2001). This contrasts with the masculine notions present in Bungleton Green and the editorials of the Guide.

Yet Walker also believed in the moral aspect of the dream (Fisher, 1973) and constantly fought and dedicated much of her life and earnings to uplifting the Black community. The tension between these two ideals can be seen in a story about Walker’s lavish new mansion in the New York Times in 1917, as she also talked about the motivation behind her wealth. “I am not a millionaire, but I hope to be some day, not because of the money, but because I could do so much then to help my race” (Brown Bros., 1917, p. 69). Her statement, under a picture of a house described as opulent and lavish, revealed Walker’s desire for expensive materials. But it also highlighted that for her, the American dream too was not just about the moral or material, but about the confluence of both of these aspects of the dream. Her advertisements too, wrestled with these contradictions.

This chapter looks at the story of entrepreneur Madam C. J. Walker and her business, the Walker Manufacturing Company. It examines how the American dream was
used to sell, not just beauty products to Black women and men from 1905-1970, but a new way of life to people, especially for Black women. For almost a century, the advertisements of Walker’s company assured Black people that beautifying themselves and their hair would lead to “success.”

Beauty culture, like the American dream, is about transformation. It is about power and opportunity and bettering oneself, but it is also at its core, about hope. Newly freed Black women at the turn of the century were trying to figure out and establish their place in American society and for some, like Walker, beauty culture offered a path to both physical and economic transformation (Bundles, 2001). However, for women like Walker, beauty culture was not just about becoming an object of desire, but a vehicle for achievement and success—it was about achieving the American dream. The American dream for Walker was financial freedom, independence from men as well as gender equity and progress for her race (Bundles, 2001). Walker’s American dream, unlike other popular culture products was most often centered on Black women finding material success and feeling good about their appearance. For Walker, and later the Walker Company, beauty culture was not separate from the American dream, but it was a part of the dream, and a tool for Black women to achieve their own dreams in life.

As the country moved into modernity, beauty culture was seen as a tool of the American dream, especially for Black women, who could not seize upon opportunities due to both gender and race (Peiss, 1988). Having to combat racist stereotypes and gender discrimination herself, Walker seemed early on to understand the importance of using the American dream ideology to explain (and, of course, sell), beauty culture to Black women. Beauty culture, her advertisements seemed to say, would allow the
freedom Black women desired, and they did so by highlighting both the moral and material components of the American dream.

The advertisements of Madam C. J. Walker and the Walker company continued to reflect the dialectical thinking that early twentieth century Black America had with the American dream and the tensions between the moral and material aspect of the dream (Fisher, 1973). But in contrast to Jiang’s (2009) analysis that people of color are primarily focused on the spiritual aspect of the dream because they are excluded from White-dominated society, I found the advertisements of Madam C. J. Walker showed that Black people wanted to achieve both material and spiritual success simultaneously.

The advertisements also contained a specifically gendered element distinct from the other cultural works I have examined during this period. While these advertisements communicated views around migration and movement, they were also about the agency of women independent from White people and Black men. Understanding Black women were frustrated by stagnant social conditions and ready for change, the Walker Company learned how to speak to those desires through their advertisements. Walker’s company was of course not solely responsible for the desire for change in the Black community, but her advertisements certainly expressed this overall desire. The message they conveyed to Black women was different from the cartoons of Bungleton Green (Jackson, 1939, 1944) and the editorials of the Norfolk Journal and Guide. The Walker Company both perpetuated and reinforced ideas around the dream that explicitly tied beauty with success implying that meaning if you want to make your “wildest dreams” come true like Madam Walker did, you must have a suitable appearance.
Advertising History

Madam Walker created her first advertisement in December 1905, in the *Statesmen of Denver*, while working as an agent for Poro (Bundles, 2001). As soon as she earned money, she would invest in more advertisements (Bundles, 2001, p. 83). By July 1906, newly married to C. J. Walker, an advertising salesman, and distancing herself from Poro, she revamped her newspaper ads calling herself Madam C. J. Walker. This shift most likely was designed to reflect her marital status and as pushback to the derogatory practice of only calling Black women by their first names. She introduced her new product to readers through the story of her “dream.” She was relentless in establishing the business, focusing heavily on the advertising component and selling the story of her hair struggle as hope to women in similar situations. As her company and success grew, so did Walker’s fortunes. So, she used that success, her own American dream story, to continue to sell her products (Bundles, 2001).

It is perhaps no surprise the notion of the American dream gained popularity in America just as advertising was becoming a new medium. In the early 20th century, in a society that increasingly valued consumption over production, advertising used the American dream ideology to play on this emerging notion of desire. According to Jack Solomon (Maasik & Solomon, 2011), advertisements often helped people understand “the status of our hopes, fears, desires, and beliefs” (p. 543), while also urging them to modify their behaviors. “Appealing to our subconscious emotions rather than to our conscious intellects, advertisements are designed to exploit the discontentment fostered by the American dream, the constant desire for social success and the material rewards that accompany it” (Massik & Solomon, 2011, p. 543). Advertisements relate to what
people covet most, and for Black women in the South, freedom and independence from men, and a wish to be seen as fully human were what they desired during this time. Black women looking for change responded positively to the advertisements that tied the narrative of hope and opportunity to the experience of Black women in the United States.

As Roland Marchand (1985) said, advertising does not provide a perfect mirror to reality, but by examining Walker’s advertisements, we can better understand how Black women were engaging with the dream and how it evolved over the years (Marchand, 1985). Marchand (1985) found that advertising directly is correlated with the notion of the American dream, but for a woman like Madam CJ Walker, it was also about a Black American dream, one that was as much about aspiration and material success as it was about uplifting her gender and race. Her advertisements contained a component of the American dream that was unique to the Black experience. Advertising slogans like “From a Slave Cabin to Riches,” “Amazing Progress of the Colored Race,” “Attractive Faces and Beautiful Hair are the Symbols of Success,” “Look Your Best and Succeed!” and “Madam C. J. Walker Preparation can help you to Beauty, Glamour, Success” made clear that for the Walker Company, success and hair were tied to the American dream (Madam C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company, c.a. 1900-1940a, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-i, n.d.-c ) and the transformation it could bring (Chapman, 2012). In Prove it on Me, Erin Chapman (2012) said

Madam Walker’s products afforded Black women the possibility to not only improve but recreate themselves. Changing their hair and their appearance according to one of the several fashionable styles that came and went during the era allowed Black women to become new versions of themselves. (Chapman, 2012, p. 90)
What made Madam Walker's role during this era and her invocation of the American dream so unique was that her dream was not just a call for the race to do better and have more opportunities, but a wish for Black women to prosper. Like the successful *Chicago Defender*, Walker’s company did not just sell a false dream of hope but gave concrete examples of how to achieve the dream whether it through the explicit use of their beauty products or by attending her beauty schools. They used her story to court Black women to both consume and take charge of their lives. Black opportunity was no longer some kind of an imagined dream; Walker was living proof of the dream. As her advertisements increasingly showed off her luxurious appearance, lavish mansion, and million-dollar factory while simultaneously listing her charity work, they seemed to tell women that this was not a sign of one woman's progress, but rather that Black women had made it.

There is a vibrant amount of scholarship about Black hair and beauty culture (Rooks, 1996, Byrd and Tharps, 1994, McGill), but the literature on Madam C. J. Walker is relatively thin and a thorough, academic text on Walker has yet to be published. Much of the literature produced references a well-researched 2001 biography, *On Her Own Ground* (Bundles), written by Walker’s great-great-granddaughter, journalist A‘Lelia Bundles. That book was recently made into a Netflix film released in 2020. Bundles’ book had the best primary source information and most comprehensive materials about her life. To learn more about the advertisements of Walker, I visited Bundles’ home in Washington, DC in 2018, to talk to her about Walker and look through her personal collection of advertisements. That added to the materials referenced in this chapter, as did Beverly Lowry’s (2003) biography on Walker, titled *Her Dream of Dreams*. 
Due to Walker and her company’s influence, there are several book articles and chapters dedicated to the subject. An article from the Harvard Business Review (Koehn, Dwojeski, Grundy, Helms, & Miller, 2007) was useful in providing an understanding of the motivations of Walker from a business standpoint, as was Americanist Nowlie Rooks’s (1996) section on Walker’s early advertisements in the book, Hair Raising. Her project was designed to look at the common ideas around race and beauty and how they meshed with narratives of Black cultural producers apart from White society and, more interestingly apart from Black elites (Rooks, 1996, p. 17). In the section on advertising, Rooks combined primary source research and a close read methodology. She charted a change in Walker’s advertisements that went from promoting health standards to the size of her company while also talking about the importance of Walker’s self-help narrative to Black women. Rooks’ research was not primarily concerned with the American dream, though the topic was clearly unavoidable, and she noted Walker was effective at demonstrating “the terrain that must be negotiated if African American women are to participate in the ‘American dream’” (1996, p. 58). Rooks’ study ends with Walker’s death, though further analysis of the later years of the company would have been useful. Byrd and Tharps’s (2014) book on Black hair, Hair Story, also contributed to my understanding of Walker’s legacy in the context of Black hair culture. Finally, books around beauty culture and the beauty industry also were useful. Kathy Piess’ history of beauty culture, Hope in a Jar (1998), and Susannah Walker’s Style and Status (2007) on Black hair salons also helped my analysis of primary source materials. Erin Chapman’s Prove it on Me (2012), which looked at race, sex, and popular culture in the 1920s, and
Roland Marchand’s *Advertising and the American Dream* (1985) helped me understand how popular culture intersected with Walker and the Walker company. This chapter continues in the vein of Rooks’ (1996) scholarship, telling a new story about Walker’s advertisements from 1905 to 1907 paying closer attention to the theme of the American dream. Over the years these advertisements provided clues to how Black people were engaging with the American dream largely through the lens of Black women in America.

**Beauty and the Migration**

Walker, like many other Black women, was born and lived much of her life in the South. As she was trying to figure out how to improve her life, she decided to leave the region (Bundles, 2001). Walker did not have an easy life in the South. Born on a cotton plantation in Delta, Louisiana in 1867, orphaned at age seven and married at fourteen. Walker moved throughout the South, first with her sister and then with her first husband, Moses McWilliams. After the death of her husband, the collapse of Reconstruction, and the rise of Jim Crow, Walker was desperate for a life filled with more opportunity, so she followed the path of many others and headed north to St. Louis when she was just twenty (Bundles, 2001).

Black women in the South faced discrimination, both because of their race and their sex, and they were often relegated to working as domestic or field workers (Hine, 1991). Seeking better wages and education, many Black women believed the North to be a land of opportunity. However, many found that, despite the slightly better wages, life in the North was not the haven they dreamed of and often did little to change their place in society. While the move north could mean a significant change in both income and status
for Black men, for women, migration often changed neither as they continued performing domestic work as the “most undesirable and least remunerative of all northern migrants” (Hine, 1991, p. 130). It was not only their continued lack of social standing but their lack of economic opportunity that persisted in ways it did not for Black men. The wages were often better than in the South, but women made less money and received fewer gains in social status or class for the same work as their male counterparts. Even in places like the Midwest where Black men could make gains in industry, Black women, were left out due to racism and hostility from White women (Hine, 1991). However, beauty culture offered a way out and some hope for success.

**Beauty Culture**

At the turn of the century, success became increasingly defined by outward expressions of consumption. English scholar Suzanne Ferriss explained, “the basis of the 19th-century self-made man’s success rested on his character, on unseen inner qualities of thrift, persistence, and entrepreneurship. By the 20th century, success was externally defined: it had to be visible to others” (in Ferriss & Young, 2008, p. 155). That visibility became tied to appearance. In a magazine called *New Success*, readers were told in January of 1920:

> Your personal appearance, your dress, your manner, everything about you, the way in which you keep yourself groomed, how you carry yourself, what you say…all these things are to you what the show windows of the merchant’s store are to his business, the way he advertises and displays his goods. Your appearance will be taken as an advertisement of what you are. It is constantly telling people whether you are a success or a failure and where people place you in their estimation will have a powerful influence upon your career. (Orison Swett Marden, as cited in Ferriss & Young, 2008, p. 155)
This kind of thought was pervasive in sites of White culture, meaning that for Black people, a people who were still looking to “become” and “arrive,” appearance was even more important.

Black people began participating in hair care business before the Civil War, but most of the time their distribution was limited to local communities (the Black-owned East India Toilet Goods, which sold a popular hair care grower, was the exception as it sold nationally and internationally) (Koehn, Dwojeski, Grudy, Helms, & Miller, 2011). Beauty centers were common in the antebellum South, particularly in New Orleans due to its humid weather conditions. Black men often dominated the industry through barber shops and as stylists for primarily White women. As race relations grew more contentious in the decades before the civil war, Black men were banned from performing such an intimate task as styling hair, so Black women took their place.¹³ As early as the 1820s free Black women ran their own salons and created beauty salons in their own homes (Byrd, 2014; Koehn et al., 2011). Due to lack of income they styled and cured any hair ailments themselves. If there was a scalp issue, for example, they sought homeopathic remedies or made their own treatments.

As Black women started fleeing to the North, they increasingly found that some jobs now called for a “professional style and dress” (Dossett, 2009, p. 95), something that was not a prerequisite to work in the fields or kitchens of the South. Black newspapers tried to “help” the migrants adapt to these new standards, but it was challenging. The new migrants were seen as harbingers of potential vice by White people and their habits as “a

¹³ After the Civil War Black men largely abandoned the service industry, including barbershops that served wealthy whites and instead turned their attention to more skilled businesses like banking and undertaking. This caused the number of black barbers to drop from 10 percent to less than 1.7 of the black “elite” (Byrd, 2014, p.73.)
threat to the establishment of a respectable Black urban middle class” (Dossett, 2009, p. 95) who did not always approve of the migrants’ “coarse and country ways” (Bundles, 2001, loc. 996). Black women migrants felt pressure from both middle-class Blacks and White society. Upper- and middle-class Black women advocated for the new migrants to embrace ideals around cleanliness, home life, and motherhood (Morris-Crowther, 2013), while etiquette books geared to Black women often advocated these same standards connecting proper appearance with progress of the race (Koehn et al., 2011).

As word of these new social norms spread throughout the country, a new consciousness among Black women was created around appearance. One woman in the South wrote to the Walker Company asking for hair supplies as soon as possible because she was going North and wanted the products before leaving. Another anecdote posted in the White Saturday Evening Post noted “the first thing every negro girl does when she comes from the South is to have her hair straightened” (Piess, 2011, p. 231). Bundles, Walker’s great-great-granddaughter, explained the phenomenon in Hair Story, “If you are a rural person becoming an urban person then you [want to] look less like a person from the country, less like an uneducated person” (Byrd & Tharps, 2014, p. 37). Writing in The Messenger in 1918, Louis George, an associate of Walker’s who would help create some of her advertising explicitly said, “The colored girl today would greatly limit her opportunities did she not make use of hair dressing, manicuring, and facial massaging” (as cited in Peiss, 2011, p. 232), proving how much the Great Migration heightened Black women’s anxiety about their hair because economic and social opportunities depended on appearance.
Black etiquette books and manuals stressed the correlation between beauty and Black uplift, but also sent mixed messages about what that look should be (Peiss, 2011). E. Azalia Hackey, a Black activist at the time, said “kinky hair is neither a disgraceful nor a shameful heredity. It is an honorable legacy from Africa,” (1916, p. 36) while simultaneously noting it needed to be changed. “Constant care of the hair will cause an improved condition of the texture which will in time be inherited” (Hackley, 1916, p. 38).

While it remained to be debated whether a “professional look” involved straight or kinky hair (Walker’s method of hair care sometimes included using a straightening comb), it was clear that at the turn of the century, beauty culture was also about class and respectability.

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**Figure 8.** Madam C.J. Walker’s Wonderful Hair Grower [Advertisement], April 24, 1908, *The Topeka Plaindealer*. From A’Lelia Bundles personal collection.
The Early Years

The initial advertisements for Walker’s cosmetic line were about having healthy hair and a healthy scalp. Her line was depicted as a practical tool that was not about fantasy, glamour or sex appeal (Bundles, 2018). Using her own narrative and photograph, the ads proudly declared her hair was less than a fingers’ length before growing to 18 inches after using her products. In October 1906, an ad in the Plain Dealer (Topeka, Kansas) showed a picture of a Victorianesque Madam Walker with a headful of slightly curled hair pulled to the top of her head. As she wore a ruffled gown buttoned up to her neck, the ad simply stated that if one wanted long and beautiful hair that would not fall out, they should use her Wonderful Hair Grower product (Bundles collection, 2018).

Around 1908, she added before and after images with short and long hair, beginning a strategy she would use for decades (Figure 8). These advertisements were often set up like a newspaper article, a technique Rooks (1996) said may have been deployed to give her claims more legitimacy. In one set of photos she used for a range of publications, two images were placed side by side. In the middle is a young Walker with short hair rolled up on top of her head, with eyes gazing off into the distance. It is the accompanying “after” photos that show Walker with hair past her shoulders confidently looking into the camera that revealing the real change. “Hair growth has altered her sense of self” (Rooks, 1996, p. 60), and a more confident woman stared at the camera. There is a folksy quality to Walker’s message, and it feels like the advertisement is written by someone who is talking to a sister or cousin trying to help them improve their lives. Walker’s advertisements were written to feel inclusive of the community. This hair treatment was
not only about her but about Black women who needed to improve their appearance. It was about trying to help her peers have healthy hair through a language of “similarity and inclusion” (Rooks, 1996, p. 60).

Shortly after she decided to use the strategy of her former employer, now competitor, Turnbo, and use women agents as salespeople to distribute, advertise and sell her products (Rooks, 1996). Walker’s use of agents showed how she wanted to connect to the Black community by the use of “real life narratives” and she urged her agents to. Tell her story and theirs and show their clients how they too could succeed in life with the help of her products (Rooks, 1996).

In 1910, an advertising proposal by the Interstate Sales & Advertising Agency, based in New York City and run by Louis George, a close confidant of Walker, noted the company planned an aggressive advertising plan to run advertisements in the top Black national newspapers, quarterlies, and White southern dailies. The proposal showed the company carefully looked at circulation numbers and readership to prove their investments would pay off and focused on newspapers like the Chicago Defender, Indianapolis Freeman, the New York News, the Pittsburgh Courier, and the Norfolk Journal and Guide. Outlets like Senior Quarterly and Teachers Monthly and mainstream White papers like Memphis Commercial Appeal, the New Orleans Times-Picayune, and the Washington D.C. Star were also targeted (Interstate Sales & Advertising Agency, 1910, folder 5). The ad agency was aiming to reach over 13.5 million people through these advertisements (using a 2.7 million circulation and multiplying it by 5). The company planned to spend over $6,380.40 on weekly newspapers alone, with an advertising budget totaling $10,000 (roughly about $264,000 in 2020 dollars) (Interstate Sales & Advertising Agency, 1910, folder 5).

**Economic Freedom and the Dream**

In late 1914, Walker began to link a particular dream tied to both economic freedom and independence from Black men, to work as a distribution agent for the company, better known as a “Walker Agent.” “How May I Succeed in Life?” was the question prominently displayed across an advertising brochure for the Madam C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company (Figure 9). On the green and white cover, a picture of a large institution is displayed, along with text that boasts the building is the “world’s largest establishment of its kind” (Bundles, 2018, personal collection, “How May I Succeed in Life” Walker Company Pamphlet, n. d.). Inside the brochure, the reader finds ideas and quotes reflecting both the moral self-help and materialistic aspects of the American dream (Fisher, 1973). “What you depend on in life, will depend most largely on your own individual effort. Positively no one can help you as much as you help yourself” (Bundles, 2018, personal collection, “How May I Succeed in Life?” Walker Company Pamphlet, n. d.). Yet, it also offered a dream specifically catered to the needs of Black women. “Beauty culture,” the ad said, is a way to move up in life, noting that learning about hair care and selling beauty products using the Walker system is an “easy road to fame and fortune” (Bundles, 2018, personal collection, “How May I Succeed in Life?” Walker Company Pamphlet, n. d.).
However, like the successful claims made by the *Chicago Defender* in the early 20th century in their efforts to promote migration, Walker provided a concrete solution to the oppression Black women were facing as she promoted the Walker beauty school (Rooks, 1996). For example, in one pamphlet, without specifying numbers, she said that “beauty culture is the most profitable business in which our women can engage…. If you desire to improve your position in life, consider this opportunity—Now!” (Bundles, 2018, personal collection, “The MMe C.J. Walker System of Beauty Culture,” Walker Company Pamphlet, n. d.). In another, she compared beauty school to other alternatives available to Black women, stating the amount of training time and projected salaries that nurses, teachers, and laundresses made (Bundles, 2018, personal collection, “How May I Succeed in Life?” Walker Company Pamphlet, n. d.).

The advertising pamphlet clearly showed what the “success” these women would be awarded looked like; success was depicted as an “expensive mansion” in upstate New York (Figure 9). It was Walker’s own northern dream mansion, known as Villa Lewaro,
and a sharp contrast to the other image on the page, Walker’s birth home, a wooden cabin in the small rural community of Delta, Louisiana. Walker had lived the American dream, the ideal that allowed any American to achieve their highest level of aspiration she proclaimed, through “faith, determination, and perseverance” and found material success. Yet, in the same publication, while beauty culture was about the big splashy rise to riches, on the bottom, it noted the “secret to happiness” was really about Walker’s desire to help others, thus reinforcing the schizophrenic nature of the dream in Black America and continuing dynamic combination of the moral and material component articulated by Fisher (1973).

Given the state of Black women during this era, I can begin to understand why the Walker Company would attempt to use their advertisements to sell Black women dreams of a better appearance and a better life. Roland Marchand (1985) noted “the central purpose of an ad was not to reflect reality but to ‘move merchandise’” (p. xvii) and, at best, could be called, as Michael Schudson (2000, p. 1) noted, “capitalist realism.” Marchand (1985) understood “advertising portrayed the ideals and aspirations of the system more accurately than its reality. They dramatized the American dream” (p. xviii).

In a letter from advertising agent Louis George to Walker sometime between late 1916 and the summer of 1917, using the Walker beauty school masthead (suggesting that he was working directly for Walker not as an outside agent), he said she and A’Leila should continue with their commitment to advertising. “With persistent appeal through convincing advertisements I believe many who are experimenting using substitutes, imitations and falling into the hands of imposters will sooner or later fall in line using Walker Treatments and Preparations” (Louis George Personal Communication to Madam
Walker, ca. 1917). He urged Walker to use advertisements to help keep the public interested in her products rather than letting the agents do all the advertisements because he said, “they cannot put the ginger in it like the main office.” He said he was sending some advertising ideas for her approval that were “more attractive” and had a more “newsy effect,” suggesting she was solely responsible for the content of her advertisements (Louis George Personal Communication to Madam Walker, ca. 1917).

Figure 10. Advertising proposal by the Inter-State Sales & Advertising Agency to Madam C. J. Walker, March 30, 1918. Indiana Historical Society.
Walker was clearly in charge of her company and the advertisements, though one letter from Ransom to Walker suggested George did not listen to her. Ransom also references an advertisement with “stringy hair” that Walker did not like and asked George to change, once again showing Walker was dedicated to a pro-black, kinky hair aesthetic for at least some of her company’s advertisements (F. B. Ransom, personal letter to Madam C. J. Walker, 1919), though that soon changed. By 1918, as the profits of the Walker company soared, and Walker became a surefire member of the elite with her Villa Lewaro and *New York Times* story, a letter from the Inter-State Sales & Advertising Agency suggested writing a biography of her success (Figure 10). This was not just about uplifting the race, but also about profit and the conflation of these two tensions. The letter, likely from George, gave three reasons as to why advertising her personal American dream story was necessary to the company’s ability to sell its vision of an American dream more broadly. First, he said, “from a business point of view, it is profitable in as much as it is a most effective method of advertising one’s personality and business.” Second, “from a race point of view, it will serve to stimulate Negro men and women\(^ {14} \), who possess talent and ability to initiate enterprise in the commercial field (sic), such as is being done by the opposite race. I believe those persons of our race who have achieved success and distinction in public life, have a solemn obligation to present to the future generations, the methods adopted, and the obstacles and difficulties encountered.” Third, he said, it was about her legacy. He believed it was of historical value and significance when great people who have achieved success write down their

\(^ {14} \) It should be noted that while the Walker agents were all women, some of the company’s products were targeted to men as well as women. However, it seemed that the tie to success and freedom via one’s overall appearance was a burden that fell overwhelmingly on Black women.
story. “This gives permanency national and international circulation to one’s name” (Inter-State Sales & Advertising Agency, 1918). It is unclear how Madam Walker responded but given the increased presence of her success story in the upcoming years it is clear it made an impression on the company.

A’Lelia’s Vision of the Dream

After Walker’s premature death from kidney failure in 1919, her daughter, Lelia, gained control of the company (she later changed her name to A’Lelia), while Walker’s close confidant, F.B. Ransom, took over the day-to-day operations. Ransom changed the strategy of the company drastically, focusing more on drugstore sales and less on agents to distribute the product, and they shifted their advertising campaigns away from the “practical” use of the product to glamour, which often seemed to translate into White looking figures (Koehn et al., 2007). He even introduced a skin bleaching product called Tan-Off (something Madam Walker had opposed), which became a company bestseller (Koehn et al., 2007). But the tie between success and beauty remained, though in different ways.

A’Lelia and Madam Walker had different ideas of Black women’s aspirations. As Dossett (2009) noted, Madam Walker was more about “production, physical labor, and respectability” whereas A’Lelia was about the “language of consumption” (p. 96). This contrast was evident in the new advertising strategy seen in the 1920s and after. While the American dream was different for Black men and women during the Great Migration era, particularly how they accessed it, it was also different among generations of Black women. No longer was Walker’s vision of labor, respectability, and self-reliance the keys to the dream (Dossett, 2009). While uplifting the race remained part of the company’s
credo, the Walker Company now turned to glamour
and consumerism to reach that goal more often.

The Walker Company increasingly and more
explicitly tied Black women’s dreams, and those of a
successful Black American, to appearance. The ads
in the 1920s and 1930s made clear people had to look
good to succeed, by saying things like “attractive
faces and beautiful hair are the symbols of success”
(Figure 11), “look your best to succeed” and “the
underlying causes for success in society or business
are identical . . . a pleasing presence counts for
much” (Figure 12). Yet, unlike White companies and
advertisements, the Walker Company sold the message
that beauty meant looking good and being a better
“race” woman.

A’Lelia, who left Indianapolis to run a hair salon in
Harlem—also known as the “Dark Tower”—
represented a new type of woman who was emerging.
The advertisements reflected the new lust for freedom
she was feeling and admiration for the Black and
White flappers, who were increasingly becoming
popular. With money, privilege, and a lust for life,
A’Lelia’s life was far different from her mother’s, and

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**Figure 11.** “Attractive Faces,” [Advertisement] by Madame C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company, n.d. From the personal collections of A’Lelia Bundles.

**Figure 12.** “Look Your Best to Succeed.” [Advertisement] by Madam C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company, n.d. From the personal collections of A’Lelia Bundles.
she sought out the American dream in a different way free from conventionality or sexual mores.

The company continued to use Walker’s image in its advertisements, but that image changed. By 1920, Madam Walker’s portrait in advertisements was of a woman with dangling earrings and draped in lace, that had evolved, into a more respectable place: “She is pretty, feminine, demure, well dressed, and has straight hair” (Rooks, 1996, p. 65). She represented a more modern and urbanized view of a “proper” woman, one who had arrived from the South, shedding cornrows and braids worn by older rural women: she was a Black woman who had both migrated and evolved (Koehn et al., 2007).

During this period, the company’s ideas of success became more explicitly about the American dream and finding fame and riches as an entrepreneur. The advertisements became less about hair care and more about what hair could do for the consumer. Rooks (1996) wondered about the purity of this strategic realignment, noting the Walker Company may have partially wanted to shun itself from attacks over hair straightening (which was criticized by some prominent Black people) and thus decided to focus on possibility instead of the practical results from product use and racial uplift that would happen through appearance (Chapman, 2012).
In a black and white advertisement in 1925, titled “Glorifying Our Womanhood,” (Figure 13) the Madam C. J. Walker company touted not only the product but also the successful Black women behind it (Rooks, 1996). The products were sold by Black women who understood being marginalized and the desire for more, but who also wanted to be beautiful. On the top left, a photo of a “Walker Booster” was shown, glamorous with light skin and shining white teeth, next to a drawing of what looked like an opera. It was supposed to be a depiction of what “womanhood” was, going to the opera with
bobbed haircuts, and the supporter with her dangling earrings and curled hair represented womanhood. The advertisement, in a departure from the past, represented a smiling beautiful Black woman who seemed not just comfortable with the idea of refinement but who gained pleasure and enjoyment from it. Hair was no longer just a vehicle for work or economic freedom, but one for pleasure as well. It seemed to imply Black women were deserving of pleasure and relaxation, and the softness and lightness of the pictures show the Walker customer as a consumer of this pleasure as well.

Another advertisement that ran in the mid-1920s showed a photograph of a Black woman as a flapper-like character, wearing her hair straight and bobbed with beads and smiling somewhat seductively at the viewer (Figure 14). While the text mentioned that occasional pressing of the hair was necessary to achieve this bobbed look, the beauty and glamour of the woman cannot be denied. She did not look downtrodden, but a free spirit, with flowers drawn into the frame the advertisement; she looked like fun was the only thing on her mind. Nowhere in the advertisement was work mentioned and the ad perhaps codes the woman as a pure consumer of the product, rather than a laborer that needed to

work or sell the product to make a living. The slim woman’s arms were exposed, and she was wearing a printed dress, showing viewers a youthful sensibility. She quintessentially presents as a carefree Black girl, before the term would come to popularity in the 21st century. As the ads became slightly more risqué, a trend towards Whiteness and White beauty standards seemed to increase.

A'Lelia, perhaps beyond her time, like her mother, understood Black women did not just want pictures of an ideal, but evidence of it, and she sold her image and her lifestyle as a lavish consumer of the American dream (Dossett, 2009). Perhaps understanding she had to compete with marketing campaigns from both Black and Whites businesses who courted the Black market (e.g., Pond’s spent $60,000 per month on advertising in 1926), she, once again, relied on the Black press to sell her “dream”
story as a Black woman of means. For example, when it was time for her adopted
daughter Mae to marry, she told Ransom, “I look upon this wedding as the very biggest
advertisement we have ever had [except for] Villa Lewaro” (Dossett, 2009, p. 107).

These ads were often dominated by text with a range of pictures that contained
nuance and caveats about success. An advertisement in 1927 with the header “Good
looks an easy road to fame” indicated that success was not necessarily about owning a
large home or having wealth, but about whatever the individual regards as success: “to be
a leader of society, to have fame, to be a wife, a mother, or sweetheart” (Figure 15). It
was a radical re-imaging of Black womanhood and the freedom of Black women to
choose their own story. It was both refreshing and inline with what the company’s
advertisements had been about for years, freedom, and independence.

In another advertisement, most likely from
1927, a headline stated, “Amazing Progress of Race:
Improved Appearance Responsible,” there is a
clearer definition of success (Figure 16). Along with
a series of photos showing Madam CJ Walker and
A′Lelia in glamorous attire, there is a large picture
of the Walker Company’s building in Indiana and
images that convey the so-called progress of the
race, including a Black church and Black-owned
bank. Mixed with pictures of Walker’s products was
an accompanying story about the genius of Walker
and her hair product, another picture of a New York
headquarters alongside commentary about how the Black race achieved so much progress just 64 years after slavery, partially because “we soon learned that appearance is important” (Figure 16). The “clean, neat and well-groomed” people of the race, the ad noted, was the reason for so much progress and the way to achieve this respectability that is one’s “birthright” was by using Walker’s products.

In the middle half of the page, the advertisement, in bold lettering read: “Add Beauty to Brains for Success!” on top of a picture of a group of nearly all White (or White-presenting) women getting their hair done. All of the women had straight hair, with one hairdresser wearing a curled bob and another, who was perhaps a light-skinned Black person, getting her short hair curled. Two women had long curled hair that fell beneath their shoulder. None look like Madam Walker, whose portrait was off to the top left of the page, or like A'Lelila, who was down below to the left in her fur coat with straight hair and jewelry. Instead, these four light-skinned women were centered in the ad, while the darker skin owners of the company were off to the side. All the women looked “respectable,” according to Black middle-class notions of appearance at the time, meaning they had straight hair and Eurocentric features. The advertisement told the reader exactly what Black women needed to do to become successful: define their goal, be confident, and "dress neatly and keep yourself well-groomed." Above all, the advertisement stresses the importance of appearance.

TOO GREAT STRESS cannot be laid upon the matter of appearance. As you seem, so others judge you! Radiate an air of prosperity and who is to know if your purse is lined with gold or not? Personal cleanliness, neatness, whitened teeth, luxurious hair, a flawless complexion and dainty hands—these are the things that impress others and pave the way for your success by building confidence. Look your best . . . —you owe it to your race. (Bundles, 2018, personal collection, “Amazing Progress”)
More than empty platitudes, the Walker Company added a column to the left, highlighting the accomplishments of both Madam Walker and her daughter. The

advertisement showed off the vast size of the younger Walker’s “worldly” company, highlighting her half-million-dollar mansion summer homes, and an additional office in New York. As the text continued, it emphasized her mother’s “dramatic story” from “a slave cabin to independence,” perpetuating the Horatio Alger narrative and going so far as to let people know they could get a free copy of her life story (Figure 17). It was important for the company to provide a concrete example of how a Black millionaire was made. This is important because it revealed that even though the company’s advertisements were increasingly tied to consumption and appearance, there was still a dedication to Walker’s story that was about more than wealth.

Figure 17 “From A Slave Cabin to Riches” from the personal collections of A’Lelia Bundles. Retrieved September 18, 2018.
It was a reminder once again that the Black American dream was not just about material success. Under her story of upward mobility was the headline “greatest benefactress of her race” and a summary of Walker’s philanthropic activities. It was not enough to just mention her efforts; the ad pictured a check she had sent to charities as well as pictures of poor Black people she helped at Christmas. Despite all of her accomplishments and her respectable attire, Madam Walker and her brown-skinned daughter were, again, off to the side as the White or light-skinned women, who appeared not to have as many accomplishments, were the focal point of the advertisement. This advertisement exemplified the perpetual tension between the moral and material that was often present in the way the company sold success and the continual need for these two components to the dream in Black America during this period. More disappointingly, the ad was a commentary on what aesthetic is seen as successful and it continued to perpetuate the myth of Whiteness as a precursor to success.

The increasing lightness of those featured in the ads was clear. In the 1920s, along with the skin bleacher Tan-Off, White-looking characters more frequently appeared in the advertisements, rather than the women who ran the company. The aesthetic looked to be more rooted in White than Black appearances. Many of the ads, rather than talking about the dream itself, depicted a sort of gaiety and carefree sentiment that was about the “good life.” For example, there was an ad of casual beachgoers with very European features (Figure 18) and an advertisement for Glossine (Figure 19) which featured a man who appeared African American because of his dark shading and slightly enlarged lips, wearing a professional shirt and tie with straight slicked back hair. It also showed White folks out on the town. With the headline “the best-dressed men and women prefer,” it
implied a certain aesthetic was necessary to fulfill the dream. No longer needing to write about the dream or the Horatio Alger narrative explicitly, the Madam Walker ads during this era increasingly just depicted it.

The Key to Beauty, Success, and Happiness

At their core, the ads of the Walker Company highlighted many of the debates and conversations happening in the Black community. With headlines such as "From A Slave Cabin to Riches and a Benefactress to Her Race The Spirit of Mme. C. J. Walker Still Lives as is Evidenced in the Conclusion of Her Life's Fondest Dream" (Figure 17) or "Attractive Faces and Beautiful Hair are the symbols of success!" (Figure 11) we can read exactly how the Walker Company believed Black women could have opportunities in America. If there were any doubts about the company’s belief in the tie between success, beauty, and the American dream, a brochure that seemed to have been printed sometime in the late 1920s made it explicitly clear. A 23-page booklet called “The Key to Beauty, Success, Happiness” was published with Madam Walker’s picture on the cover and filled, not only with her success story but the story of others like Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Booker T. Washington, and Frederick Douglas (Madame C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company
Company, n.d.-g). The brochure told the success of Walker’s rags to riches story, alongside advertisements for Walker products and her mantra, beauty equals success—

“Half the battle of achieving success is to look successful. The other half depends on your health, determination, and your ability,” the first page of the brochure said. However, the next section was about improving the lives of Black people. The pamphlet continued to link the importance of giving back and advancing “our people,” and using Walker’s products.

“Thus, by helping yourself to greater success and happiness through the purchase of Madame Walker Products, you also help every deserving member of our race,” while also highlighting pictures of Black beauties who often had light skin and European features. The book ends with a section on the importance of dreams, “They have influenced men and women in their habits, their decisions, their social and business affairs. Nearly everyone can recall experiences in which dreams have come true” before mentioning that the only way to ensure dreams come true was to use Walker’s line (Madame C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company, n.d.-g).
A’ Lelia’s Death and A New Strategy

The Walker company was not immune from the impact of the Great Depression with one advertisement reflecting the unfortunate event even as it touted the company as a “Haven for Hope” as a Black-owned business that hired Black people. Yet that was not the only reason for disarray. A’Lelia died in 1931, having more interest in partying than business (poet Langston Hughes wrote a poem after her death noting “She did not die at home/In her own bed at night./She died where laughter was,/ And music, and gay delight” (Hughes, For A’Lelia, 1931), and the marketing strategy seemed to changed again. The company was on the decline, though it still used A’Lelia’s ideals around glamour in its advertising. By the 1940s and through the 1960s, its primary focus seemed to be advertising Glossine as the company scrambled to figure out how to remain relevant to a new generation of women.

The Walker Company in the Mid-Twentieth Century

A somber market research report from 1946 showed the decline of the company in the intervening years (Sullivan, 1946a). Despite the increase of Black spending power, it noted, Walker’s top products had not been advertised in almost ten years, and there was a new generation of women who did not know who Madam C. J. Walker was. There had been a dramatic increase in the number of brands courting the Black market, and they were more aggressive and savvier in their advertising campaigns. Instead, the memo said two other Black hair care lines, Apex and Overton, now dominated the market, as well as Pond’s, a White-owned company that did not even directly market to Black people.

My own family can attest to this as my grandmother, Evelyn Allen, was a beautician working in Harlem in the 1940s worked under the Apex line.

Figure 22 Evelyn Charles Allen’s Apex Salon and Business Card, ca. 1940's. From author’s personal collection.

The report noted the Walker company made $1 million in 1929 (the equivalent of over $15 million in 2020 dollars), but in 1945 had only made $250,000 (about $3.6 million in 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n. d.). Given this data, David J. Sullivan (1946a) at the Negro Market Organization recommended the Walker Company do several things to boost sales and to reach the over 14 million Black consumers in America. He advocated they improve their product design and spend more on advertising. The advertising campaigns, he said, should center on five ideas:

1. The Walker Company pioneered beauty culture for black women.
2. That Madam C. J. Walker was the “first” (an obvious misnomer).
3. The products are still are of high quality.
4. The line has a good reputation.
5. Madam Walker has product “Know-How” (Sullivan, 1946a, folder 6).

Sullivan (1946a) believed that by spending $76,000 in the Black press, they could familiarize a new generation with their products since according to his market research, almost 50% did not know the brand or who Madam Walker was. He advocated the company spend the most money on three products, Glossine, Superfine Face Powder, and the Skin Brightener in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Afro-American*, the *Chicago Defender*,...

In a follow-up report, Sullivan included a letter from the *Afro-American* after he inquired about the new campaign. The response from the newspaper was somewhat enthusiastic yet skeptical about their strategy. The paper told Sullivan they would have a “whale of a job” trying to advertise the forgotten line. The letter seemed genuinely apologetic for bringing such bad news to the company, noting it had been “unfortunate that this product has been allowed to slip in all of the markets” (Sullivan, 1946b, folder 7). The paper believed it was going to take some real effort to bring the brand back to life, including some concentrated, well-planned, and skillfully directed advertising, but said: “if Sullivan was successful, he deserved his picture in the Hall of Fame” (Sullivan, 1946b, folder 7).

Ad agent Mark Gross (1957) seemed to spearhead this effort in the 1940s and 1950s. During this time, the Walker Company brought in celebrities trying to embrace the glamour girl concept wholeheartedly, while still tying beauty and success in its advertising. The company continued to utilize mainly light-skinned actors with straight hair and often also portrayed celebrities as the American dream with actresses like Lena Horne in their ads (Figure 22). Instead of the rags to riches tales of the Walkers, they also ran pictures of Black people who had “made it,” like musician Cab Calloway and inventor Dr. George Washington Carver, noting “You, too, may become an important personage in your respective field. Radiate an air of prosperity and who is to know whether your purse is lined with gold” (Figure 23). This advertisement, while seemingly aimed at men, once again placed the importance of appearance and success with hair.
“Beautiful hair and a lovely complexion.” the ad noted next to a picture of athlete Jesse Owens, is something every woman wants, and “every man admires,” and it can lead to “glamour, success, love, and happiness.”

Success in these ads, filled with high achieving scholars, musicians, and salespeople was highly urbanized and during this second wave of the migration, rural life generally ignored. The overwhelming number of advertisements seemed focused on more city-centric glamorous notions of the American dream narrative with light-skinned women and straight hair being synonymous with success. This was consistent with much of the Black press at the time, namely *Ebony Magazine* (see Chapter 4).

![Image](image_url)


In 1953, another setback occurred. The Federal Trade Commission filed a complaint about the company’s advertising. The Commission was not worried about its

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15 Some exceptions existed. One advertisement showed a picture of the children of migrant workers playing a game outside with a White-presenting woman with straight hair. The focus seemed less on glamour and more on the practicality depicted in the early ads. These children, with their neat but plain hairstyles, were not living a sophisticated urban lifestyle but still benefited from having their hair attended to.
American dream claims, but about false health charges made in their advertising (Federal Trade Commission, 1953), noting that “none of the preparations contributed to scalp health, nor do they have therapeutic value in relieving the condition of short, thin, brittle hair or preventing falling hair” (Federal Trade Commission, 1953, p. 4). Amidst all this the company tried to continue on. A 1957 proposal revealed the company planned to spend $75,000 in advertising, still using newspapers, along with Ebony and Jet magazine (Gross, 1957). By 1959, their advertising budget, which included radio, dropped to $28,730 (Walker Company Proposed 1959 Advertising Program, 1959).


The Sixties

No longer about explicitly lifting the Black woman through self-determination, and with its founders long deceased, the story of the American dream for Black people, specifically Black women, seemed erased from most of their advertising campaigns.\(^\text{16}\)

Instead, the Walker company seemed to be trying to figure out a marketing strategy

\(^{16}\) However, from time to time, those themes of the dream and self-sufficiency seemed to be incorporated into the ads, particularly around the few beauty schools that remained.
centered on glamour for all women, not just Black ones. In one advertisement, for example, one dark-skinned and one light-skinned woman sat next to each other, both wearing purple outfits made of the same fabric, gazing at the camera, seductively, with straight hair flowing down their backs (Figure 24). The woman on the left appeared to be White or White presenting, while the figure on the right appeared to be a person of color or an African American woman. No mention of Walker or A’Lelia was made; in fact, the Madam C. J. Walker name brand was understated. No products were shown, and instead, it seemed like it was selling the sexuality of the two women. The women initially appeared to be the same height sitting back to back, though, on closer examination, the White-presenting woman sat a bit taller. She dominated the ad, taking up space in not just one, but two panels of the page, with her hand positioned under her chin. She was the more intriguing character, or rather, she was placed as the more intriguing one, with her foot outstretched and her arms reaching further on the floor than the Black woman, whose legs were demurely closed with her hands folded over them. The darker-skinned woman’s dress was shorter, and the words, “Take the soft line from Madam C. J. Walker” were written next to her image. There appeared to be a deeper, perhaps even radical, depiction of these two women in the advertisement after looking at the ad more closely. The Black woman, with her light lipstick and large ring on one finger, was soft, feminine, and also sexual. Her character was not the functional picture of a woman we saw in the earliest company ads, but one who was seductive and glamorous. She finally had the sexual freedom and desire she lacked in the past. No longer in the shadows, or beholden to a culture of dissemblance, this ad showed a Black woman as a sexually desirable being holding her own next to a White woman. While at first, they appear to be
equals, when one looks deeper, there is something different. The White model was more prominent, which perhaps implied an understanding equality has not quite arrived.

Still, the message remains bold. It showed a vision of an America and a place at the table for Black women something Madam C. J. Walker always advocated for (Bundles, 2001). While the ad initially disappointed me for its lack of promotion of unabashed Black womanhood and freedom, perhaps it too, is more subversive. Perhaps, despite the long straight hair and focus on sexuality, I should read this as a pushback on the respectability of the past and on the previous notions that Black women were not in the same position as White women. This advertisement shows Black women are soft, sensual, and equal to their White counterparts in nearly every way. It also shows the White woman needing support from the back of the Black woman. In contrast, the Black woman was sitting upright on her own, commanding the attention of the viewer, not needing support, and with a smile that seems happier than her White-presenting counterpart. She looked as if she knew a secret and made peace with its contents and she conveyed a feeling of happiness, relaxations and peace. Maybe that too was the dream that Madam C. J. Walker and A’Lelia had for Black women to be sexual, beautiful creatures, self-sufficient creatures without a care in the world.

Perhaps for Madam C. J. Walker and the Walker company, being a Black woman who was able to love and embrace herself fully was the American dream. Since the early days of her company, Madam Walker strove to make Black women independent, respectable, and able to hold their own in a world that continuously shunned them. For years, Madam Walker advocated for Black women’s place at the table. Her daughter, A’Lelia, continued that work, albeit in a different way (Bundles, 2001). They both
produced advertising and marketing that highlighted not just the respectability of Black women but their aspirations and desires.

**Still Dreaming**

While the tone of the advertisements in the 1960s was largely different from those used during the company’s height at the turn of the century, there were still glimpses of the American dream-themed ads of the past. In 1967, a small advertisement with the headline, “She had a dream,” ran. The advertisement clearly tried to capitalize on Martin Luther King’s dream speech, as it incorporated the famous “I have a dream” line by the civil rights leader in its title, but it was also about Walker’s dreams. The advertisement talked about Walker’s dream of starting a company, but all mentions of race and gender were eliminated (Figure 25). Instead, the copy focused on Walker’s dream to enhance “natural” beauty and her desire to help create an industry that provided jobs for thousands. It was not quite the Black American dream-centered advertisements of the past, but still, with pictures of both the glamorous Madam Walker and the big prestigious Indianapolis building (which had suffered a decline as middle-class Black families moved away from the area), the images conveyed an American

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*Figure 25. “67 Years Ago.” [Advertisement] by Madam C. J. Walker Collection, 1967, Indiana Historical Society.*
dream story focused on material wealth, despite the copy which talked about the egalitarian moral commitment of the company.

A 1968 proposal about the state of the company gave a more dire assessment than in the past, as it noted the company was not only “far behind its competitors” but also had never reached it’s “full potential.” The proposal blamed a lack of: marketing, continuous advertising, and merchandising for the company’s decline (Madam C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company, 1968-1970).

As the migration came to a close, an advertisement by Willard B. Ransom, the son of F.B. and now General Manager of the company, dated April 26, 1971, tried to convince food brokers to carry their line. It emphasized the new multicultural approach the company was taking during the “Black is Beautiful” era. “Yes—Black is Beautiful,” the ad said, adding, “and so is brown, and so is white, and red, and yellow...” The advertisement noted all colors were beautiful if they had the right products suited for their “color tones and their complexion needs” (Madam C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company, 1971). While the advertisement noted that Walker was a revolutionary in the creation of the Black beauty industry, this note seemed to officially mark the end of the company as an exclusively Black beauty line.

**Conclusion**

By the late 1970s, the changes within the Walker Company were clear. Their mission seemed muddled as they tried to balance their connection to Black beauty culture while also embracing other beauty cultures as well. That gamble provided less than stellar results. In the past, the Walker Company was able to find success because they were able
to sell not just any American dream story, but a Black, and particularly Black woman American dream centered narrative of success. Without it, the company seemed lost.

As the company moved further and further from that credo, they faltered. Madam C. J. Walker and the Walker Company was about selling products, first and foremost, but it was also about making the American dream a reality for Black women through beauty culture. Much of that mandate was lost after Madam Walker died but it was apparent even more so after A‘Lelia’s death. In 1986, the company was sold by the Walker estate, and the company languished for years. In 2013, Sundial Brands, which owned the popular product Shea Moisture, bought the company now titled Madam C. J. Walker

Enterprises. Five years after that, one of Sundial’s cofounders bought Villa Lewaro to create a think tank for Black female entrepreneurs (“Self-Made,” 2020). In 2016, the company relaunched the Walker Brand under the label M.C. J.W (the new name for the Madam C.J. Walker line) with the assistance of Walker’s great-great-granddaughter A’Lelia Bundles. The product line was sold exclusively at the Sephora beauty store chain. The line, they said, was inspired by Walker’s original formula.

Sundial Brands is a family business run by Richelieu Dennis, a Liberian immigrant to America. It was started in 1991 and has dominated the Black beauty business for years, with sales estimated around $240 million in 2017. That year, it was acquired by Unilever, the mega-corporation that owned products like Dove, Lipton, and Ben & Jerry’s (Carlos, Wall Street Journal, 2018). Like Walker, Dennis has said his mission was not just about the material side of the dream, but also about moral uplift. “This was never about building a business. . . . This was about taking care of and investing back in our community. He told the Wall Street Journal, “If we’re relying on somebody else to take care of our issues, then we’re never going to have true freedom” (as cited in Carlos, Wall Street Journal Magazine, 2018).17

Today, Sundial seems focused on most aggressively courting the young adults of Generation Z for their M.C. J.W line. In their recent campaigns Sundial seemed to invoke the same spirit of the American dream of Walker’s ads in the past. Their advertisements can be seen in video and stills on the M.C. J.W Instagram account

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17 Sundial had received scrutiny in the past, specifically when an ad for their Shea Moisture hair product seemed to reach out to White women in an advertisement, leaving Black women feeling abandoned by the company. Sundial pulled the advertisement and maintained its brand was about serving women of color (Dennis even bought and published the Black woman-focused Essence magazine) (Schmidt, 2017).
In this new campaign, every hairstyle texture and ethnicity are represented. One tag, next to a video from 2019 about the products, said “Inspired by southern ingredients, #MCJWBeauty are moisture-rich hair solutions have everything today’s woman needs to be bold, beautiful and confident!” This was listed with the hashtag #IwriteTheRules (Instagram, April 26, 2019). Another advertisement next to a dark-skinned woman with a head of curls atop her head said, “She is unapologetically beautiful. She knows what she wants and goes for it. She built her own success story” (March 4, 2020), while there is a different ad with a woman with long curls say, “Remember sis. Dreams come true. SO dream boldly. Keep your curls feeling like a boss and scalp hydrated…” (Oct 3, 2019) Aside from pieces of fruit and products in various lavish settings, the campaign proves the trajectory is still similar—Walker’s products are about dreams, glamour, and success. One advertisement with a light-skinned woman with long hair, sitting in a fancy red car with a friend, is reminiscent of a picture of Walker sitting in a fancy car, staring boldly and assertively into the camera, showing women are not just in command but also luxurious. The new ad invokes the same feeling the picture of Walker did with the new group of 21st-century women looking cool and calm as ever confidently stare at the camera (Figure 26).

But it is another advertisement that features a popular Instagram influencer that shows how much the idea of the dream still

plays a role in the company (Figure 27). In the advertisement, a brown-skinned woman looks directly into the camera showing off long blonde tresses and holds up a purple canister for a moisturizing masque. The label on the canister boldly says “Dream Come True,” revealing for the Walker Company in the 21st-century, dreams and female beauty are still linked.
Chapter 4
The Happier Side of Negro Life: Ebony Magazine, Glamour and Celebrity During the Civil Rights Era

That glamor world is not my world. I think my world is a more realistic one. But it’s true, we try to find the glamor side of our magazine even though, not all the people we glamorize believe that this is all their world either...We are like the movies—just as they tend to embellish and adorn the normal, I think we do the same. This is not to misstate the truth but simply expresses the search for something that will capture the imagination.


In 2013, CaShawn Thompson began an online campaign using the phrase, “Black girls are magic.” A few years later, amidst a new movement for Black youth empowerment, the idea of “Black girl magic” took off. People were drawn to the phrase, which one actress called “ethereal,” that served as a testimony to the humanity, joy, and distress Black women have experienced for centuries (Hope, 2017). However, the concept of Black people, particularly Black women, being magical had been depicted long before, on the covers of an unlikely source: *Ebony* magazine, in mid-20th century America (Camp, 2015; Hope, 2017). For decades the magazine used glamour, a word that at its etymological roots means magic to convey the idea of the American dream on its monthly covers, most often using Black women to sell this narrative.

In 1945, John H. Johnson, publisher of the national magazine the *Negro Digest*, decided to create a new magazine called *Ebony*, aimed at “the happier side of negro life—the positive, everyday achievements from Harlem to Hollywood” (Johnson & Bennett, 1989, p. 160). In keeping with this mission, the magazine heavily depicted

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18 A more complete statement by what *Ebony* was going to be, written by Ben Burns, its White former communist editor at the time: “As you can gather, we’re rather jolly folks, we *Ebony* editors. We like to look at the zesty side of life. Sure, you can get all hot and bothered about the race question (and don’t think we don’t) but not enough is said about all the swell things we Negroes can do and will accomplish. *Ebony* will try to mirror the happier side of Negro life—the positive, everyday achievements from Harlem to
what the Black American dream looked like through the use of glamour, which, at its roots, is also about magic and transformation. This chapter looks at how the American dream was depicted in *Ebony* during the civil rights era through the images and text on its covers and will focus on *Ebony’s* depiction of what I call the glamorous Black American dream and how it changed between 1955 and 1968.

**The Rise of the Black Middle Class**

As middle-class life became accessible to more people in the feel-good post World War II period and hope for economic and social equity in African American life was on the rise, Black Americans continued to wrestle with what success in America looked like. Despite inequity built into laws such as the G.I. Bill (1944) and the National Housing Act (1934), which primarily helped boost White Americans into the middle classes, Black people also saw their lives improve. In 1955, Black people continued their northern migration and increasingly gained more education, entered white-collar and clerical jobs (Landry & Marsh, 2011), and won the legal battle over school integration. Some, like *Ebony’s* founding editor, thought things were improving for the Black race. In many ways, he was right. Things were changing for Black people. In 1940, the number of Black men in white-collar jobs was just six percent. By 1960, it rose to 13%, and by the end of that decade, it was at 24% (Bureau of the Census, 1979). The number of farm laborers also significantly decreased. In 1940, a third worked on farms. Twenty years later, that number stood at eight percent. Women also saw their work lives significantly change, leaving lives as service and domestic workers and also entering professional

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Hollywood. But when we talk about race as the No. 1 problem of America, we’ll talk turkey” (Green & Miller, 2007, p. 130)
fields. During that same period between 1940 and 1970, for example, the number of Black women working in private households dropped from 60% to 15% (Bureau of the Census, 1979).

The change in status in the Black community was so palpable that sociologist E. Franklin Frazier wrote a book, *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), to address the rise of this new Black middle class. It was a controversial publication, as Frazier scolded this new class of Black upwardly mobile for their focus on conspicuous consumption and status.\(^\text{19}\)

However, it highlighted how the Black community continued to wrestle over ideas about what success and achievement meant, and the tension between the material and moral components of its American dream (Fisher, 1973).

*Ebony* created a space of desire, sexuality, and humanity for Black people that mainstream White media often lacked. It was a space for Black people to be celebrated, adorned, and adored, a place for Black people to have dreams and aspirations and hope. As Veblen said, success could not happen but needed to be shown. “In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men, it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence” (Veblen, 1912, p. 36). *Ebony* was the evidence that Black people too could access the American dream.

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\(^{19}\) In 1957, E. Franklin Frazier’s *Black Bourgeoisie* specifically called out Black entertainers for their consumption, while simultaneously highlighting the power that this group has. Frazier said that many of these entertainers come from poor and working-class backgrounds believed that entertainers have a “far greater influence upon the morals and manners in the Negro community than actors and entertainers in the White community. Their prestige is owing partly to the glamor of their personalities, but more especially to their financial success, which is due to their support by the White world” (Frazier, 127). Frazier believed that this dedication to material possessions was because of feelings of inferiority among the group.
After a quick look at the covers of *Ebony* during the civil rights era, it may appear the magazine strictly viewed the American dream through the material lens during this period, particularly during its early years. Certainly, many of the covers reflect that viewpoint and Johnson openly stated *Ebony* overemphasized achievement as having mink coats, cars, and fancy homes (Talbott, 1965, p. 52). However, *Ebony*’s cover line text seemed to have a slightly more balanced approach to the dream, promoting both its moral and material components, while the images appeared to focus on material success, glamour, and celebrity. As the civil rights movement escalated, changes occurred at the magazine and after the fall of popular civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., with Black Americans in a great moment of despair and disappointment, the images on the covers of *Ebony* showed a significant engagement with the moral component of the dream. Ultimately, this proved that *Ebony*, just like many of its readers, had no single concept of the American dream, but rather that multiple versions of it were always being negotiated, depending on events impacting the Black community at large.

**The Beginning of *Ebony***

For nearly 20 years, through the 1950s and much of the civil rights movement, *Ebony* magazine focused on the “happier side” of Black life. *Ebony* was able to accomplish this, particularly in its early years, through the use of glamour. Glamour is a concept that, according to Stephen Gundle, transmits desire; it is an alluring image that is closely related to consumption. It is an enticing and seductive vision that is designed to draw the eye of an audience. It consists of a retouched or perfected representation of someone or something whose purpose it is to dazzle and seduce whoever gazes on it. (Gundle, 2009, p. 5)

It was a place of both transformation and illusion, a performance of pure creation and fantasy; it was about *magic*. During this time of great transformation in the Black
community, glamour was deployed as a way to explore the possibility and promise of America and the American dream. In the mid-20th century, *Ebony* helped to advance the transformative concept of glamour in the Black community. As writer Virginia Postrel (2013) concluded, “glamour contained the promise of a mobile and commercial society that anyone could be transformed into a better, more attractive, and wealthier version of themselves” (p. 138).

Within the concept of glamour, there is an inherent tension about the material and the moral; a constant struggle between an egalitarian concept and individual success. The story of *Ebony* magazine in this era continued to expose these tensions. *Ebony* positioned itself by embracing glamour, or more specifically, what I would call Black glamour, to convey to its readers, messages of upward mobility and the American dream to its readers.

Black glamour, like its counterpart in the White world, was relayed through images and notions of materialism, wealth, and status, while deploying a little magic to obfuscate the reality of Black life in America. Black glamour was most prominently displayed on the covers of the magazine. This is a key part of the success of any magazine, since 80% of consumer sales are based on what is shown on the cover (Johnson, 2002). To see Black people on the newsstand in a way that showed them as beautiful, desirable beings, with all that razzle and dazzle, was powerful after centuries of stereotypes as slaves and virtual erasure in the mainstream White-centered media. It was also a departure from the social justice-oriented Black press at the time. Johnson, the believed Black newspapers were succeeding at reporting on the oppression that wreaked havoc onto Black life, but he wanted a “medium to refuel the people, and to recharge
their batteries” (Johnson & Bennett, 1989, p. 157). That medium, it seemed was designed to make them believe in the promise and possibility of America-the American dream.

While some people would question the strategy of creating a medium of such positivity during the era of Jim Crow and with a burgeoning civil rights movement, Johnson said he felt like Black people were about to finally be liberated after the decision of Brown v. Board of Education. “I’d come up from segregation and nobodyness, and I believed that the Promised Land was around the next turning. . . . I remember thinking at the time, and I was not alone, that we were free at last and that the struggle soon would be over” (Johnson, 1989, p. 238). Johnson felt the American dream was in reach for Black people. The idea of using positivity and glamour for this magazine made even more sense in the post-World War II boom era, when conspicuous consumption was on the rise for Black Americans as they began to earn more income, indulge in leisure activities, and create lives that were not just based on labor (Green, 2007). Black people were becoming urbanized, skilled consumers, and, for a select few, upward mobility was attainable.

Despite the gains Black Americans were experiencing, racist Jim Crow laws continued to persist in the South, and more subtly, in the North. Black people across the nation were relegated to inferior positions of employment, often lived in segregated communities, made less money, and were virtually absent from mainstream media. For example, artist and scholar Bill Gaskins found that over the entire history of Life Magazine, one of the most popular weekly magazines of the postwar era, only 23 covers featured Black people (Stange, 2001). Black people were, at best, marginalized citizens,
and the White press excluded stories of them and their everyday affairs unless it was negative.²⁰

Ben Burns, one of the first editors of Ebony, a white journalist and a former editor at the Chicago Defender, said the magazine was radical because it was the first time an organ of the Black press was not about negativity, agony, or advocacy of cause (Burns, 1989, p.88). Instead Johnson saw his vision as an antidote to the social justice coverage. Instead, the formulaic evaluation of content that upheld any story about Black people as long as they were: “first, only, and biggest” (as cited in Stange, 2001, p. 211), would be Ebony’s editorial strategy for decades. Johnson initially sold Ebony to readers by promoting sensationalism, particularly with stories about interracial relationships, sex, and those engaged in racial passing. Johnson wanted to make sure Ebony was not too politically radical and that it appeased both Black and White advertisers, whom he heavily courted. Readers loved the magazine, and by the early 1950s, it had over 500,00 readers (Roberts & Klibanoff, 2006, p. 79).

Despite the Ebony’s popularity, Frazier was one of the biggest critics of the magazine noting its assimilationist and classist tones (1957). Charles Stone, a columnist for The Philadelphia Daily News, also called out Ebony for its bourgeois sentiment

²⁰ According to Americanist Maren Strange, The Times-Picayune of New Orleans had a policy of not allowing photographs of Black people until the 1950s. Activist Jesse Jackson recalled a similar policy in his hometown paper in South Carolina, where he said Black people were not given a decent obituary. Historian Henry Louis Gates echoed that sentiment saying Black people were “starved for images of ourselves” during the mid-20th century (Stange, 2001, p. 215).

Stange (2001) believed that the editors of Ebony were trying to use photography as more than journalism. Photography was used as a way to push back on the stereotype of African Americans as victims and caricatures and “detach images of Blacks from their persuasive association with equally familiar cultural representations as spectacular or desegregated Others and victims” (p. 208). Rather, Ebony’s images helped shift the gaze from the racialized iconography, and the pictures “would, instead, reproduce iconic Blackness articulated to equally naturalized and sanctioned symbols of class respectability, achievement, an American national identity” (Stange, 2001, p. 208).
stating, “*Ebony* is nothing but *Life* Magazine in Blackface without *Life*’s intellectual and investigative strengths” (Gelman et al., 1975, p. 54). Similarly, *The Liberator* Magazine asked, “Is *Ebony* a Negro magazine?” (Ellis, 1965, p. 4). *Ebony* responded to the accusations about its less than radical politics in an editorial in its fifth-anniversary edition in 1950:

> There are some who have accused *Ebony* of fence sitting. . . . If being a middle-of-the roader who refuses to carry either a chip on the shoulder or a hat in hand is fence sitting, we plead guilty. Frankly, we are big believers in carrying both a big stick and a soft glove when approaching white folks on the race question. (Roberts & Klibanoff, 2006, p. 79)

The editorial, which was written by Burns did not seem off-putting to readers as *Ebony*’s content seemed to resonate with Black people (Roberts & Klibanoff, 2006). Even Stone admitted if it were up to him, he would not change a thing about the magazine: “I’m glad it’s around. It’s the best testimonial to Black industry in the country” (Gelman et al., 1975, p. 54).

In 1954, when an economic recession hit and *Ebony* lost over 100,000 subscribers, Johnson fired Burns, believing he was responsible for the sensationalistic approach and decided to take the magazine in a new direction away from yellow journalism, but he continued its focus on middle class readers. Johnson knew that the reality displayed in *Ebony* was different than the real lives of the majority of his readers, with only about ten percent of readers being able to access the “advantages” shown in the magazine (Bird, 1963, p. 14), but he thought this aspirational rendering of Black life was positive.

In many ways, Johnson was responsible for creating a dream world for average Black Americans shown through material riches (Williams, 2009). Reflecting on the past,
Johnson later said, “Originally, Ebony expressed the brighter side of Negro life and highlighted Negro achievements. But achievements then was measured by material standards—mink coats, elaborate homes, beautiful automobiles” (Talbott, 1965, p. 52), and often revealed how success was experienced rather than achieved (Brooks, 1991).

Achievement in Ebony was also, as Hirsch (1968) noted, about individual efforts and self-help, ideas often critical in many iterations of the American dream myth. Media scholar Dwight Ernest Brooks (1991) shared that sentiment: “The Black achiever who was highlighted in Ebony enhanced the myth of the American dream and the notion of individual success” (p. 161). He found accolades were often given to people who found individual success rather than groups (including the Black race) who were deserving of acclaim. Individual success was crystallized by the revelation of salaries and material possessions most often via stories about homeownership, employment status and automobiles.

The focus on consumption wasn’t totally superficial. Lizabeth Cohen (2003) argued America became a “consumer’s republic” in the post-World War II era when consumption and citizenship became one in the same. Black people were excluded from many tools that would lead to a middle class like the G.I. Bill (1944), bank loans, and widespread admission to colleges. However, one way Black people could “become” citizens was through consumption and fighting for equal access to the consumers’ marketplace (Cohen, 2003). This fight for equal access to consumer goods, though seemingly overly focused on the material, and reinforcing the supremacy of capitalism also promoted the idea of equal economic rights. It was a concept that seemed to shape Ebony’s outlook during these years as Johnson continuously and subtly promoted the
equality of access through the attainment of material goods. While this rendering of the dream seems overly focused on consumption of the dream, it was not just about access to goods, but about Black access and entitlement to material possessions and consumption, which in was a political idea.

However, the magazine covers between 1955 and 1968 contained more content on social issues and justice than previous studies suggested (Brown, 2010). Sometimes what seemed like a superficial positioning of the magazine would be revealed to be more subversive than thought. In “Why Negroes Buy Cadillacs,” the writer argued that material possessions were important because of what they represented:

> The fact is that basically a Cadillac is an instrument of aggression, a solid and substantial symbol for many a Negro that he is as good as any White man. To be able to buy the most expensive car made in America is as a graphic demonstration of that equality as can be found. (Johnson, 1949, p. 34)

Perhaps because of the illusion of equality *Ebony* was trying to present in terms of success, this idea of glamour, an illusion in and of itself, was the perfect vehicle to help convey success and equality (Johnson, 1949, p. 34).

The September 1955 magazine cover that featured actress Madi Comfort, titled “New Movie Queen,” (Figure 28) provided a good example of how *Ebony* embraced the aesthetic of glamour. Comfort wore a red dress that slightly revealed cleavage, with matching nails, straight curled hair, and jewels on her fingers, ears, and wrists. She had a wide, bright smile, trim figure, straight sparkling teeth, painted red lips, and big eyes looking up towards the heavens with her hands raised in jubilance. It looked like the entire world was hers for the taking.
Some of what *Ebony* was portraying was about material gain and celebrity, and the article title reinforced that notion. Their version of glamour, however, was also different than the more mainstream idea of glamour that was centered in Whiteness; Comfort’s glamour and the positioning was about *Black glamour*, which took the ideals of the American dream and meshed it with desire, sexuality, and often, Whiteness. This contradiction highlights a complexity of the magazine that is often left uncovered by scholars and represented how the magazine showed Black girl magic early on.

As mass movements for civil rights began to grow nationwide and received more attention in both Black and White media, Johnson’s *Ebony* Magazine were showed dreams of celebrity, riches, and glamour on its covers. Only as Black power started to come into the national psyche during the 1960s did Johnson slightly change *Ebony*’s direction. While the magazine often failed to always fully engage with the struggle for Black equality, particularly with its cover images, its dedication to glamour and celebrity while perhaps seen as frivolous, “affirmed a sense of dignity, worth, and fully rounded humanity” (Postrel, 2013, p. 62).

Not everyone agreed with this strategy. Frazier (1955) believed the Black press, including *Ebony*, was superficial in its coverage of the Black world: “It’s exaggerations concerning the economic well-being and cultural achievements of Negroes, its emphasis upon Negro ‘society’ all tend to create a world of make-believe into which the Black
bourgeoisie can escape from its inferiority and inconsequence in American society” (p. 4). Nonetheless, Black glamour was a political act. It allowed Black people to finally be seen as whole and human and create their own dreams.

**Previous Studies of Ebony**

No studies on the covers of *Ebony* magazine have been previously conducted. While there is research that explores Johnson’s desire for achievement and success, there has been no study directly looking at how the American dream can be read in *Ebony* (Brooks, 1991). A good portion of the research conducted around *Ebony* focuses on its editorial content or advertising, often from the fields of sociology, psychology, or business, and many times in comparison to its mainstream White counterpart *Life* (Saddler, 1984). While John H. Johnson’s autobiography in 1993, gives some insight into the creation and editorial policy of the magazine, as well as Ben Burns’ memoir, a larger study that looks at the magazine is overdue.

As the civil rights era remains a popular subject for scholars, a few articles examined the editorial content of the magazine during that era (Hirsch, 1968; Goodman, 1968; Rosen, 1964). While none specifically looked at the covers, they all noted an increase in the social justice content of the magazine during this period in the mid- to late-1960s, as the notion of Black power becomes more popular (Hirsch, 1964; Rosen, 1964). Paul Hirsch argued that stories about the civil rights movement and protest disrupted the individualistic and self-help narrative the magazine weaved together for so many years, and while the magazine had started to move away from the promotion of pure consumption during the mid-sixties, praising leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., the magazine had yet to have “a contest in which the grand prize wasn’t a Cadillac”
(Hirsch, 1968, pp. 269-270). Walter Goodman’s (1968) agreed that the magazine devoted some coverage to civil rights matters in the sixties, the bulk was still about “Entertainment, Sports, and Personalities” with the only contribution to “the consciousness of black solidarity” being given in superficial articles about the continent of Africa, which were “long on exotic detail and short on critical analysis” (Goodman, 1968, p. 405). He believed that Ebony’s more radical tone was due to a cultural shift, not a differing editorial strategy (though he did note popular writer Lerone Bennett, Jr., was the “nearest thing to a militant” in the upper ranks of the magazine) (Goodman, 1968, p. 408), “Like all mass publications, Ebony is a popularizer of ideas rather than an innovator; it responds to the prevailing winds…The Ebony formula transmits month after month the sense of an orderly and thriving middle-class Negro life in America, a very different sense from the one transmitted by the unsettling columns of our daily newspapers” (1968, p. 405-407). While Goodman asserted that Ebony used the current hip language of the moment, even militant ones, he doubted any radical change stating that the magazine’s goals, “remain the liberal goals of the fifties.” (Goodman 1968, p. 408). This project departs from these previous works by specifically looking at the notion of the American dream and glamour in Ebony, and by articulating that social justice had been a theme in Ebony magazine since the 1950s and throughout the civil rights era.

Glamour: A Brief History

According to Stephen Gundle (2009), the concept of glamour emerged in Europe between 1770 and 1830, when the bourgeois class, eager to downplay genetic divinity as the key to power, started using sex appeal, fame, money, and theatrics to reaffirm their economic and social status (2009). Poet Walter Scott first made the word popular in “The
Lay of the Last Minstrel,” a poem about a magical power that made ordinary people, dwellings, and places seem like magnificent versions of themselves (1805). “You may bethink you of the spell / Of that sly urchin page / This to his lord did impart / And made him seem, by glamour art / A knight from Hermitage” (Scott, 1805). The concept of glamour used here had origins in Scottish superstition and meant, according to Scott, “the magic power of imposing on the eyesight of the spectators so that the appearance of an object could be totally different from reality” (Peet & Kinnaman, 1896, p. 87).

The term, glamour, came to America in the late 19th century as the country’s new moneyed elite wanted a way for people to convey their new social status. The idea was not fully embraced until after World War I, when Hollywood began selling the idea of glamour to mass society and movie stars like Clark Gable, Carey Grant, Joan Crawford, and Marilyn Monroe began enticing audiences to believe they could and be whatever they wanted to be and act on their dream through the consumption of material things (Gundle, 2009).

The glamour of Hollywood’s golden age has largely been seen as the standard for glamour and, as historian Carol Dyhouse (2010) said, has always been linked to this idea of female becoming. “Glamour was often linked to a dream of transformation, a desire for something out of the ordinary, a form of aspiration” (Dyhouse, 2010, Introduction). It allowed ordinary women to “indulge in dreams of escape from everyday hardship and to express interest in sexual power, the exotic, presence and influence” (Dyhouse, 2010, Chapter 3). This framework can be used to understand how this idea created a sense of becoming in the Black community, while also being a political act. Dyhouse believed in its more subversive qualities, suggesting a desire for glamour included going against
normal expectations of class and gender. Glamour allowed for women to express non-compliance and self-assertion in a society that often pleaded with them to behave in conformity with conventional norms (Dyhouse, 2010). While others, like Colin Campbell (1987), linked the idea of glamour with conspicuous consumption, Dyhouse’s reading of glamour as subversive and Gundle’s understanding of glamour being about “fantasy, desire, and longing” is most useful in an analysis of *Ebony* Magazine covers and their message about the American dream. The American dream can be seen in how glamour is understood. I agree with Postrel’s view that the “evocation of the American dream is an exercise in glamour” (2013, loc. 3496). She wrote that glamour was a way to deal with the present by presenting another version of reality,

> This paradox means that one writer can observe that glamour contains “a moral element” that has “something to do with optimism, cheer, and celebration, glamour being a language that denotes great faith in life,” while another suggests that glamour’s appeal originates in despair: “If you’re trying to escape through a fantasy you have to be pretty desperate, right? That’s the sense of ‘despair’ that I mean—a feeling of being trapped and having no options left.” (Postrel, 2013, loc. 981)

These contrasting views of glamour resonated with the experience of African Americans, whose presence in America represented a similar paradox. I believe *Ebony*’s rendering of glamour lay somewhere between Postrel’s two definitions. While glamour served an empowering tool for Black people to create their reality, it was as Frazier noted, a world of make-believe as well. The editors of *Ebony* understood this, and glamour was mainly used in its images, while its text revealed a far more pained existence, a more authentic version of life, confirming the glamorous images on its covers were part of an illusion about Black life in America.
Black Glamour

While glamour is a universal idea, it embodies some racial specificity when applied to Black life. Although glamour is historically based on similar desires from marginalized communities, Black glamour is different. It is a combination of glamour, the universal concept, and cultural capital. Glamour itself is based on concepts around taste and style, cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2012), systems of Whiteness that were not created for Black people. Black glamour, while based on some of the universal ideas around glamour, is also based in Whiteness.

*Ebony*’s covers encompassed the following aspects of glamour: alluring images about consumption, enticing an audience, and representations of ideas designed to dazzle and seduce. *Ebony* and its depictions of glamour, however, were unique during the civil rights era. This fantasy play was also about constructing a new Black reality that had previously been largely unexplored in the media (Gundle’s 2013).

*Ebony* did not just show images of Black America or images of powerful Black Americans, it showed glamourous images of those figures. They rarely portrayed the working class. Women were not always seen as laborers, but as consumers. The *Ebony* images were both an elite focus on the dream and a way to show the desirability of Black people, especially Black women. Black women often stared straight out into the camera from the covers of *Ebony* and they dared to have people look back at them. These women held the gaze; they were finally sexual beings more in control of their sexuality than in the past. While it was problematic that they were frequently thin, light-skinned, and heterosexual, the implication was Black women were finally seen as desirable, and through that desire, they displayed a power they had not been previously given.
For *Ebony* magazine, glamour was not just relegated to the stars, it was embraced as a lifestyle. Whether activists or models, the covers of *Ebony* depicted a world few Black Americans could access. Black glamour, though an under-examined concept, is a useful way to understand *Ebony* during this period when people like political scientist Ralph Bunche got the star treatment. While *Ebony* lived in an insular world, it deployed glamour to both further ideas of make-believe and affirm humanity. Johnson, who often proclaimed the importance of images in the magazine, said his editorial decision was partially because Black people wanted to see this hidden side of Black life, “We were dressing up for society balls, and we wanted to see that. We were going places we had never been before and doing things we’d never done before, and we wanted to see that” (Johnson, 1989, p. 156). But Johnson also seemed to believe celebrating material success gave people a complete portrait of the Black experience:

> The Negro ought to have a right to be a human being in the fullest sense of the word. He ought to have the right to give a party, go to a country club if he likes, buy a mink coat for his wife if he has the money, take a skiing trip somewhere, visit the Riviera. Now I don't think the Negroes who are able to do some of these things are made alien to other Negroes, nor does it pull them apart from the others. This is just another way of expressing his interest in being a human being. (As cited in Bird, 1963, p. 14)

Johnson said he did not see these representations as a depiction of a separate world, but as people who had essentially achieved this dream lifestyle everyone wanted:

> What we depict are Negroes who, through their own efforts, or by birth or accident or some other means, are able to acquire what all other people want. And it is exactly the same in the white world, where the majority enjoy reading about the people at the top. What I think I am doing is showing the readers that we all have strata in our society as in the general society. We’re showing Negroes that some of us are able to make it. (As cited in Bird, 1963, p. 14)

But Johnson, in this same piece, also hedged in his belief about glamour.
If you examine my magazine, you’ll find not so much a world of glamor any more as a world of achievement. . . . That glamor world is not my world. . . . I think my world is a more realistic one. But it’s true, we try to find the glamor side of our magazine even though, not all the people we glamorize believe that this is all their world either. . . . We are like the movies—just as they tend to embellish and adorn the normal, I think we do the same. This is not to misstate the truth but simply expresses the search for something that will capture the imagination. (Bird, 1963, p. 14)

While Johnson initially denied glamour, followed by his apparent acceptance of it, he emphasized Black achievement. One must admit that *Ebony* during this era embellished the “ordinary” and often celebrated the individualistic, materialistic, notion of the dream. It celebrated any seeming connection to the power Black people had and reinforced a standard of beauty based on Whiteness. The magazine was not interested in showing the everyday Black woman; the magazine wanted to counter

the image of Black women as domestic drudges and to emphasize their potential for work that was better paying and more challenging and prestigious . . . maids were featured only when their employers were persons of note and their daily routines filled with glamour and excitement. (Jones, 1985, p. 272)

Yet, as historian Jacqueline Jones carefully noted, *Ebony*, “while devoting due attention to the glamorous and unconventional lifestyles of these women, also portrayed them as particularly committed and effective political activists” (1985, p. 226). This showed other aspects of the moral component that heralded equality and freedom for all. Still, while there was some reality in *Ebony*, the cover images remained out of touch. According to Valerie Saddler (1984), the magazine showed less of the violence of the civil rights movement than the White-run publication *Life* Magazine. All of the covers during this period were of non-violent protests, not dogs attacking people or even Emmett Till’s funeral, conveying the idea that while *Ebony*’s words on the cover were often dedicated
to some sort of reality, the images, the focal point of the publication, remained in the make-believe fantasy world of Black glamour.

**Methodology**

Black glamour was most prominently displayed on the cover of the magazine. This is a key part of the success of any magazine, since 80% of consumer sales are based on what is shown on the cover (Johnson, 2002). To see Black people on the newsstand in a way that showed them as beautiful, desirable beings, with all that razzle and dazzle, was powerful after centuries of stereotypes as slaves and virtual erasure in the mainstream White-centered media.

Magazine covers can be an important tool for understanding the ideology of *Ebony*, one of the most important vehicles and arbiters of Black popular culture. Covers function as both a way to tell readers what the magazine considers important editorially and socially and as a marketing tool for the brand (Cantrell-Rosas-Moreno, Harp, & Bachmann, 2013, p. 5). They set the magazine’s tone and frame how a magazine places itself in the societal context. While the importance of these covers may be undervalued in the digital-focused media landscape today, these magazine covers set the tone, focus, and agenda of the publication, particularly in the 20th century, much in the way the cover of the *New York Times* sets the agenda of the day, whether read online or in print. The magazine cover also reinforced the company brand, an important tool since most people decide whether or not to buy a magazine within 3 to 5 seconds (Johnson, 2002).

Using images from *Ebony* printed from microfilm at the Schomburg Branch of the New York Public Library and cross-referenced with magazine cover images found in color online, I considered how the idea of the American dream was deployed, and if it
changed during the civil rights era. I looked at both the cover line text and the cover images of *Ebony* covers from September 1955 to December 1968 (148 issues in total) and classified them under text and images. I created 10 text categories that seemed most relevant to my analysis (social justice/history; celebrity/entertainment; marriage/relationships; upward mobility; politics/politicians; diaspora; vacation/travel; religion; sports/athletes; interracial issues) and 17 images categories (women; dressed up/non-casual attire; swimsuits; formal/cocktail attire; glamour; social justice/history; jewelry; natural hair; celebrity; politician; material possessions; marriage/partners; vacation/travel; religion; paper bag test; sports/athletes; interracial). When analyzing things like skin color on magazine covers, I used the paper bag test, a tool used in Black communities to discriminate against darker-skinned Blacks (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 2013, p. 27). I primarily used Gundle’s (2013) definition of “dazzle” and “seduction” to define glamour. Other categories were added to alleviate the burdens of the definition and to help give the reader additional context (e.g., formal dress, the appearance of jewelry, or an exotic locale). For the text, as certain cover stories fit more than one category, I categorized each story to observe general trends rather than produce precise data. Categories were of course subjective and qualitative. Simplified data of the most prominent findings can be seen below.
Figure 29. Text References by Theme in Ebony Covers from 1955 to 1968. Data compiled by author.

Figure 30. Image References by Theme in Ebony Covers from 1955 to 1968. Data compiled by author.
Findings

The results both confirmed previous research conducted on the magazine and illustrated new issues. I assumed glamour, more than social justice issues, would be depicted on the covers, both through images and text headlines. Based on previous data, I also assumed there would be more coverage of social justice issues during the latter part of the 1960s and earlier issues would be completely about the Black world of make-believe.

Cover Line Text

There was a general increase in stories related to social justice and Black history issues as the civil rights movement gained more traction (Figure 29). The stories remained steady and were often a contrast to the images, revealing more of a commitment to social justice than critics like Frazier realized. These stories included topics like:

- “Land of the Till Murder” (April 1956),
- “The End of Uncle Tom Teachers” (June 1957),
- “Why Negroes Move to White Neighborhoods” (August 1958),
- “What ‘Sit-downs’ Mean to America” (June 1960),
- “What Negroes Can Expect from Kennedy” (January 1961),
- “What Negroes Have Done for America” (September 1962),
- “Are Interracial Homes Bad for Kids?” (March 1963),
- “The Mystery of Malcolm X” (September 1964),
- “Your Child and Prejudice” (October 1964),
- “The White Problem in America” (August 1965),
- “Integration: the Great Dilemma of the Church” (June, 1966),
- “Negro Youth: Anxious, Angry and Aware” (August 1967),
- “Black Power at the Polls” (January 1968),
- “Was Abe Lincoln a White Supremacist?” (February 1968),
- “How the Ghetto Gets Gyppped” (September 1968),
- and “What to do if Arrested” (November 1968).

The text changed tone to more radical topics by the mid-1960s, like the controversial “The White Problem in America,” but showed Ebony talked about many of
these issues for years. There was a decline in stories about social justice in 1959, 1961, and 1965, with only about six cover lines dedicated to these topics each year. There was also an increase in stories about politics, defined as an activity related to governance. In 1960, there was a general increase in stories about social justice on the magazine cover, broadly taken to mean issues around privilege and equality, with 10 cover lines in 1960. In 1964, there were 18 cover stories, in 1966, there were 14, in 1967 there were 13 and in 1968, there were again 14 cover stories, suggesting a new editorial turn for the magazine. Overall, 133 cover lines during this period were related to social justice issues, suggesting a more justice-oriented focus for the magazine throughout this period as opposed to others (Frazier, 1957).

Celebrity and entertainment stories were generally steady and represented a big part of the magazine. They were second to text about social justice stories, with 101 appearing as cover line text. Between six and eight of these cover stories were usually promoted each year. Both 1958 and 1960 were blockbuster years for this type of coverage, with 10 and 11 (respectively) celebrity and entertainment-related stories comprising the most amount of text space on the cover.

Forty-four cover lines about upward mobility, moving up, and entrepreneurship were depicted on the covers over the years. Lines included:

- “Most Fabulous Negro Wedding” (October 1958),
- “Profitable Careers Without College” (June 1959),
- “Negroes in Hawaii” (July 1959),
- “$50,000 Dinner” (July 1960),
- “Cleveland Millionaire” (August 1961),
- “Horseplayer Who Won $81,000” (July 1964),
- “College Coed-at 76” (December 1965),
- and “Negro Money Men” (September 1967).
This number was surprisingly low, given *Ebony*’s perceived interest in status. It shows while images were central in portraying status, the text remained more focused on justice. Cover lines about politics and politicians remained relatively even over the years, though they increased slightly in the 1960s. The diaspora was not heavily covered in *Ebony* at all, usually receiving about one or two lines a year. Religion was not as big a topic for the magazine; between 1955 and 1968, only 16 stories were directly about religion, though there was a big cover on African bishops. Twenty-five stories centered on athletes during this time and another 15 on interracial relationships.

**Cover Images**

The images on the magazine cover revealed other interesting aspect of the magazine. While the text often focused on stories of social justice, what Fisher would have called the moral aspect of the dream, the magazine’s images were more directly focused on the superficial and material. Covers featuring images of civil rights or Black history occurred just 11 times, all of them after September of 1963 (Figure 30). These peaked in 1968, the year King died, when *Ebony* dedicated four covers to civil rights issues, race pride, or Black history (though even these covers could include glamour). This study revealed that women were featured on 130 out of 144 covers. While some of those were shared with men, most of the covers featured a single woman or multiple women. Ninety-nine featured women dressed up. As styles changed from more formal cocktail attire to a casualness of the 1960s, the magazine evolved, too. Cocktail gowns and formal attire were a big part of the magazine in the early years, perhaps reflecting Johnson’s “achievements … measured by material standards” (1988). This aspect of the dream declined during the later years of the civil rights movement. By 1963, the formal
glamour dress attire was in full retreat, though cocktail and black-tie regalia graced at least 43 covers. Jewelry, especially big prominent jewelry, was often on display on the covers of *Ebony* early on, with models and stars showing off their possessions. However, that trend also began to disappear, and more casual looks became en vogue.

Natural hair on Black women (and by extension people with African features), rarely graced the cover of *Ebony* magazine. During the civil rights era, as the phrase “Black is beautiful” became prominent (Smith, 2018), models and celebrities with natural hair graced the cover only four times, including one all-male cover about “the natural,” and one feature with actress Cicely Tyson donning wigs; her natural hair was the “before” style. Another cover of natural hair ran in June of 1966 declaring “The Natural Look: New Mode for Negro Women” (Figure 42).

While politics and politicians were often part of *Ebony*’s stories and celebrated in the text on the covers, their images appear only 17 times during this era. When politicians did appear, they often were presented in a way that blurred the line between politician and superstar, like political scientist Ralph Bunche in a suit with a cigarette, or Adam Clayton Powell on vacation. As the civil rights movement wore on, more standard government photos featuring Black elites with leaders like John F. Kennedy (March 1961) or Lyndon B. Johnson (September 1964) emerged. These photos revealed the respect *Ebony* gave to these prominent and elite figures, and while not the glamour of gloves, dresses, and jewels, their access to power represented another dream of Black America.

One surprising finding was the infrequent appearance of material possessions on the covers of *Ebony*. While cars were sometimes seen in photoshoot backgrounds, *Ebony*
seemed far less concerned with depicting these on its covers. Covers like that of actress Dorothy Dandridge in 1962, sitting on a luxurious couch in what appears to be a well-decorated living room, are rare. Only 22 cover images featured non-clothing/jewelry related objects of material wealth (like a fancy car), perhaps showing glamorous women and men signified wealth and the dream more high-ticket items.

Still, *Ebony* consistently evoked a certain image of Black material success. Out of 148 covers, 66 images had jewelry, and 117 featured light-skinned people who would pass the paper bag test. About 10 covers during this period featured White people. Therefore, skin color seemed to be an important part of the success narrative to Johnson, a dark-skinned man. It should be noted that lighter skin color was often confined to female-presenting people. Academy award-winning actor Sidney Poitier, a man, could possess more African features, like kinky hair, and darker brown skin, and be featured on a cover.

Cis-gendered, heterosexual relationships were depicted on at least 25 covers, while images of seemingly Black and White people (either as colleagues or as a couple) appeared only 10 times during this period. Surprisingly, only 10 athletes appeared during this period—less than expected—as they were often viewed as celebrities since they often had fame and wealth. Postrel’s (2013) analysis of glamour noted the power of travel, which *Ebony* fully embraced; Black people on vacation or in “exotic” locales were displayed on their covers at least 30 times.

Glamour was a consistent theme on *Ebony’s* covers. While the “traditional” aesthetic of Hollywood glamour appeared in the early years of the civil rights movement, glamour on the magazine’s cover evolved from formal to Black tie formal to the
metaphorical “world at large.” Exotic locales, professional careers, and unique attire soon became a stand in for the fancy ball gowns and jewelry of the past. For example, in October of 1955, teenage television star Joan Proctor appeared on the cover in a ball gown, big jewelry, red lips, long hair, and bright white teeth with a green backdrop (Figure 31). It is quite a contrast to the cover featuring teenage model Patricia Evans in August 1964 wearing a professional suit, understated makeup in front of an urban setting emphasizing the vast city as much as her beauty. This showed that the concept of glamour changed over time.


During the civil rights era, 111 out of 144 covers could be considered glamorous. Both political scientist Ralph Bunche and activist Coretta Scott King could be viewed as glamorous figures when on Ebony’s covers, even though they were working on serious issues. Ebony was most interested in glamour from 1957, when every single cover was classified as glamorous, until 1959 as the civil rights movements gained steam. By 1960,
only nine out of 12 covers were dedicated to glamour. That number remained consistent until the end of the civil rights movement, with exceptions in 1962 and 1964, which had 11 cover images, and 1963, which had seven cover images dedicated to glamour.
Figure 32. Assorted collection of *Ebony Magazine* covers compiled by the author.
A Close Read of Glamour in *Ebony*

The Fifties: Red Lips and Fur Coats

*Ebony* magazine served as the perfect vehicle for glamour in the 1950s, with most of its subjects, regardless of content, receiving the glamour treatment. Actress Lena Horne represented the quintessential *Ebony* cover subject. She was attractive, respectable and of course, a celebrity. On one cover in 1956 (Figure 33) she wore a shimmering gold dress with her hands holding onto what looked like an elevator grate. Her image revealed everything Black people were told they were not supposed to be: sexual, confident, and desirable. She was far out of the realm of domesticity and it seemed her appearance was a result of both leisure and pleasure. This cover made her a particular vehicle of Black glamour, since it was both a site of transformation and desirability, but also served as a corrective to a world of stereotyping that labeled Black women as dirty, undesirable, and hypersexual.

Her cover, like others also revealed the importance of the Hollywood star to the magazine and its understanding of glamour. Celebrity and its entanglement with glamour, also captured the new world of leisure for Black people. A March 1956 cover of Harry Belafonte (Figure 34) casually dressed in his signature open-buttoned shirt, with his wife and children, also emphasized a relaxed world of leisure.

On the surface, Belafonte may not be as glamorous, but his celebrity made this photo a product of glamour. In *Ebony*’s case, Black glamour was about selling both the person and extraordinary lifestyles that were not defined by work. This concept was fairly new for Black people, including men. Being shown as fathers with time to engage and enjoy their time with their children was a new experience many Black men aspired to.

Covers of Adam Clayton Powell and Nat King Cole depicted a sort of carefree leisure and glamorous fatherhood that showed them with their wives and children and presented them as icons of glamour. These covers reinforced an American dream of domesticity.

While a vacation alone does not seem to be a glamorous idea, a vacation with Black people, shown in leisurely attire with tropical flowers and a big hotel in the background, was important to the magazine. An April 1956 cover image on Thurgood Marshall’s honeymoon provided a glimpse into both Marshall’s personal life and his upward mobility by showing his ability to take an expensive vacation and engage in leisurely pursuits. If, as Johnson said, people were solely interested in the ordinary lives of Hollywood stars and politicians, they would have depicted Marshall cooking dinner or

*Figure 34. Ebony Magazine* March 1956. Retrieved from https://www.pinterest.se/pin/56506170312797626/
walking the dog. Placing him in an exotic locale reified *Ebony’s* commitment to material wealth and riches. But this was different. This cover showed glamour. It also showed Black people had the freedom to travel wherever they wanted, again revealing tension Black people have with the dream. Vacation and travel were definitely about material success and having a luxurious lifestyle, but it was also about the freedom Black people finally had to enter these spaces.

As years passed, *Ebony*’s idea of glamour expanded beyond beauty and there seemed to be a desire to include a carefree attitude and worldliness. In April 1958, a photo of painter Barbara Chase, with windblown hair, smiling sensual lips, and a white crop top with Rome in the background, seemed about more than a student studying abroad, as the text implied. Her beauty was a focal point for sure, but the European background, and her free-spirit attitude seemed to define another aspect of Black glamour. Whether on a beach, as shown in a June 1958 cover of three girls holding beach balloons and posing on vacation, or at home, the windblown carefree look, different from the polished Lena Horne, was redefining glamour and the experience of Black America. Like the comics of *Bungleton Green*, many of the covers portrayed life outside of the confines of the United States as unrestricted, not just happier but also freer.

However, there were still times when *Ebony* relied on a more direct rendering of materialism to fuel its covers. One example was a cover story featuring Willie Mays with his light-skinned wife, pink Cadillac, and poodle. On another, a law teacher in Hawaii holding law schoolbooks stood in front of a big car with palm trees.

*Ebony*’s depiction of Black success on its covers was also often about Black people who were achieving the material dream in the White world, not about the
traditional ways Black people found riches in segregated Black communities (for example as funeral directors etc). One example is a cover image of New York State Assemblywoman Bessie Buchanan, a smartly dressed woman is shown sitting at her desk filled with books and papers, smiling at the camera as she worked. Both her position and her styling made her glamorous. While working was not new to Black women, the types of work changed and professional, rather than domestic work, was seen as glamorous.

Several stories on professional glamour appeared in the magazine. In 1959, a cover image featured Black women who were the first hostesses (or flight attendants) for Trans World Airlines (Figure 35). Another that same year featured women working on Capitol Hill. At heart, these representations were not apolitical. They showed Black people’s access and freedom to enter spaces previously dominated by White people. Whether it was travel, access to better jobs, or access to the White power structure, these images proved that life had changed for Black people.

A December 1961 cover and headline featuring a female engineer, “Beauty in a Man’s World,” was a typical Ebony story focused on beauty first and then achievement. The engineer was pretty and holding a model rocket but remained “different” and unique because of her looks and her position. By contrast, world-renowned tennis player Althea Gibson seemed rather plain in her photograph, but it was her success as a tennis player that made her cover glamorous.
Even as the formal aesthetic was ending in the late fifties, Ebony still clearly had a traditional idea of glamour. In November 1957 (Figure 36) Diahann Carroll wore a raincoat with little makeup or jewelry, proving glamour could be conveyed without ball gowns or fancy jewelry. While her more casual display of glamour would fully be realized in the 1960s, it foreshadowed how Ebony’s Black glamour aesthetic was evolving, even as its commitment to portraying the material aspect of the dream remained.

Ebony’s rendering of glamour did not apply to all women equally. One prominent cover featured Mahalia Jackson in what appeared to be a choir robe, a decidedly unglamorous image despite her celebrity status (Figure 37). Jackson, one of the few darker-skinned characters Ebony featured, appeared matronly, not warm, almost stern. While this was understandable, given her position as a gospel singer, her praying hands and eyes towards the heavens, is anything but glamorous. Her image does not razzle and dazzle. She seems holy, somewhat untouchable. I cannot help but notice this trend with slightly larger and darker-skinned women during this period.

In 1960, a cover image of actress Claudia McNeil shown in costume as Mama from A Raisin in the Sun also was not given the glamour treatment. She was simply dressed and carried a prop from the film. Like Mahalia, she
looks dignified and respectable, but the image seemed like an evolution of the mammy stereotype. Though glamorous gorgeous pictures of McNeil appeared inside the magazine (Figure 38), once again Ebony failed to depict a larger darker-skinned Black woman with more African features as sexual, desirable, or glamorous. Not all Black women seem to have access to glamour in the eyes of Ebony, even when they have achieved success and represented the American dream. This was a contrast to the advertisements of Madam C. J. Walker (especially when she was alive) and also perhaps a revelation of the difference between male and female editorial leadership.

The Sixties: A More Serious Tone

In the early years, Ebony’s understanding of the American dream and success were about material riches, a point its founder, Johnson, repeatedly conceded to in his later years,

In the early days we followed the consciousness of the times by defining success narrowly in terms of material things. There was perhaps a need for that then. We needed to know then that some Blacks were living as well as some Whites. But as the magazine matured and as Blacks changed, we broadened the formula for success, defining it as the achievement of a positive goal or the attainment of whatever a person set out to do. Winning a civil rights battle was a success. Raising a family was a success. Sending children to college was a success. Earning an MBA or making an outstanding professional contribution was a success. This changed the weight of the magazine. Before the sixties we were perhaps 50 percent orange juice and 50 percent castor oil. For most of the sixties we were practically all castor oil. (Johnson, 1989, p. 288)

Ebony’s content on the covers between 1955 and 1968 was more often about social issues and justice than previous studies suggested, especially in the 1960s (Brown, 2010). In the 1960s, more portraiture and news photos appeared on the covers, leading to a “heavier” and weighted tone, less about glamour and more indicative of the civil rights struggles. The magazine remained dedicated to the American dream story and continued to use glamour to underscore that ideology, at times, mixing glamour and politics for its covers. In 1962, Ebony showed a photo of Marie-Thérèse Houphouët-Boigny (a dark-skinned woman), the first lady of the Ivory Coast, with U.S. First Lady Jaqueline Kennedy. Houphouët-Boigny, like Kennedy, exuded elegance and glamour familiar to Ebony readers (Figure 39). They were both desirable. The editors of Ebony dubbed them “glamorous first ladies.” This cover showed that even when the magazine shifted focus
and gave more attention to issues like activism and politics, *Ebony* had a limited view of glamour and success.

Colorism plagued the magazine and natural hair was absent through most of the 1960s. As previously noted, a 1962 feature highlighted the beauty of wigs using dark-skinned actress Cicely Tyson’s natural hairstyle as the “before” picture. With her natural hair, Tyson’s face was stern, and despite her red lips and pearls, she looked serious. In the “after” picture, the main cover image, Tyson’s face, had a big grin and she looked more glamorous with her new wig. She was approachable, smiling with lashes and a new look. In October of 1964, a dark-skinned woman was on the cover, draped in a beautiful flowing dress, makeup, and with a look that revealed she was courting the camera (Figure 40). Like many of the dark-skinned women previously displayed on the cover of the magazine, she is a larger woman. The positioning of her slightly open legs was distinct from the way the magazine often portrayed lighter-skinned women, perhaps showing a sexual availability that was usually more subtle on its covers. While the woman’s smile is enticing and her clothing beautiful, her position is less glamorous and she seductive in a way that suggests availability and promiscuity, rather than crossed legged upstanding position of her lighter-skinned counterpart that perhaps suggested less sexual availability.

That same year, in November of 1964, Mahalia Jackson was given another cover image. This time, editors made more of an attempt to make her glamorous, as she was shown wearing a red lower-cut dress with a pretty necklace. She was not treated as a seductive, desirable character completely (perhaps still due to her gospel background), but her newfound desirability is shown as emanating as a result of a man’s presence.

With the cover title “Love comes to Mahalia,” she can be read as an object of desire, a carefree sexual being (Figure 40), but it is the man the cover implies, which has made her desirable. However, more and more dark-skinned women began to appear on the covers, especially those from the world of music. In 1965, celebrities like singer Diana Ross of the Supremes were finally put on the magazine covers, combining sexuality and a carefreeness that ushered in a new era of glamour.
Still, for much of the decade, the somber civil rights tone spilled into *Ebony*’s coverage of glamour, showing how the moral aspect of the dream was gaining prominence. While *Ebony* tried to merge glamorous images with more social justice-oriented themes, as the intensity of the movement grew, it seemed the editors realized it would be disingenuous to have so many covers dedicated to glamour when Black America was in crisis. Editors increasingly began to produce more covers that reflected the experience of Black America. In November 1963, a simple wide shot of the March on Washington was used. Another cover featuring a lithograph of abolitionist Frederick Douglas told the story of the Emancipation Proclamation. By 1965, the glamorous world of the celebrity was not the sole terrain of the magazine cover. But his did not mean *Ebony* abandoned the concept of glamour. A February 1966 piece with the cover line, “Are negro girls getting prettier?” put so-called beauty at the center of the magazine, with a range of close-up images of glamorous, beautiful light-skinned women on the cover. Just three years earlier, Johnson said the skin color issue had changed:

> All those color distinctions began generations ago during slavery days when the slave owner kept certain slaves for his personal pleasure, and from these were born children of lighter skin who got more privileges than the field hands. . . . Negro people are no longer ashamed of their naturalness. . . . You will see many Negro girls who are no longer straightening their hair, and I think in general black skin has acquired a new meaning.” (Bird, 1963, p. 14)

That was not true. There was a backlash to the article, seen in the letters to the editor in April with one woman writing in saying that the cover made her “wince” and the
real title should have been “Are negro girls getting whiter? (Ebony, 1966). By the June issue of the magazine, a darker-skinned woman was finally on the cover. Yet, she did not seem to embrace the traditionally glamorous American dream women coveted and men fantasized about. She was shown on a rather drab cover that was anything but glamorous. In an aesthetic departure for the magazine, a close-up of a dark-skinned woman sporting a short afro hairstyle was shown, representing the “natural look.” The woman on the cover (Figure 42) with her beautiful African features, lacked a smile, had no makeup, no real hairstyling, and was draped in neutral colors. On top of that she was not famous. She gave a slight smirk to the camera, and while she was pretty, she was not positioned as a glamorous creature that would razzle and dazzle. One may even read a bit of sadness in her eyes and the cover could even be read as somber, not glamorous.

Once again, the magazine seemingly revealed how connected they were to a light-skinned notion of glamour, even during this emerging Black power era. Still, this new cover image signals a change in the magazine. Covers about Black youth in America, like “Negro Youth in America: Anxious, Angry, and Aware,” routinely appeared in graffitied typeface alongside other unglamorous stories, like that of Japan’s rejected mixed-race children. In the late 1960s, Ebony was still trying to redefine glamour from its height in the 1950s but still struggling to figure out how to do so.
A multi-photo cover of boxer Muhammad Ali in November 1967 embodied a new quiet, understated glamour (Figure 43) for Black men and was a radical choice on the part of the magazine since Ali had just refused to take part in the draft to Vietnam months earlier and was stripped of his title and sentenced to jail. He was shown on his honeymoon in what appeared to be a private boat, wearing a tie. Ali was both shown as a glamorous celebrity, and, more subtly, as a symbol of Black power and unconventionality. While Ali was shown with charisma and quiet charm, his new wife was simply stunning with a scarf covering her hair, jewels, and a long dress. Respectability in politics was still on display through matrimonial devotion and religion of the Black power activist and boxer, as well as a quiet, understated glamour rooted in celebrity, wealth, religion, leisure, and privilege that dazzles readers.

Figure 43. Ebony Magazine November 1967. Retrieved from https://www.pinterest.com/pin/111534528245402859/

By 1968, as Ebony continued to redefine Black glamour, it turned to Lena Horne, one of its old stars of glamour (July 1968). Appearing on the cover with a more casual shaggy hairstyle, light makeup, and hoop earrings, this image revealed how the concept
of Black glamour was evolving at Ebony while still committing to the American dream. Horne remains glamorous and desirable through her beauty and carefree attire. In this instance, the text seems to reinforce the image on the cover as it reveals she is 51. Unlike past pictures that show older Black women with wrinkled hardened skin, Horne was shown with a perfect complexion, white teeth, and a smile on her face that told us she had not lived a hard life on the fields. Rather she has endured, she has lived when so many Black people have died, and she remains beautiful, healthy, and happy; a consistent theme with Ebony’s version of the American dream, but also a subtle political comment on Black glamour. While more traditional renderings of Ebony’s Black glamour appeared, stories about Diahann Carroll and the best-dressed woman of the year, for example, remained, Ebony showed its increasing comfort with more direct engagements with Black glamour as Black militancy rose.

In 1968, it seemed Ebony figured out how to exist as a publication that embraced the Black Power era, celebrity, and glamour with a cover story about Coretta Scott King as it turned towards the moral. The story, written a few months after Martin’s assassination, with the cover line “In her husband’s footsteps,” was not about a sad grieving widow, but about a woman who was coming into her own. She was not shot in a studio as a model. Instead, a real-life photo of Coretta and Martin walking side-by-side at what seemed to be a march was used (Figure 44). Coretta was wearing a smart gray suit, black top, a chunky, double string pearl choker, and big earrings. As her hair fell next to her, she curled her lips like the Mona Lisa in a way that is part seductive, part smirk, and not quite a smile, walking with a lean as pink cat-shaped sunglasses framed her face. They seem to be in domestic bliss as Martin held her hand wearing a gold watch, with a
paperboy hat cocked to the side. Glamour emanated from the couple. Both their styling and their work for change made them seem glamorous. Laced with cover lines about social justice issues (e.g., “Black revolt in White churches,” “How the ghetto gets gypped”), the couple seemed enticing. Their glamour and their American dream story was about inspiring people to transform both themselves and their communities. In many ways, *Ebony* continued to merge the interesting stories they covered on civil rights with sexier cover images creating a sort of civil rights glamour, similar to the 1955 cover of Ralph Bunche, but with more weight. Instead of being filmed at some location away from the public, this cover put the Kings on the ground level, surrounded by ordinary people. They were warriors for social justice, and they were draped in glamour, particularly Coretta. She was everything *Ebony* had defined as glamorous: respectable, married, beautiful, domestic, justice-oriented, fashionable, and, of course, a celebrity. In 1968, she was the new embodiment of the American dream, or *Ebony*’s version of it, seducing us, and the world, to follow in her and Martin’s footsteps for moral change.
Conclusion

In 1995, bell hooks said, “the history of black liberation movements in the United States could be characterized as a struggle over images as much as it has also been a struggle for rights, for equal access” (p. 58). In some ways, *Ebony* recognized and embraced this struggle as it negotiated its covers over the years. As. Johnson (1988) noted in his autobiography, he wanted to do what other Black magazines were not doing at the time. He wanted to give Black America something to dream about, a magazine that would show positive images of Black people. Based on the cover images and text, *Ebony* 

did so throughout the civil rights era. While its cover images often reflected an American dream that did not look like the world most Black people lived in, *Ebony* consistently portrayed a glamorous world of possibility. *Ebony* showed Black success and achievement through a limited view on these covers, focusing on the Black extraordinary. These covers often depicted extraordinary lives and people, but also gave Black folks something they consistently needed to get through their lives: hope. Since the American dream is often about possibility and hope, *Ebony*, in many ways, was a living, cultural product of the dream.

Yet, the text of these magazine covers depicted the complexity and the tension in the American dream for Black Americans. It shows there is often more than one version of the dream. *Ebony* shows this most clearly through its negotiations with Black glamour and the way they made and remade its meanings. At times Black glamour can feel like it is solely about consumption, but as Cohen showed, consumption too, particularly in Black America can also be a tool for access. At times, Johnson’s use of glamour felt like a political tool to be used to uphold the moral component of the dream. While not discounting some of the more troubling qualities of *Ebony* during this time (e.g., its narrow definition of success as material- mink coats- or its focus on light-skinned women), it shows some of these depictions were more nuanced and complicated by a tension with the moral aspect of the dream.

Black glamour is about transformation. In a departure from the traditional notions of glamour, it is about entering spaces Black people could not access, fighting off stereotypes, changing one’s self, and also, as used by *Ebony*, changing how Black and White Americans thought of Black people. Glamour was used by *Ebony* as a tool to
convey the notion of the American dream. While the aesthetics of glamour changed over the years, at its core, it was about freedom and access, concepts *Ebony* engaged with throughout the civil rights era. While *Ebony*’s images of glamour often were more conservative than radical, and though its images and text did not change to embrace a radical ethos until the mid-1960s, the ideas of Black people transforming and entering a new reality were always the heart of Black glamour for *Ebony*.

The aesthetics of glamour changed during the civil rights era. Still, at its core, it has been focused on transformation, an idea *Ebony* has always been committed to regarding the Black community. This analysis shows the American dream has been interpreted in multiple ways in Black America, even when a tool like glamour was deployed. The covers of *Ebony* show for the magazine, the American dream was always complicated and nuanced. It was not about one idea over the other.

**A Personal Connection**

While not on the cover, I have personally seen how *Ebony* embraced this idea of glamour. In 1958, my grandfather, George Allen, won a new powder blue Cadillac in an *Ebony* magazine-sponsored contest. Along with my mother, Deborah, and grandmother, Evelyn, he was portrayed as a “respectable” man of his community. According to the article, my grandfather had built his own home, was gainfully employed as a foreman, was a member of the church, and had a nuclear family. While these events seemed to represent the experience of an ordinary upwardly mobile Black man, the images in the magazine showed a rather extraordinary man, and my grandfather and his family were portrayed with a little bit of glamour (Figure 45). Here, the tension of the American dream in Black America continued with the material aspect of the dream. Much of the
focus was on the photos through these glamorous shots, and the text also conveyed a family man who was respectable, hardworking, and, at least superficially, equal to Whites.

While that glamour may have been on a different level than the way Lena Horne was depicted, it still was glamour. My grandfather was dressed in his best silk smoking jacket, reading the newspaper with my grandmother faithfully serving him coffee while my mother, who was a young girl at the time, looked on. It could have been any middle-class family in the 1950s regardless of race. Yet, this picture obscured the true reality my family was facing in their lives. Left out of the article and pictures were the segregated community he was forced to live in, because no other part of town would let Black people live there; an anecdote about his time in the military, being forced to peel potatoes in an all-Black unit for White soldiers; the pain his back endured from injury at his job; his many duties in the kitchen at home (often cooking and serving my grandmother); and his escape from the South for a better life. Instead, in 1959, *Ebony* showed George Allen as the masculine patriarch of a happy, middle-class Black family eating Sunday breakfast with a new Cadillac on the way. The pictures assured us this was progress, the American dream, and in some ways, it was.

In 1959, the Black American dream was shown through the glamour photos of a Black family with some measure of financial security. They had been transformed, at least temporarily, by clothing, makeup, and the faux respectability that surrounded them, into what many people desired—success, beauty, new possessions, family—the American dream. And, what, the magazine seemed to ask, was more glamorous than that?
Figure 45. *Ebony Magazine* story about my grandfather George H. Allen, January 1959. Author’s personal collection.
Chapter 5
For I Am You: Life Magazine, Gordon Parks, and the Black American Dream

What I am, what you force me to be, is what you are. For I am you, staring back from a mirror of poverty and despair, of revolt and freedom. Look at me and know that to destroy me is to destroy yourself. There is something about both of us that goes deeper than blood or Black and White. It is our common search for a better life, a better world. I march now over the same ground you once marched. I fight for the same things you still fight for. My children’s needs are the same as your children’s. I too am America. America is me. It gave me the only life I know—so I must share in its survival. Look at me. Listen to me. Try to understand my struggle against your racism. There is yet a chance to live in peace beneath these restless skies.

—Parks, The Cycle of Despair, September 8, 1968

Twelve years before the Kerner Commission stated everyday Black life was not depicted enough in mainstream media (Sentman, 1983), Life magazine decided to explore segregation, an aspect of Black life very much in the news in the mid-fifties. Segregation, the systematic separation of groups or classes of people by the state, had recently been outlawed by the Supreme Court in the Brown v. the Board of Education (1954) decision. Media outlets, like many Americans, wrestled with how an integrated America would look and how segregation had impacted the country. Soon, the editors at Life magazine decided to weigh in.

It is not as if the popular weekly had ignored the issue. Between 1954 and 1955, 16 stories around civil rights had been published (DiBari, 2011), but the editors wanted to do more. On March 21, 1956, Life magazine editor Edward Thompson wrote a memo stating, “everyone has been teeing off on segregation” (personal memo, March 21, 1956), and it was time they did something “maybe a lot—more” on the issue. He noted while the magazine had produced some “thoughtful” and “newsy” stories on the matter, now was the time to cover the issue in-depth: “we should do it big and good” (E. K. Thompson, personal memo, March 21, 1956). A few weeks later, after convincing publisher Henry
Luce of his idea, plans began for a comprehensive series charting the history of segregation in America. This move was progressive for a magazine that catered to middle-class White America and did not always treat Black people as human in its pages. Luce made it clear in 1948 he believed Black Americans should be treated equally,\(^{21}\) and the magazine took a pro-integration stance (DiBari, 2011). Despite this positioning, and even occasional editorial forays into racial equality (Luce wrote a piece in 1944 called “Negro rights”), \(\textit{Life}\) was not known for positive coverage of Black life in America (Sentman, 1983, p. 506). However, the editors did not ignore the plight of the Black American and often tried to understand their conditions in a more nuanced way, even attempting to understand how Black Americans experienced the American dream. This chapter looks at how a mainstream magazine that was aimed at and helmed by White Americans tried to understand the American dream in Black America, through the lens of a Black photojournalist and the Black subject, and how these efforts took shape and changed over 20 years. In contrast to \(\textit{Ebony}\) magazine, a magazine created by and for Black Americans, this chapter examines how the American dream was explored by a Black staffer at a White magazine, who, from his early days, saw the American dream as a moral failing of a country that was supposed to ensure liberty and justice for all.

\(^{21}\) According to communications scholar, Michael DiBari, Luce said Black people should be treated equally on three grounds. First because it was morally correct and simply the “right thing to do” (“The political rights of Negroes must be unambiguously assured. Equality of opportunity for Negroes must be more fully realized” (DiBari, 2011, p. 38). Second, because it was of economic interest to the country, “We will all be better off if all Negroes are given equality of opportunity to work and serve to the fullest of their capacity in all walks of life. It makes hardboiled economic sense to say that by keeping millions of Negroes down, we lose at least $4,000,000,000 a year” (DiBari, 2011, p. 38). And third, because it was the fundamental to the principles of America (“America is the most wonderful country that ever was. But there’s a stain on the American flag—the stain of discrimination. We’ve got to get that stain out of the flag and keep it out” (DiBari, 2011, p. 39).
I explore the multiple ways *Life* magazine engaged with the American dream in Black America through three different narratives: (a) a series of images on Black progress in the segregated South taken by *Life*’s sole Black staff photographer, Gordon Parks, but written by a White writer in 1956; (b) the letters from a Black family about the consequences that resulted from that story and her subsequent inability to experience the dream; and (c) a piece about an impoverished Black family in Harlem written and photographed by Parks and published in 1968, after he rose to prominence at the magazine.

I seek to understand how the Black American dream was dealt with at a mainstream White publication with content largely produced by Black Americans, and how Black cultural producers and subjects responded to and viewed *Life*’s representations of the American dream in different eras. Through a close read of the text published in *Life*, archival materials from Time-Life archives at the New York Historical Society, materials at The Gordon Parks foundation, Parks’s memoirs, and letters and memos to *Life* by one Black family, a narrative about the promise and possibility of life for Black America emerged. These narratives each offer a distinct take on the American dream for Black Americans and once again reveal the complexity of the dream in Black America in the pages of one of the most popular magazines in the 20th century.

**The Segregation Series**

The limits of *Life*’s commitment to the Black experience in America were clear from the conception of the segregation series in 1956. In announcing *Life*’s plan, Thompson (1956) told his team the series on segregation would give a basic rundown of the issue, without coverage of picket lines and boycotts, and would be “treated in a sober
and non-inflammatory manner” that would carry favor with their White and Black readers. In response to a query as to whether the series would be run as a special issue, he flatly said “no,” implying the matter of segregation was not that important. “I rejected that because it seemed to blow this admittedly big problem a little out of proportion. We intend to adopt a very calm tone and the drama of a special issue kind of undercuts that” (E. K. Thompson, personal letter, June 13, 1956). This response seemed to minimize a big problem. Thompson listed a few story ideas the magazine planned to include in the series, such as pieces on the origins of Jim Crow, the way of life White men were trying to protect, the moral problem of segregation (potentially written by Reverend Billy Graham), “subtler forms” of segregation in the North that would make their southern readers happy, and one on the Jim Crow in the South which would displease their southern readers (E. K. Thompson, personal letter, June 13, 1956). Life’s sole Black staffer and photographer, Gordon Parks, was assigned to cover the segregation story in the south. A few weeks later, Thompson alerted editors there may have been a problem with Parks’s story and assigned another photographer to start working on an alternative essay, in the event that the segregation story did not work out. He did not mention why the piece was not working, but Parks’s recollection of the shoot confirmed Thompson’s earlier assertion southern White readers would be displeased with any narrative on Jim Crow.

Gordon Parks

Gordon Parks was a photographer who became one of Life’s most well-known and prolific artists. Born in Fort Scott, Kansas, in 1912, he taught himself photography after being captivated by images of migrant workers in the magazine. He was hired to
take pictures for a clothing store in Minnesota where Marva Louis, the wife of boxer Joe Louis, saw his images and encouraged him to pursue photography more rigorously. Following her advice, Parks and his family moved to Chicago, where he began a business taking pictures of Black elite women. His work in Chicago led to a prestigious Julius Rosenwald fellowship in 1942. Writer Alain Locke, one of his recommenders, noted on his application Parks was “promising” as the field was relatively new to Black people (Lewis, Berger, & Willis, 2018, p. 15). Soon, he started working with the photography unit at the Farm Security Administration (FSA).

Parks created one of his most famous works, *American Gothic*, while at the FSA under photographer Roy Stryker (The Gordon Parks Foundation, n. d.-a) (Figure 46).

*American Gothic* depicted a Black cleaning woman, Ella Watson, from Washington, DC, in front of an American flag with a mop in one hand and a broom in the other. It was styled after the famous Grant Wood painting of a farmer and his daughter in front of a gothic style house, a painting said to be a satire of life in rural America. Parks’s version was also a satire, as he too, attempted to tell a story about America. His story, however, was a commentary about the deferred dreams and hopes for Black America. It was a powerful image and one that exposed the irony of America, and perhaps the American dream, that seemed so unavailable to Black women despite the rhetoric of opportunity.
and freedom for all. It also showed his belief there was a deeply moral component to the promise of America the government had not lived up to. Parks would remain intrigued by these ideas for the rest of his career, but also would enter the world of glamour photography, taking pictures of movie stars and elites for outlets like *Vogue* and *Ebony*, and writing camera manuals.

In 1948, *Life* magazine did not have any Black photographers on staff. When Parks, who had freelanced for the publication, came to them with a story idea about a Harlem gang leader and executed the essay perfectly, they hired him (Doss 2001). He was not necessarily hired to cover “Black” issues and almost immediately was assigned to the Paris bureau. There he took photos of everything, including haute-couture fashion, actors Ingrid Bergman and Robert Rossellini, then involved in a torrid affair, and the funeral of French general Marshal Pétain. Parks did not mind engaging in stories around race, but he was open to covering other topics, seeing himself largely as a documentary photographer who was emotionally detached, objective and just wanted to report accurately the way we live—our social systems, our moods, what we think is ugly, what beautiful. The photographer's job isn't to change these things he just shows them up as they are, and the people take it from there. (As cited in Doss, 2001, p. 227)

Still, when *Life* magazine needed pictures about race or the Black experience, he was often called: “If I could bring special significance to a story because I was Black, it was given to me” (as cited in Doss, 2002, p. 225). He often seemed to take a subjective and intimate approach to filming Black people, giving them a humanity that other photographers often did not, by showing them as complex beings with ordinary lives, stumbles, dreams, and failures. His photography rooted in social commentary and justice was a highlight of his long, multi-faceted career. "I saw that the camera could be a
weapon against poverty, against racism, against all sorts of social wrongs” (as cited in Grundberg, 2006, p. c16).

In the spring of 1950, early in his tenure at Life, Parks was assigned to cover a story about segregation in his hometown of Fort Scott, Kansas (Haas & Parks, 2015). He tracked down members of his high school class and filmed them both in segregated spaces and in their living rooms at home, hanging out with family members or with their partners, happily living their lives to the best of their ability. It was a departure from the nascent coverage of civil rights where protests and pain often dominated media coverage and distinct from Ebony’s “first and only” stories of success and fame. Instead of celebrating anomalies, Parks seemed intent on telling the story of ordinary Black people in respectable and realistic ways that told of their dreams and nightmares.

The series was never published by Life and no concrete justification was ever given. Curator Maurice Berger theorized the series never ran because of the “stately and dignified images perhaps thwarting the expectations of his editors” (Berger, 2018, p. 277). The story was Parks’s first look at segregation as a photographer for Life and also his first time serving as a reporter. He wrote a 7-page article to accompany the series, edited and laid out by the magazine. Parks was transferred to the Paris bureau immediately after submitting the story. There his thoughts on America as an outsider crystallized and his talent for storytelling grew. When he returned to America 2 years later, as both a photojournalist and sometimes writer at Life, he produced some of his most acclaimed work, which told the story of ordinary Black people looking for their American dream in the world.
Life Magazine

Life magazine was not known as a focal point of Black popular culture. Life’s nearly 20 million readers were mostly White and middle class (Kozol, 2001) and the magazine often depicted Blackness in troubling ways (Doss, 2001). In 1937, an article on Black musician Lead Belly, who was often entangled with the law, ran with the subtitle, “Bad Nigger Makes Good Minstrel,” along with a picture of him barefoot, wearing overalls, and holding a guitar (“Lead Belly,” 1937, p. 39). That same year, another feature reinforced stereotypical behaviors of Black people as it depicted a Black woman eating watermelon as she nursed her child (Figure 47).

Figure 47. Image of woman eating watermelon while feeding her child. From “Fifty Million Watermelons,” August 9, 1937, Life Magazine, p. 52.

The accompanying text stated

Nothing makes a Negro’s mouth water like a luscious fresh-pickled melon. Any colored ‘mammy’ can hold a huge slice in one hand while holding her offspring in
the other… what melon the Negroes do not consume will find favor with the pigs. (“Watermelons,” 1937, p. 51)

In 1938, *Life* ran a 14-page spread about the Black “problem” in this country. Titled “Negroes, The U.S. Also Has a Minority Problem” (“Negroes,” 1938, p. 48), the piece purported to expose White Americans to the lives of Black Americans by explicitly framing Blacks as inferior and their status as a problem. “Every White man knows that there is a Negro problem. But few know the Negro,” the piece read, “The Negro may be free but in no way—economically, politically, socially—is he the White man’s equal” (“Negroes,” 1938, p. 48). The images accompanying the piece further highlighted stereotypes of Black people speaking improper English and gambling, with one caption beneath a photo of Black farmers that stated, “Tote dat barge, Lift dat bale” and another of Black crapshooters, with the caption, “baby needs new shoes” (“Negroes,” 1938, p. 48). To the chagrin of some its White readers for daring to offer positive images of Black people, *Life* also reported on a Black debutante ball in the late 1930s. The magazine, despite its pro-integration stance, was generally not known for positive coverage of Black life in America (Sentman, 1983, p. 506). The coverage seemed to get slightly better in the later years, but its depiction of the largest minority population at the time was woefully inadequate.

For its nearly 36-year history as a weekly magazine, only 23 *Life* covers featured a Black person (Stange, 2017, p. 19), and its editorial staff included only a few Black men and women. Media scholar Mary Alice Sentman’s (1983) study of the magazine between 1937 and 1972 found that coverage of Black Americans seemed to be influenced by either “news incidents or high levels of personal achievement” (p. 508). Coverage peaked in 1972, but still amounted to less than three percent of the magazine’s content.
Yet even within narratives focused mainly on entertainers, politicians, athletes, or protesters, Sentman asserted, *Life* treated Black people as belonging to a separate community, without stories about their everyday lives. In the late 1940s, Parks wanted to work among *Life’s* nearly 40 staff photographers because of their dedication to the images, and sometimes text. “Life was the magazine as far as photographers were concerned. . . . It was the goal of thousands to work there. Life had an edge on every other magazine—it was slicker—better known throughout the world” (as cited in Doss, 2001, p. 229). Indeed, *Life* was and is considered a fundamental part of 20th century American culture, though Erika Doss called the magazine “a monolithic medium of dominant White consensus” (2001, p. 227). While *Life* never endorsed an anti-racist agenda, it often depicted Black people as victims rather than full humans, reifying what Doss (2001) called, “its liberal vision of an integrated, middle-class American democracy” (p. 238). Editors engaged with issues around race and occasionally hired Black writers and photographers. Parks’s hiring did not change the magazine, and ultimately, he had mixed feelings about his employment there. In 1995, Parks said “I couldn’t say I loved it, but I had a tremendous respect for the magazine. . . . It was a great institution” (as cited in Doss, 2001, p. 238). Nevertheless, Parks’s work exposed readers to a different side of Black life and gave his subjects a voice and story that was often hidden from the public.

Some people wondered why Parks did not try to pursue more work at *Ebony*, which many said was an emulation of *Life*. While both magazines were concerned with the American dream, Parks’s work and *Ebony’s* often highlighted different approaches to the dream even in Black America. Despite this fact, Parks freelanced for *Ebony,*
photographing the famous Black and White “doll test” study of psychologists Kenneth
and Mamie Clark. Stories with models, celebrities, and success were often the focus of
his work at *Ebony*, since that was the model of achievement they focused on. One
element of this is Parks’s 1946 photo shoot in with upwardly mobile Black Americans in
Sugar Hill, Harlem’s elite neighborhood where musician Duke Ellington and writer
Langston Hughes lived (Doss, 2001). Perhaps it became clear to Parks that *Ebony’s*
engagement of the American dream in Black life, through stories of material success, was
not the way he wanted to engage with the American dream. It seems as though Parks was
more interested in the complexity of the American dream for Black people, one that was
filled with both success *and* failure. As Doss (2001) noted, “Parks’s interest in Black
individuality was predicated less on success than on effort, on conviction and fervor
rather than ability” (p. 233). Parks’s personal rags to riches story never stopped him from
questioning the country he loved. While living in France for two years while on
assignment for *Life*, Parks wrote of how much he believed in America,

> I could never bring myself to say I hated America. I acknowledged her as a great
country, but without trembling at her greatness. I damned her at times, but without
allowing her to consume me with bitterness. The ironic thing about all this is that
no country in the world offers a Black the opportunities America does. The sad
thing is that America makes it so difficult for Blacks to take advantage of those
opportunities. (As cited in Doss, 2001, p. 234)

It is that sense of possibility, promise, and of deferred dreams that often peppered Parks’s
work in *Life*, often, in a way that the glamour aesthetic of *Ebony* did not. Parks’s work
speaks, not just to the potential and the promise and possibility of America, but to the
reality of it. That reality often meant exploring the tensions and the many contradictions
in the American dream. This stood in contrast to *Ebony’s* goal of conveying that Blacks
had already arrived and were achieving the dream. But the meaning of the promise of the
dream for everyday Black people was missing from their pages. It was this very idea that Parks seemed most interested in exploring:

I have had faith in America for as long as I can remember. But I have also been angry—even bitter. It is now time for America to justify this belief I have in her, to show me I have not believed in vain. I want my children and their children to keep this faith flowing through their veins. But in all honesty I cannot ask of them love for a country incapable of returning their love. (Parks, 1963, p. 79)

It is this obsession with the dream and his faith that came through in his *Life* magazine work.

**The Restraints Open and Hidden: The Text**

Part 4 of *Life*’s five-part series on segregation opened with a picture of Mr. Albert and Mrs. Josie Thornton, the elder members of a large family in rural Alabama (Figure 48). In the picture, they are sitting on a velvet couch, upright and dignified, staring directly at the camera in their Sunday dress. In the background, there is a photograph of them that was made for them shortly after their wedding day in 1906. On the left of the image began the story titled “The Restraints: Open and Hidden.” The story was credited to Robert Wallace, a White writer at the magazine, though it seems likely Sam Yette, a Black freelancer, gathered all the field notes (Parks, 2007) and assisted or did a fair amount of the reporting (or all of it). Yette was not given credit for the story. Parks was listed as the photographer.

Wallace’s story immediately presented the Black community as a problem, “At the center of the storm over segregation, stand the 10 million Negroes of the South” (Wallace, 1956, p. 99). Simultaneously reporting the improving and worsening conditions of Black America, Wallace reported progress had been made and Blacks were headed in an upward trajectory. The tone of the story was formal and Wallace’s use of the third
person made clear he was not Black and that Black people were merely the object of inquiry. Almost immediately, he classified the story as a “study” of a Black family, the Thortons. The focus of this piece was an individual story of race in America, not of the Black community, yet Wallace acknowledged the systemic problem of segregation, calling it “the restraints” which often made life hard for Black people in the South. He used the word restraint for the majority of the piece, seemingly trying to sanitize the issue instead of calling it what it was, the legalized separation of two groups.

Wallace did not obfuscate what was at hand, noting that while White people were also poor, they could move as they pleased, whereas “Negroes may move only to another segregated neighborhood” (Wallace, 1956, p. 99). Wallace often took a patronizing and paternalistic tone when writing about the family. He noted while the Thortons were “thoughtful, and in private articulate, they do not make many direct statements about segregation. This is because they face yet another restraint—the constant fear of publicly speaking their minds” (Wallace, 1956, p. 99). Wallace ignored the statement the Thortons made by allowing themselves to be filmed and interviewed for a national publication. Instead, he added to the narrative of Black people being afraid of Whites and passive against mistreatment. Nowhere do we read or see images of protest or Black people fighting the injustice of segregation.

Rather, Wallace persistently characterized Blacks as afraid and lacking the power to create change. His depiction seems to run counter to Parks’s photography. The initial photograph of the Thornton family showed two dignified people, with Mrs. Thornton in a floral printed dress with hands crossed and Mr. Thorton, wearing dark pants, a crisp White shirt, and brown suspenders, seated straight up (Figure 48). Both stare into the
camera, though Mrs. Thorton had a slightly bewildered look on her face. They are direct, they do not look oppressed or downtrodden, but instead serious and straightforward, much like they did in the picture above the couch. The use of the photograph hanging above showed the importance of family legacy and the power of generation, a fact reflected in the many branches of family members shown in this story. This family, Parks showed through this one particular photo, had endured, had survived despite the restraints.

Figure 48. Image of Mr. and Mrs. Albert Thornton, by Gordon Parks (photographer), from “Restraints Open and Hidden,” by Robert Wallace, September 24, 1956, Life Magazine, p.98.
On the next page, there was a smaller picture of the entire family in front of the house, an image of Albert, the patriarch, with the caption that he raised cattle to supplement social security funds (perhaps subtly highlighting Blacks’ reliance on the government), and a picture of Mrs. Thorton, who looked darker here. She was holding a baby who was resting on her bosom and had a scowl on her face. Though she was wearing the same dress, she looked more worn down holding the baby. Her scowl suggests she did not trust her surroundings, yet she was described as a “passive, illiterate, and devout” woman who hoped the new laws would end segregation (Wallace, 1956, p. 99). Her hope contradicts the idea of her passivity or the notion Black people fear conversations about segregation. The women in this story are often shown as the most vocal and brave on the matter and offer another example of where the text and images contradict each other.

Another picture showed Albert Thorton being shaved by an adopted son as two of his granddaughters played. In the background was a picture of Jesus hanging from the cross and a skirt hanging from the door, as two of his two granddaughters played. It is an image of everyday life, the Black ordinary, so often missing from stories about segregation. There is a touch of humor as the home barbershop is shown as a place of play for his two granddaughters who have torn the hair from the “Negro doll” to “see how it would look” (Wallace, 1956, p. 99). The image serves as a reminder that children are innocent and curious, a nice touch in a media landscape that often depicted, and continues to depict, Black children as adults (Bump, 2014). Like Ebony, these images show Black people indulging in things like leisure and pleasurable activities. While not depicted with the highly stylized glamour of the Black periodical, Parks’s photos are
more understated in their connotation of leisure, but the inclusion of these activities is important to note.

On the following page, Parks’s photos continue to show Black people doing ordinary things: a grandfather taking his grandchildren for a walk, a Sunday service at a Baptist church, and children playing in the rain. There is also a photo of Black women in their Sunday best, drinking from a segregated fountain in front of a store. Yet the text continues to highlight the unsavoriness of Black life. In a photograph titled, “Out for a Stroll,” Mr. Thorton is seen walking with more of his grandchildren as he carries another down a lush green country road. The picture looks peaceful, almost idyllic in the country landscape, but its caption emphasizes poverty: “The handsome, permanent greenery makes the neighborhood look less like the slum it actually is” (Wallace, 1956, p. 100). Another caption, in front of a picture where children play in front of a tree, spoke about erosion in the neighborhood where houses have started to lean over, as can be seen in the background. The text described the progress the elderly man had seen but makes clear progress has been fleeting. Wallace (1956) reported that Thorton, the son of a slave, had put four out of his 10 children through college, all of whom are now teachers. The article stated Thorton’s other achievements and satisfactions had been “small,” noting the state of the Negro was “little better than when he was a child himself,” since there were no Jim Crow laws when he was growing up. Wallace’s words seem to attempt to define what the measure of success and achievement should be for this man, despite the fact that raising a family seemed to be Mr. Thorton’s priority. Parks’s pictures suggest Thorton has achieved the American dream by seeing his family attain education and advance in ways he could not, by having a marriage, and by being surrounded by relatives. Wallace, who
apparently measure success as wealth and proximity to Whiteness, does not seem to believe Thornton has achieved any aspect of the dream.

**From the Thortons to the Tanners**

The story proceeds to another branch of the family, that of granddaughter Virgie Lee Tanner who seemed to be closer to achieving the dream in Wallace’s mind. Once again, the pictures showed a woman who was actively trying to change, although aware of her place in the world and its restraints. In the first photo, Virgie Lee was ironing clothes and the picture centered on a dilapidated room. Feeling the need to explain their housing condition, the caption, working in tandem with the image, explained that the family had not repaired this home, as they were spending their money trying to build a new house, feeling the need to explain their housing condition. The ideals of ownership and creating something from scratch, key tenets of the American dream, were clear; this family was trying to make good on the material aspect of the dream.

While seeming sympathetic to Virgie Lee Tanner’s plight and the “restraints” in her life near Mobile, Alabama, Wallace did not fully comprehend what was happening or how their dream could be denied aside from the practice of Jim Crow. For example, he wrote that employment discrimination did not hurt her family as evidenced by her husband having a government job as a mechanic at the Brooklyn air force base in Mobile (Wallace, 1956, p. 106). The piece made no mention of the 1952 incident of White aircraft workers who were acquitted after beating a Black aircraft worker who drank at a “Whites only” water fountain after a presidential order integrated the military (“White men,” 1952, p. 10). Instead Wallace seemed more outraged by legalized Black exclusion from White society and focused his writing on how simple tasks like shopping, going to
the park, or having a drink at the grocery store with a Coca-Cola sign were segregated in the South. Wallace seems to see these families solely as victims of this one horrible practice, rather than as a product of an entire nation that has failed them, with their dreams often discarded altogether. Parks’s photographs continuously showed these families wanted more and were working hard to make sure they could progress in their lives.


Figure 49 shows a young Black girl pushing on the window of a clothing store filled with White mannequins, a few sized like her. She pushes against the window, her bony back exposed, as if she knew that she, or anyone who looked like her, did not belong in that display case, and perhaps, she yearned for what they had. This could be read as a desire for material possessions, but I think it was more. This image highlighted the wall that existed between the two worlds, even between young children who could
not quite push their way into White life. The little girl was on the outside and was unable to get into a world that looked like hers with even the clothes in the window looking like her own. This showed how the lives of the two groups really were, except for the difference of skin color. Similarly, there was a picture of six Black children looking at an all-White playground from behind a fence (Figure 50). The text that accompanied this image makes the White playground seem like an inaccessible haven, with Wallace (1956) noting the children believed the White playground was a “special wonderful place from which they are being deliberately excluded” (p. 107). While the characterization of the White-only park may be true, the text leads the reader to believe Whiteness is desirable, something we see repeatedly. Even in showing the family’s desire for progress, Wallace denigrated the segregated area as if Black inherently meant bad.
A larger book containing additional images of Parks’s shoot on segregation, published by the Gordon Parks Foundation, expands on the images selected for the *Life* series (Steidl, 2014). It showed this Black family living in a segregated world, at colored water fountains, going to ice cream parlors and movie theaters that that said “Colored only.” But, life seemed ordinary and the family was not shown in despair. They were shown as living complete, happy lives, rather than as victims of oppression that this series, particularly in the text often implied.

**An Image of Success: E. J. Thorton**

The series in *Life* did not end with the Tanners but continued to build with the Thorton family, portraying increasingly successful people as their story went on. The story of E. J. Thorton, a Black college professor, and Albert’s offspring, was reserved for the final two pages of the piece (Figure 51) Thorton encompassed the most conventional version of material success and Wallace too seemed to define him as achieving the dream. Interestingly, *Life* devoted only 2 pages to E. J. and less was written about his life. Wallace seemed to have the most sympathy for E. J., who was portrayed in formal attire, with his children and wife, on campus teaching, and subsequently at a segregated bus station in Nashville. Titled “A Professor’s Injured Pride,” the matter of segregation was shown to be a matter of “feeling” and inconvenience rather than pure danger or economic obstacles, despite Parks’s picture of the professor and Parks’s experience filming the series (Wallace, 1956, p. 108). Even as the text detailed how E. J. had gone far (and the furthest away from the deep South) to get a Master’s degree from the University of Massachusetts and served as head of a department at the all-Black Tennessee State, his struggle seemed to be minimized by Wallace due to his class privilege, despite the fact
that Parks’s photos show another story. The photographs showed a man who was pushing back against the limitations he has had to endure due to Jim Crow legislation and was trying to thrive despite it, although pushing back against frustrating limitations he had to endure as a result of Jim Crow legislation. While it looked different from his father’s dream, the photographs also show that he had achieved some version of the dream. Because E. J. was not living in abject poverty, the writer and editors did not seem to really understand his plight, stating the “economic restraints upon Mr. Thorton are negligible” (Wallace, 1956, p. 108).

Figure 51. Images from article about Professor Thorton by Gordon Parks (photographer) from “A Professor’s Injured Pride Article Name,” by Robert Wallace, September 24, 1956, Life Magazine, p.109.
Wallace (1956) seemed to believe Professor Thorton had achieved the dream but downplayed any further aspirations he had for himself and his family. For example, in a discussion regarding the professor’s salary, Wallace seemed to believe Thorton’s salary was rather good. However, he made no comparison of the professor’s salary to the salaries of his White counterparts. Instead, Wallace noted that the professor made a salary where he could live on “quite comfortably.” Wallace seemed to believe that Thorton did not have much to complain about. Wallace, or the picture editor, wrote that his comfortable lifestyle was disrupted by his “determination to put his own three children through college.” Thorton’s belief in education and thrift was denigrated here and his dreams of further upward mobility were not taken seriously. Since Thorton’s economic status was not compared to that of his White counterparts, the systemic inequality that he and the Black middle class faced was often obscured (Frazier, 1957). One study found Professor Thorton’s salary was $6,600 a year, compared to the average salary of $16,000 a year that college professors were making nationally in the 1955-1956 school year (“Salaries and Benefits,” n. d.). What Wallace really implied when he wrote about the professor’s salary was that it was good for a Black man, an important distinction.

The magazine text focused on E. J.’s lack of access to the White world, claiming the professor was unable to network with “intellectual equals,” despite showing Parks’ photographs of Thorton on campus with other Black faculty members. This framework belittled any sort of Black achievement or accomplishment, as it stated E. J.’s equals were White professionals from other Nashville colleges. This showed different understandings of the dream for Wallace and Parks. Parks seemed to be open to the idea that Professor Thorton could achieve the dream among his peers and none of Thorton’s
comments seem to disagree with that sentiment. However, Wallace seemed to believe access to the White world was a sign of success. In the passage below the American dream seemed to be cast in a moral light because Wallace believed the economic impediments had been overcome. Yet, it is clear his economic inequality is also a moral component of the dream.

Economic restraints upon Mr. Thorton are negligible, but social restraints remain strong. He cannot mingle publicly with his intellectual equals, White professors from other Nashville colleges, and he must follow the local segregation customs. Thus, while some restraints are removed because he is an above-average citizen, remaining restraints are more wounding to him, for the same reason. (Wallace, 1956, p.108)

As with his father, Life attempted to make Professor Thorton a passive character, stating that he accepted segregation “passively” with “hurt pride.” Wallace wrote that the professor dodged the problem (not a passive action) of segregated bus rides, by sometimes taking more expensive plane trips. Parks’s picture of Professor Thorton showed a man who remained strong despite his conditions, not a man with hurt pride, a distinction from the text. The images of Professor Thorton showed someone looking up, with his head held high, standing with pride, ease, and comfort, surrounded by his family. Thorton was shown fully and not as an object of sympathy. He was not hidden by shadows or seen in darkness, but in the light with his wife and kids and his students. He was shown as a strong Black man, providing for his family, working with his wife, and kids. All his children were depicted in “respectable” ways, with one reading while others played instruments, in what looks to be an upper-income or middle-class home with a piano. No one was presented doing domestic work. Professor Thorton’s positioning by Parks in these elite spaces seemed intentional and showed how showed the Professor’s life of leisure contrasted with that of his other relatives.
In Parks’s eyes, Professor Thorton seemed to represent the American dream, or as much of the dream accessible to Black people in 1956. The text, however, presented him as a weaker character than the pictures revealed. E. J. and his family were visually portrayed differently from others in this series. Thorton and his family members were upright, tall, surrounded by members of the community, and often engaged in scholarly activities, a sign of true progress for the family.

**The Causey-Kirksey Family**

While the pictures of E. J. Thorton were a contrast to the stereotypical images of most Black people often displayed in the media, it was the story of one family and the accompanying text that caused the most controversy. The story of Allie Lee Causey (Kirksey) and her family in Silas, Alabama, located in the middle of the magazine spread, proved how precarious the dream was for Black families, and highlighted the ways in which media, even when produced in part by Black people, could easily hide the true reality of the Black experience.

The Causeys were shown, not as incredibly poor nor as wealthy, but as upwardly mobile—in a modest way. The pictures showed the Causeys as workers with no one except the children engaged in leisure activities. Even when the boys were shown fishing in a beautiful quiet creek, they were not depicted as achieving the dream; the caption stated the two kids did not know how to read, despite having a stepmother for a teacher, did not play baseball, and had not heard of the Dodgers or Yankees. It was a subtle implication that these skills and knowledge should be the norm for young boys.

Most pictures are of the Causey family conducting domestic work and looking downward, with one picture of a child looking at a gun while the others read. No picture
showed members of the Causey family looking directly at the camera. While the article stated they Causey’s would be considered high income earners for the area, Wallace’s words revealed his skepticism at their so-called progress and his text seemed to show some disdain for their condition. Wallace wrote that Mrs. Causey (Kirksey) was a divorcee and mentioned the house was unpainted, “disintegrating” with a pigpen close by (Wallace, 1956, p. 103). Yet after documenting this, the text stated the family was not in dire financial straits, and that Allie Lee’s second husband, Willie, a farmer and a woodcutter, with the assistance of his sons, made a living from the 16 acres of cropland and 24 acres of timber he owned. The piece reported the family actually was fairly well-off for resident of Silas since Allie Lee brought home $2,400 a year as a schoolteacher. The family was so successful, Willie bought a Cadillac the previous year as a symbol of their success and “equality,” which Wallace seemed to deliberately leave in quotes (Wallace, 1956, p. 103). Though Wallace belittled the purchase, this statement shows how the material and the moral side of the dream could intersect in the lives of African-Americans with the material (the Cadillac) sometimes representing the moral component of the dream as well. The photographs in *Life*, however, did not show any substantial representations of material success from the Causeys and it is unclear if Parks took photographs that were more “uplifting.” There were no pictures of Willie with his car or of Allie with students; instead, the pictures showed Willie cutting wood with his sons and Allie’s empty impoverished one-room classroom (Figure 52).
though the reader learns Willie was good at his business, the story centered on attributes and qualities that Wallace associated with Whiteness and White people.

According to Wallace (1956), Willie could “compete successfully with White men in the same line of work” suggesting his ability to work as well as a White person is the

**Figure 52.** Images and article about the Causeys by Gordon Parks (photographer) from “The Restraints: Open and Hidden,” by Robert Wallace, September 24, 1956, *Life Magazine*, p.103.

Though the reader learns Willie was good at his business, the story centered on attributes and qualities that Wallace associated with Whiteness and White people.
moniker of success (p. 103). The reader also learned Willie owned his equipment, including power tools and a truck, even though the text said he could not handle the administrative tasks of business and only had a year of schooling. A photo of Allie Lee helping Willie with paperwork for his business was shown. Both were portrayed as hard workers. Parks’s images of Willie chopping wood with his sons are particularly powerful as the lean and strong Willie sawed wood (Wallace, 1956). The image of three Black men in positions of strength, as people who have conquered the land, was in sharp contrast to the typical images depicting Black people as lazy and downtrodden. Here however, the strength the Causey’s exhibited was not only created with Parks’s images, but also through the words they used with reporter Sam Yette (Yette seemed to be the main source of reporting for the piece and there is no indication that Wallace ever met or even talked to the Causeys, though Yette was not credited in the publication). The Causeys showed resolve by speaking about segregation, stating they believed it would end soon:

Integration is the only way through which Negroes will receive justice. We cannot get it as a separate people. If we can get justice on our jobs and equal pay, then we’ll be able to afford better homes and a good education. (As cited in Wallace, 1956, p. 103)

No one thought much of Allie Lee’s quote or Parks’s images after the story’s publication in September of 1956. By October, when Willie started to lose business, as detailed later in this chapter, it became clear how quickly life could change for an upwardly mobile family who dared to tell a reporter her dream of America.

Wallace (1956) often took a paternalistic tone in his writing for the segregation series. This stood in contrast to Parks’s mainly dignified images Black families trying to make ends meet. It therefore became clear that the reality of the Black family was different from what was portrayed in the magazine, especially the Wallace’s text which
prioritized the material aspect of the dream while empathizing with their inability to enjoy true freedom a moral component of the dream as well. Over the next few months and years, Life’s editors would learn would that the rhetoric of the Causeys alleged “progress” did not match the reality. In some ways, the story and its aftermath only exposed the tension of the dream for Black Americans and proved the American dream for this group was about more than just economics, it was about a true freedom and equality for Black people.

**Shooting “Restrains Hidden and Open”**

Parks (1979) wrote of the many encounters he faced when trying to shoot the segregation series in his memoir, *To Smile in Autumn*. One of his most frustrating moments was not with southern racists in Shady Grove, but with Freddie (an alias), the southern bureau chief for *Life*. Freddie, who was White, was supposed to help Parks and Yette navigate the contentious southern terrain and help facilitate relationships with sources. Instead, he often put their lives in jeopardy. On one occasion, he gave the duo the name of a person who was supposed to be their “protective source” in Birmingham. Yette had a strange feeling about the name and suggested they run the source’s name by the local branch of the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP). Parks and Yette soon learned the contact was the head of a local White Citizens Council, a far right, supremacist organization who most likely would not have responded positively to talking about segregation with a Black reporter and photographer. Parks and Yette were told to leave town immediately by the NAACP, and though Freddie apologized for the mistake, Parks never trusted him again (Parks, 1979, p. 106).
Another problem arose after a shoot at the segregated Birmingham train station. According to Parks, Yette did a “very uppity thing” and drank out of a “Whites only” water fountain, setting off an already suspicious group of White men (Parks, 1979, p. 107). Later that night, Yette was attacked on the train. Parks believed the people who saw Yette drink from the water fountain were responsible and that they wanted to confiscate his film. The film remained unharmed as it was secured with Parks in another cabin (Parks, 1979).

Both Parks and Yette became increasingly worried about Freddie’s sabotage. When assigned to take one last shot of Professor Thornton in front of a “for coloreds only” sign at a bus depot, they nervously decided to change the time of their meeting from 2pm, the time Freddie had suggested, to 10am. They got their shot without any problems and took an early flight back to New York. In their place, Parks sent a Black university student to the station at 2pm who had volunteered for the set up. The student was immediately grabbed and held until he proved he was not a Life photographer. The incident confirmed Freddie’s betrayal. Afterwards, Parks realized how dangerous the situation had been.

The experience had been even more horrifying than I realized; it was like awakening from a nightmare. Indeed it was so unreal to me even then after thinking things over I decided against giving the sordid details to the New York bureau. (Parks, 1979, p. 108)

Parks liked to talk and word spread after he told the story to another photographer. Soon Irene Saint, who headed up the domestic correspondents at Life, asked him to stop spreading lies about their colleague and her good friend, Freddie. Parks simply walked out of her office without saying a word. Around the same time, as the Causey family began to worry about their safety, they phoned Freddie, their Life contact in the South
who had promised to help should trouble arise. The Causeys were unable to reach
Freddie as he had gone on vacation for a month (Parks, 1979, p. 109).

**The Reality**

E. J. Thorton praised *Life* magazine for the segregation series, for its authenticity,
and accurate portrayal of the plight of the Negro in the South. He also passed on a letter
from his sister Allie, who had asked E. J. for help after she experienced some trouble as a
result of the series,

> We are having it tough here in Silas. Mr. Willie’s job is being boycotted and no
> one want to give him gas, nor food, sell him anything asked him to leave threaten
> his life. My job is threaten (sic) of being taken away from me. I don’t know what
to do. (Kirksey, A. L. C. to E. J. Thorton, September 27, 1956)

The White community in Choctaw County was upset because Allie Lee Causey (Kirksey)
mentioned the word “integration” in the story: “We’re not used to hearing the word
‘integration’ mentioned in this county,” the Superintendent told her (Stolley, 1956, p. 78).
Allie Lee was suspended by the school district for insubordination and the paper
company Willie received work from said they did not want to do business with him
anymore. The White community was particularly incensed because they believed they
had been good to the family, helping out Willie, who had lived in the area his whole life,
when he needed it.

They told Dick Stolley, a White reporter from New York who also worked at *Life*
that was sent to Alabama to report on the fallout, that there were some inconsistencies in
Willie’s story, like whether Willie owned his truck and saw (they were mortgaged). In a
memo, Stolley said he believed Willie’s grave offense was that he thought he was a “first
class citizen,” able to own a truck and be a lumber dealer when the White community
saw him differently, “He had to go. . . He had been ungrateful. He had talked of
discrimination” (Stolley, D., memo, October 11, 1956).

Stolley’s report identified an error about Willie’s business earnings and the need
for a more explicit fact check on the subject of equal pay but concluded that ultimately
the White people in Silas were bothered by the Causeys dare to dream:

The Causey’s didn’t do anything wrong except to show bad judgement in what
they said, not realizing the neighbors would be reading it in black and white. They
also owed some money, but that is not a crime, and their creditors have been
making profits from the Causey’s for many years. (Stolley, D., memo to Life
editors, October 11, 1956)

Allie Lee later claimed she did not know her words to Yette about segregation were
going to be published (implying perhaps an inside connection with the Black reporter),\textsuperscript{22}
but she also never renounced them. While there were even some inconsistencies told by
Allie Lee after the story was published (she told the school board she was paid by the
magazine after she lost her job), Stolley believed that this was a matter of self-
preservation and overall they were decent people who were telling him the truth: “It is
just such deviousness and inconsistency that Negroes must so often use to maintain
friendly dealings with White people” (Stolley, D., memo to Life editors, October 11,
1956). But the truth did not matter in Silas where bloodshed seemed imminent. The
family was warned violence may fall upon them and Willie believed they would be killed
if they did not leave Shady Grove. The Causeys left for Mobile immediately, throwing

\textsuperscript{22} A Time-Life memo dated December 26, 1962 was written after a writer went to investigate Allie
Causey’s situation. The writer quoted Allie as stating that she did not mean for her communication with
Sam Yette about integration to become public, implying that she thought it was off-the-record. The memo
stated: “It is Ms. Causey’s opinion that the writer of the first LIFE article was young and immature. When
she made her remarks to him about justice and the Negro it was made more or less in confidence” she did
not realize that her remarks would ever appear in print.” However, she never denied making those
statements during her years of correspondence with Life magazine. (Time-Gen.- Life-Causey memo,
their lives in disarray (Stolley, D., memo to Life editors, October 11, 1956). This family, who once represented a sign of progress in rural Alabama, was now the subject of the American nightmare, giving an up-close account of how Black people, and particularly Black media subjects of this era, engaged with the dream and its precariousness. Despite segregation, it is ironic that Life selected this family to represent progress in the Black community. The story resulted in further endangering the family and ending any real pathway for Allie Lee to fulfill her dreams. The fallout from the story revealed just how complicated the so-called dream was for Black communities who were simultaneously trying to gain not just freedom from Jim Crow but find economic and spiritual fulfillment while also claiming the right to tell their own story.

Willie left his hometown of Shady Grove, giving his land to his brothers, and moved closer to family members in Mobile. Upon moving, the editors learned Allie Lee wanted a divorce. She said Willie was abusive and repeatedly hit her and threatened her with a gun (Kirskey, A. L. C., letter to Life editors, April 11, 1966). She said their relationship was bad before the story and became even more hostile after publication, as Willie blamed her for all their problems. Due to the nature of their troubles, Life decided to give both Willie and Allie a lump sum. Allie Lee received what would be a year’s pay and Willie received $1,000 to buy a new truck (Stolley, D., personal letter, August 30, 1961). Life also ran a follow-up story about the boycott against the Causey family in Silas, written by Stolley on December 10, 1956. In it, one White woman noted,

People in the north don’t understand what we’re up against down here… Talk about restraints… if he thinks he had restraints before, I’d like to know what he thinks he got now. It’s the burrheads like him that are causing us trouble. We ought to ship every one of them back to Africa. (Stolley, 1956, p. 78)
Nevertheless, *Life* wanted to continue their work on race and segregation. A series about segregation in the North was conceived by E. K. Thompson. Robert Wallace, who had written the article about the Causeys, wrote a long memo citing his opinion that the potential for a story was misguided. “There is no segregation in the North. Only discrimination” (Wallace, R., letter to E. K. Thompson, November 16, 1956). Wallace asserted there was no discrimination in housing (a matter he attributed to class) and that when a Black person wanted to move “out of the ghetto” he could so without experiencing any more discrimination than Puerto Ricans, Chinese, or Jewish people. Wallace argued that job discrimination in the North was often about skill, which he believed to be more about class than race. Moreover, while he acknowledged Black people would not be able to get into fancy New York City establishments like the Stork Club at the Plaza Hotel, he believed that was “scarcely” enough material for an essay. “In the North, we discriminate against people who are poor, uneducated and unskilled. When they get rich, bright or skillful, we stop. . . . In the South, however, they discriminate against Negroes, and they never stop” (Wallace, R., letter to E. K. Thompson, November 16, 1956). He goes on:

The trouble with us is that we are too sensitive to the South’s argument that we do, too, discriminate against Negroes. . . . But the truth is that we don’t really discriminate any more against Negroes than against other minorities, notably Asians, Puerto Ricans and Jews. We just don’t like poor people, ignorant people, and people who can’t drive a nail straight. (Wallace, R., letter to E. K. Thompson, November 16, 1956)

Wallace’s analysis explained his thinly veiled contempt for some of the Thorton family and proved that many of *Life*’s editors, despite their liberal leanings, failed to understand the experience of many Black people in America, despite their coverage of segregation. Wallace’s memo was circulated among the editors at *Life* and proved so popular one
editor suggested it be printed as an op-ed in the magazine. Neither the piece, nor a larger exposé about northern segregation ran, but the story of Allie’s shattered progress continued, albeit outside the pages of the magazine.

**The Consequences**

By August 2, 1957, Allie was out of money due to paying debts, helping her parents, and looking for work. She planned to move north to Alliance, Ohio, where she said she could do housework for $6 or $7 a day, more than a domestic in the South. She informed the editors at *Life* she had met with renowned lawyer Thurgood Marshall, who suggested her wrongful termination case against the Choctaw County School District be dealt with by the NAACP (Kirksey, A. L. C., letter to *Life* editors, August 2, 1957). In March of 1958, *Life* sent Allie $300 with “strong-worded advice” that she find a steady job. She was also told, in a somewhat patronizing way, they were sure she wanted to end her reliance on others (Stolley, D., personal communication, April 17, 1958). *Life* eventually gave Allie Lee money for secretarial school, expecting her to become a typist, but she continued to pursue teaching. When she had trouble passing the typing test, the editors at *Life* became concerned about her narrow focus on teaching: Her life is centered on being a rural negro school teacher. This she can never be again. She seems unable to cope with the new life she has been in now for more than two and a half years… as long as she and her family know we are standing ready with checkbook in hand, I’m afraid she’ll never solve her own problem. (Stolley, D., personal communication to Robert T. Elson, March 5, 1959)

Parks seemed to be marginally aware of the situation, but uninvolved. Allie continued to periodically write to the editors over the next decade. On August 30, 1961, Dick Stolley wrote a memo about Allie Lee’s plight, noting the trouble experienced trying to make her dreams come true after the story in *Life*:
Allie Lee was almost 30 when she completed college, and she stuck with it only because of her determination to teach school. So, quite naturally, her first thought was to teach in Mobile. She had little luck, even in substitute teaching. Her education wasn’t the best; and it’s entirely possible the Mobile school system knew about the trouble she had been in. (Stolley, D., personal communication to Art Keylor, August 30, 1961)

Stolley estimated they had given Allie only $1,000 to $1,500 over 5 years since the move from Mobile; the editor continued to feel bad about her plight:

The worst part of this tragic situation is that Mrs. Causey had to leave a comfortable teaching job she undoubtedly could have had for the rest of her life. She was fulfilling a lifelong ambition in that job...She was a good teacher, too, but the education and training that was good enough for a Negro school in rural Alabama was not, I’m afraid sufficient for Mobile. This is the root of the problem. (Stolley, D., personal communication to Art Keylor, August 30, 1961)

Even though the editors at Life may have been well-meaning in profiling this family, there was a lack of understanding by all involved. The notion of the dream for Black people was very delicate. This family’s ability to make any progress towards the dream made them extraordinary, despite Wallace’s dismissals.

By 1962, Allie Lee’s letters became more pessimistic. She moved to Alliance, Ohio, and reunited with her first husband (Willie divorced her in 1962) and became known as Allie Lee Kirksey.23 (Kirksey, A. L. C., letter to Life editors, May 31, 1962). In December of 1962, a Life representative found Allie’s financial difficulties were not as bad as she had suggested and were primarily the result of her husband’s drinking habit. Her husband, the report found, worked for American Steel and made a decent salary taking home between $123 and $127 for two weeks’ worth of work, but he kept losing things and gambling (WJS memo to Life editors, December 26, 1962).

23 The reports about her new relationship from Life raised doubts about the legality of her marriage to Willie (WJS memo to Life editors, “Allie Lee T. Kirksey Causey,” December 26, 1962), once again showing how marriage, or the perception of it, was another tool in presenting as a “respectable” Black woman.
Allie had been unable to get work as a teacher and attain true financial independence from a man. She worked as a substitute teacher for three days in December earning $16 a day, but that, she said, was hardly enough to survive. She reported making $7.50 a day in Alabama on steady income, with deductions. *Life* tried to appeal to the Ohio school district, but soon learned teachers and principals complained Allie about her bad grammar, inability to write and speak acceptable English, and her use of corporal punishment in the classroom (Law, L.E., personal communication to Ruth Fowler, March 25, 1963). *Life* sent her $100 the following month.

By July of 1963, the editors at *Life* sent Allie a letter stating they could no longer help her. Her receipt of the letter resulted in anger and desperation and she now wrote more about her troubles growing up: Typhoid fever, bad work, a long walk to school, and being forced to sleep with the landlord for money (Kirksey, A. L. C., letter to Clare Boothe Luce, October 22, 1964). On April 11, 1966, she wrote to Gordon Parks,

_I have been mistreated and forgotten by *Life* magazine and the White people of Alabama. I know if the story had not been written I am sure I would have not been suspended. What good did it do to help in the dirty heart of the White of Choctaw County? I have been made to make a living by any way I can. The North is just as bad as the South. Both are a sin. I rather see the dirt in the opening then to find it under the rug. Which would you rather sting you a bee in the open or one under a leaf? Both will sting and both will hurt. (Kirksey, A. L. C., letter to G. Parks, April 11, 1966)_

She wrote her belief that her southern accent and age (she was now over 35) negatively impacted her ability to find a job and she was relegated to cleaning floors. “I have been forgotten by all” (Kirksey, A. L. C., letter to G. Parks, April 11, 1966). She also wrote the editors at *Life*, claiming Parks and Samuel Yette were trying to make money off her story and demanded *Life* pay her for lost wages: “He and Gorton Park (sic) were trying to make a million dollars any way they could” (Kirksey, A. L. C., letter to *Life* editors, September
6, 1966). Dick Stolley responded *Life* had given her about $5,000 and owed her nothing else. However, when Allie Lee wrote again in 1968, a few months after Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination asking for help for her daughter Shirley, they conceded. Shirley had been admitted to the University of Toledo following her high school graduation but did not have the money to attend. Before *Life* decided how to help her, Shirley, now 17 and influenced by the burgeoning Black Power movement, sent a letter (Figure 53) to the *Time* and *Life* chairman of the board, bluntly invoking racism at the publication and showing an aggression that differed from her mother:

I’m not like my mother, she believes that God will work it out . . . but we need a change now. . . . The new Black generation will not- and doesn't plan on taking what the older generation did. If it wasn’t for your magazine my mother would have a job. You have destroyed her faith in her follow man. . . . After writing to you for help, this is what we got, (Cogradulation (sic) on your daughter graduation) dam the congradulation (sic). We need help and I want it now, not tomorrow next year but now. . . . It is plan [plain] to see that life is a racist, they don’t care what happens to the Black family that they destroyed 12 years ago . . . I am going to school one way or the other even if I have to wrote my past 12 years living in hell, how Life destroyed us and forgot all about us, how they turn their backs on the little Blacks. (Kirksey, S., letter to *Time/Life* board, September 3, 1968)

*Life* decided to pay her tuition and noted they were trying to help young Black people as much as possible. Once again in an internal memo they seemed pleased with their benevolence stating initially they were “perhaps acting foolishly from a legal point of view” but with a heart (Fowler, R., personal communication to Dick Stolley, November 7, 1968) and underscoring how fairly they treated Allie “I figured that no matter how ugly she got (uppity isn’t the word, in this case,) she would continue to be treated fairly by you” (Stolley, D., personal communication to Ruth Fowler, November 12, 1968). Starting in 1970, the magazine anonymously donated $2,500 each semester towards Shirley’s tuition, board, and living expenses. For a moment, things seemed to calm down
but Allie remained desperate and continued to write to the editors and Gordon Parks, who was now shooting his first film based on his novel, *The Learning Tree*. It was the first studio film to be directed by a Black person (Philadelphia, 2006). Parks was concerned about the case of Allie Lee and wrote to Dick Stolley asking if *Life* could help: “I don’t know if anything can be done, but it is bothering me and I wish *Life* could in some way clarify their position” (Kirskey, A. L. C., letter to G. Parks, January 16, 1969). Allie had written to Parks telling him she was unhappy, had a poor Christmas, and needed some help (Kirskey, A. L. C., letter to G. Parks, December 26, 1968).

![Letter to Time/Life board](image.png)

*Figure 53.* Shirley Kirksey, personal communication [Letter to Time/Life board], September 3, 1968.
Life learned Shirley was doing poorly at the university and eventually dropped out. They continued to believe they had an obligation to the family and were unsure how to respond to the Shirley’s letters. “Our liability is not an actual one we wish to acknowledge, but a moral one we have assumed” (Fowler, R., letter, June 30, 1971). Allie continued to correspond with Life, stating she just wanted to work again. On November 27, 1972, Life, having sent $9,150 for Shirley’s dream, closed the case on Shirley and Allie Lee.

In an undated letter, Allie sent a note thanking Life. She said it was hard for Shirley to finish her schooling due to her “southern half day education” but she would try again soon. She also noted Shirley was also looking for work, which was hard to find. On May 15, 1974, in what appears to be a final letter to Life, Allie wrote of her hatred to the magazine: “I lost four years of college work where I wanted to help children, lost My Retirement and I have worried myself down. I hate Life” (Kirksey, A. L. C., letter to Donald M. Wilson). The story of Allie Lee Kirksey Causey, whose American dream of becoming a teacher ended long ago, showed the power of a story and the role that a major magazine played in the American dream for a Black family in the South and the material and moral dimensions of that dream, where material wealth, equity and justice overlapped.

Years later, the magazine would impact the life of the Fontenelle’s in Harlem, another Black family searching for a dream. Their story is much the same; while the ending is sad, the subjects seemed to have a different experience and interaction with Parks and Life magazine. This may have been because Parks had become a powerful figure at the magazine in 1967 and had more control over his work there (Mason, 2016); he now took the pictures and wrote the accompanying text.
Parks’s Evolution

In 1967, the country was in a different place than it had been in 1956. The intervening years had witnessed the passage of landmark civil rights legislation, there was increased attention to activists and racism in the North, urban uprising and public calls for Black Power. The world was anxious and angry and the outlook of the Causey (Kirksey) family and Parks’s outlook too clearly had changed. As Parks’s success increased, and his real-life American dream story continued, he worried about the impact of his success on his storytelling abilities. In a 1963 feature on Black Muslims that centered on Elijah Muhammed and Malcolm X, which he photographed and wrote an essay for, Parks expressed concern about being perceived as a Black man in “White man’s clothing, sent by the very ‘devils,’ that Muhammad criticized so much” (Parks, 1963, p. 31). In the same piece, Parks questioned whether his successes in the “White world” had prevented him from understanding “mainstream” Black life and compromised his ability to be objective (Parks, 1963, p. 78). Parks now lived in Westchester, passing the center of the Black Bohemian life in Harlem on his way home. “I found myself on a plateau of loneliness, not knowing really where I belonged. In one world I was a social oddity. In the other I was almost a stranger” (Parks, 1963, p. 31), he wrote, questioning in that same piece, whether his “success” as a photographer and reporter had been in vain. Ultimately, he concluded “there is nothing ignoble about a Black man climbing from the troubled darkness on a White man’s ladder” (Parks, 1963, p. 79), but plainly stated that if the revolution was going to come, though he may disagree with them, he would always side with his brothers: “I know that if unholy violence shall erupt… this same circumstance will place me, reluctantly, beside them. Although I won’t allow them to be
my keeper, I am, inherently, their brother” (Parks, 1963, p. 79). Parks was a superstar at *Life*, now able to take pictures and write the text for many of his stories. In his telling of a Black American dream story published on March 8, 1968, he presented another family attempting to achieve the American dream with a different narrative than the one created by Wallace in 1956.

**The Fontenelles**

Parks grew up poor and though he initially believed his role as a photographer was supposed to be neutral, he eventually changed his mind after he found his life experience only enhanced his work:

> It is impossible for me now to photograph a hungry child without remembering the hunger of my own childhood. Time has taught me that it is not enough to look, condemn, or praise—to be just an observer. I must attempt to transcend the limitations of my own experience by sharing, as deeply as possible, the problems of those people I photograph. (Parks, 1975, p. 9)

We can see the intimacy and closeness Parks felt to the Black experience in general, and particularly of the broken dreams of Black America. The tone his 1968 story, part of a special section about race and poverty, was both consistent with and different from *Life*’s coverage of segregation in 1956. Parks’s black and white cover photograph of 5-year-old Ellen Fontenelle, with one tear streaming down her face as her mouth opened, seemingly in pain, was both beautiful and alarming (Figure 54). The title for the series, “The Negro and the Cities: The cry that will be heard” once again presented the Black experience in the pages of *Life*. Inside, once again, Black people were treated as sympathetic melancholic victims, as the title “Cycle of Despair” headlined the page (1968, p. 47).

*Life*’s special issue on race and poverty consisted of three reports from Chicago, Harlem, and Brooklyn. Parks wrote and photographed the story in Harlem. The
introductory page, written by an unknown writer, framed Black people as the problem. “The Negro and the cities constitute the nation’s most alarming domestic problem,” (“Cycle,” 1968, p. 47), turning what the writer believed to be a “southern problem” into a national one. The writer suggested the White community contributed to the problem; the North was “not as tolerant as they thought” (“Cycle,” 1968, p. 47). The anonymous introduction argued Black people were responsible for White apathy; White people who may have been sympathetic to the Black cause were “rebuffed by the tough militancy of a new Negro leadership, and stirred into fear by increased crime, increased talk of hate and increased violence, violence, and shootings” (“Cycle,” 1968, p. 47).


The story Parks wrote was different. Despite the initial framing of the series, in his article, Parks humanized the experience of Black Americans by telling a story about
the restraints, primarily of poverty, and dreams for one Harlem family. Parks’s portrayal of this family with both images and words differed from the patronizing and paternalistic tone Wallace used in 1956. The pictures remained powerful, but now there was an intimacy and understanding of the plight of this family, which had been missing from previous articles. Parks’s commitment to respectability was clear; the subjects were dressed in their Sunday best, with plenty of pictures showing them reading, educating themselves, and engaging in religious activity. He wanted to show them as dignified, but also, we will see later, complicated. Parks understood the world of his subjects. He was not simply an observer doing clinical work, as Wallace noted in his “study” of the segregation piece in 1956. He was, despite the perception of his success, presenting his America. The piece begins with Parks’s words:

What I am, what you force me to be, is what you are. For I am you, staring back from a mirror of poverty and despair, of revolt and freedom. Look at me and know that to destroy me is to destroy yourself. There is something about both of us that goes deeper than blood or Black and White. It is our common search for a better life, a better world. I march now over the same ground you once marched. I fight for the same things you still fight for. My children’s needs are the same as your children’s. I too am America. America is me. It gave me the only life I know—so I must share in its survival. Look at me. Listen to me. Try to understand my struggle against your racism. There is yet a chance to live in peace beneath these restless skies. (Parks, 1968, p. 48)

In this introduction, Parks artistically positioned this family as the universal subject who wanted the same thing as he did—that everyone did. There was no Black and White, but rather “a common search for a better life.” Parks claimed the American dream for Black people regardless of race or class. He sought to tell the reader that the desire for a better life was the struggle of all Americans, even Black ones—“I too am America” and remind them of the commonality of the struggle, both moral and material. Unlike his photos in 1956, which show Black people looking into a White world, he seems to want to break
down those metaphorical boundaries and bring readers into the world of one Black family, who like all Americans, are trying to search for a better life. The photos accompanying the text attempted to expose the reader to what this search looks like for a Black family, so no one could see and feel the family’s pain, joy, and frustration. Also in contrast to the 1956 series on segregation, the photos were shot in black and white. Perhaps this decision reflected Parks’s changing sense of hope. Nonetheless, his photos were a beautiful, intimate, direct, and realistic representations of the ills of poverty within one family.

**Poverty and the Fontenelles**

Bessie Fontenelle, a 39-year-old woman with eight children, met Parks through the New York City antipoverty office after *Life* magazine decided to do a series on poverty. She was one of the few families that consented to filming her family, whereas others were ashamed of their poverty (Parks, 1979). Neither Bessie nor her family seemed to be afraid of Parks’s camera and were seemingly upfront and honest about the struggles the family faced, including her abusive husband. Unlike the 1956 segregation story, their problems were presented more openly and honestly. While both Bessie and Allie were in relationships with abusive men, Allie only revealed that information after publication. Parks seemed to want the reader to understand the root of this abuse, the cause of this pain in Black life, and perhaps more subtly, the male anger. He presented a close portrait of Norman Fontenelle, Sr., the patriarch of the family early on and that forced the reader to look directly in his eyes as he looked back at the viewer. The color was gone from the picture, and though Norman’s pursued lips showed resolve, his eyes revealed sadness. He was looking back at us just as much as we, the viewer, were looking
at him. He had been laid off from his job and wondered how his children were going to get their next meal. Norman was frustrated, Parks wrote, by an America that was inherently unequal; Norman bluntly stated, “the Black man gets the walking papers first. And he’s the last to be called back. The White man does all the hirin’ and firin.’ Not much I can do about it” (cited in Parks, 1968, p. 49).

The acceptance of his fate, his sense of helplessness, was reminiscent of prior pieces about the Black experience of poverty. In contrast, while Parks exposed his dreams, he also showed Norman was responsible for his fate, noting his eyes were “always bloodshot” alluding to his proclivity to drink. On the first page, we learned Norman immigrated to the country 15 years ago from St. Lucia, in the West Indies. He had, Parks stated, “big plans,” but now “defeat is hanging off him.” The 38-year-old had 10 mouths to feed and repeatedly said things like “what can you do?” Parks showed the family trying to secure a more stable life. Bessie even tried to move the family into a housing project where the conditions were better; but without a steady income from Norman, they were ineligible and forced to live in a cold apartment where goldfish could not even survive. Parks understood and was sensitive to this nightmare, showing the reader one son sleeping in the cold. But Parks also made it very clear that this was a story about a family with a dream. Parks could have focused exclusively on their poverty but chose to focus on their desire for a better life. Parks quoted Bessie saying, “All this needing and wanting is about to drive me crazy” (Parks, 1968, p. 52). The idea of possibility, of wanting, dreaming for a better way, was an important theme in Parks’s work and one not always seen or told about Black life to White readers.
Parks made clear the reality of the Fontenelles, both visually and through text, by showing and telling the story of this family in painful ways. There was the picture of Norman, Jr., using masking tape to cover a hole in the wall (Parks thought it was to keep out the rats, which was a problem in the house, but 13-year-old Norman, Jr. told Parks it was to keep out the cold wind) and a picture of one of the children in front of a “turkeyless” oven on Thanksgiving highlighting their poverty. But taken as a whole, Parks’s narrative was primarily about an unfulfilled American dream and the hope needed to sustain it in a racist country.

A picture of Bessie at the antipoverty office (Figure 55) one of the most well-known from the series, with her four kids standing around her, revealed the sadness and skepticism in her life. Parks did not shy away from this sentiment. Rather, he persistently explored it, noting the White director of the office Bob Haggins, told Bessie to keep the faith when she complained about the rats, broken windows, and heating problem in her home.

Bessie seemed to have lost hope like Norman. Both had migrated to the New York with dreams of a better life (Norman from the Caribbean, Bessie from North Carolina) but her Northern promise ended with dashed dreams: “I heard all about the big factories that were going up in the cities. I did not know it would be like this” (as cited in Parks, 1968, p. 52). Parks continued to show the importance of hope, but at the same time exposed how difficult it was to maintain due to the systemic obstacles for poor Black families.

When Parks asked Bessie if the family was religious—the only picture in their home was that of a White Jesus—she said they used to be, but the family did not go to
church anymore: “It’s hard keeping faith in something when everything’s going so bad for you. I teach the kids their prayers, and that’s the best I can do” (as cited in Parks, 1968, p. 57). The perfectly framed White Jesus picture with a crack in the wall below seemed to be a metaphor for her plight, showing the cracks in her faith was a reflection of her broken dreams.

Figure 55. Bessie and her children at the Antipoverty Center by Gordon Parks, Life Magazine, March 8, 1968.

Herein lies Parks’s skill in using writing and imagery to connect his readers with this family and understand the cause of their agony:

My husband is a good man but every time they fire him or lay him off, he takes it out on me and the kids. He gets his little bottle and starts nipping. By the time he nips to the bottom, he’s mad with the whole world. (Bessie, as cited in Parks, 1968, p. 52)
This kind of language showed the complexity of the Black male experience, their relationship to both violence and work, and the systematic foundations of this family’s problems. Without infantilizing Norman Sr., Parks also exposed the problems Bessie faced, revealing her suicidal thoughts, which she presented as a nerve problem, and those of her son Harry, who struggled with drug addiction. Even so, the family was not hopeless; Parks showed Bessie’s hope was invested in her daughter Diana, who was graduating from nursing school. But hope was rare.

While most of the focus of the essay and photographs are about how Bessie and Norman’s dreams, Parks also made clear what his American dream looks like: family, loyalty, home, faith, education, cleanliness; and visited many of the same types of images in the segregation series. In that series, he also photographed a disorderly house. However, cleanliness there, like with the Fontenelles, seemed to be less about respectability and dirtiness and more about systemic failure that has allowed Black people to live in inhumane conditions. Parks attended to deteriorating conditions of the Fontenelle’s Harlem home, focusing on the rats and roaches that occupied the space, even taking a picture of Ellen’s dirty feet. One of the captions reported “dirt is a constant plague to the spirit, to Ellen’s feet” (Parks, 1968, p. 57). Words like misery peppered the article and while it did not seem like Parks wanted to judge their life, he was drawn to the messiness of poverty much like he did with the segregation story in 1956. This time it seemed he doubled down that this was about America’s inability to live up to its material promise to Black America but also its moral one by letting hard working families live under these conditions.
Both in the text and photos, Parks showed that education was a way out of poverty (Figure 56). Several frames showed children reading, as if that was the only path for them. One shows Ellen in front of a stack of books. It was noted that the books might take her to “another world” (Parks, 1968, p. 54), again reifying the idea of education as the sole salvation of Black people, and implying that while problems were systemic, individual effort and achievement also mattered. Other photographs of the children reading included one of Rosie, shoeless, pouring over a book, “Rosie studies fitfully in bare feet like other teen-age girls” (Parks, 1968, p. 54) were included. Who the “other” is, remains unclear and once again it seems to assume that Whiteness is the default. At the same time, perhaps by positioning her in this world it also is challenging the “norm” and arguing for her right to inclusion.
Parks even wrote about how one child, Lette, wanted to keep studying but was unable to because she did not receive glasses from the welfare board. Parks said her mom wanted Lette to keep going:

Seems the most important thing now is to try to get them some kind of education... That’s why I make them keep working. If just one of these kids can make it in some way, I’ll be thankful. (Parks, 1968, p. 54)

Despite Parks’s interest in the education of young Black Americans and its potential promise, he reminded the reader of the structural elements obstructing their dreams, like the antipoverty office’s refusal to get reading glasses for Lette, or the frigid conditions that led Kenneth to do schoolwork underneath the covers.

Parks often balanced his professional and personal identities, of journalist and Black man, not relegating his subjects to monolithic stereotypes. When Norman, Jr., talked about his defiance of White society, Parks created balance in the story by depicting Norman’s aggression, hostility, and powerful build with anecdotes about his “overwhelming tenderness,” and sweetness. Reminiscent of Bungleton Green, Parks quoted Norman Sr. as saying, “All I want to be is a man” (Parks, 1968, p. 58) as he worried about feeding his family. “There’s not enough in the icebox to fill the baby’s stomach” (Parks, 1968, p. 49), he said, reminding readers of how important being a provider was for Black men during this era. In fact, the entire the narrative was shaped by the idea of Norman’s lost manhood, perhaps because as a Black man Parks could relate to these sentiments. However, it was also an example how much the material security intersects with the moral dimensions of the dream too.
As Bessie continued to unravel during the holiday season and her kids remained cold and hungry, the family continued its descent into despair (Parks, 1968). In a final set of pictures, we learned Norman has beaten Bessie so badly she believed her ribs were broken. In retaliation, Bessie threw a pot of boiling water with honey and sugar on Norman’s face sending him to the hospital (Figure 57). Parks took a medium shot of Norman’s burned face as his son Norman, Jr., looked on. The piece concluded with Bessie, laying on a bed, holding her child, Little Richard, looking exhausted with her hand covering her face, suggesting her position was more painful than the burns on Norman’s face (Figure 58).

The photo and the text concluding this piece sharply contrasted with the segregation story. Instead of the dignified Black professor waiting at a bus stop with his family and a suitcase headed on to an unknown journey, we are left with an abused woman and a child. Parks ended the article documenting his ambivalence about hope, and perhaps ambivalence about the dream; “Snow was falling again. He (Bessie’s son)
headed back to that cold apartment, and I wondered why they wait for summer” (Parks, 1968, p. 63).

Figure 58. Bessie and Little Richard by Gordon Parks, *Life Magazine*, March 8, 1968

**The Price of Being in *Life***

This story, like so many of Parks’s stories, did not conclude here. *Life* and their readers donated money and attempted to help the Fontenelles. Three months after the article was published, *Life* provided the Fontenelles with a modest home in Queens and helped Norman, Sr., get a job—a component to the American dream that would have, in theory, finally made the family feel whole again.
At the same time, Life’s editors-maintained caution in their assistance, perhaps due to their prior experience with Allie Lee earlier. A letter to the publisher detailed how Life’s staff thought these poor families needed to be managed: “I appreciate your objections to Time Inc. getting into the long-term charity business, but we have already orally committed ourselves to this project and I don’t see how we can gracefully withdraw without embarrassment” (Schad, T., letter, March 28, 1968). The staff member, Tenn Shad, suggested the house be put in the name of Time, Inc. (Life’s parent company) so that gift tax would not be imposed or the assistance be used to collect on previous debts (Schad, T., letter to Jerry Hardy, March 28, 1968). This well-intentioned missive denied this family’s ability to achieve the American dream of homeownership. Further, the letter showed Life’s continual White savior complex and their infantilizing approach with another Black family in need.

Tragically, three months after they moved in, Norman, Sr., came home drunk one night and dropped a lit cigarette on the family’s couch, starting a fire that killed him and their young son Kenneth (The Gordon Parks Foundation, n. d.-b). Bessie escaped the fire with her other children but did not want to go back to the suburbs; she requested to move back to Harlem. The family kept in touch with Parks, who over the years learned of their continued troubles—some of the children fell victim to the streets, another two died of AIDS. Bessie Fontenelle died in 1992 of breast cancer, and Parks attended her funeral with four of her children (The Gordon Parks Foundation, n. d.-b).

Only Richard, the child who used to eat plaster off the walls, with his bright eyes and hopeful stare, thrived and enjoyed what the New York Times called “middle class success,” being married for over 20 years and having a stable job and hobbies he loved,
and perhaps invoking what many believe to be the American dream (Mason & Newman, 2013). Unlike Allie Causey (Kirksey), Richard was happy with the family’s portrayal in the series, even though it exposed the stark reality of poverty. Park’s version of the reality of his family life became a part of Richard’s life, and perhaps, a motivation for his success. Richard remained close to Parks and by all accounts loved the photographer and respected him as a mentor. One of Richard’s four children has Gordon for a middle name. In 2013, three days after an exhibit opened featuring the Fontenelles’ story, Richard died at the age of 48. His wife later told of the importance of Parks’s rendering of his family’s story,

Even through all the adversities and the negative sides to the story, it did not matter to him. It was just, “This is my family and this is how we live and this is where we come from. But this is where we’re going and this is what I’m doing with my life now.” (Mason & Newman, 2013, para. 22)

Conclusion

The narratives of the Thortons, the Causeys, and the Fontenelles represent different understandings of the Black American dream and the impact *Life* had on several Black families during the civil rights era. All of these stories told of striving, of a dream people believed in, and of constraints they faced due to systematic oppression. The Black people in all three stories had agency and were powerful, as shown in Parks’s images. But how their narratives were understood by Parks, the mainstream editors at *Life*, and even the subjects were all different, revealing a tension between Parks and the mostly White editors at the magazine and how Black and White America understand the American dream.

The American dream for Parks was depicted as an important aspiration for Black families. Yet, he also was committed to telling the story of the failed promise of America
and the material dream these families did not have access to. He believed in the moral aspect of the dream but was also committed to showing the inequality and depravation of material possessions some Black families were facing. If as Fisher (1973) said, Americans profess the moral aspect of the dream while really practicing the more materialistic version of it, these stories especially illustrate it. The Thortons, Causeys (Kirkseys), and Fontenelles all understood America was a broken system for Black Americans; they wanted to see change, but they also were focused on survival. In this capitalist society, money was an equally important desire for these families. Money in some ways could give them more of the equality they all desired. It was, as it remains today, powerful. Yet, they understood that a combination of the moral and the material was necessary for Black people in America. This was evidenced in the story of E. J. Thorton, who had some economic success, but struggled with segregation. Parks’s coverage seemed to reject the dichotomy between moral and material; instead his photos in the segregation series in 1956 and his photographs and essays in 1968 seem to suggest how linked these dimensions of the American dream were for Black families, and how linked the obstacles to realizing either aspect was.

Both Life magazine editors and Parks believed in the moral aspect of the American dream. They believed there should be equality between the races. In fact, it was the very thesis for the segregation piece. However, from its inception, one could see how Blacks and Whites viewed certain aspects of the dream from different perspectives. In 1956, the American dream in Black life was not fully understood by the writer, Robert Wallace. While Parks’s dignified pictures revealed a story that was less about poverty and more about aspiration and a desire for access (e.g., the girl on the glass, the children
looking into the park), the text does not always align with this ideology. Even the character for whom Wallace has the most sympathy for in 1956, Professor E. J. Thorton, was misunderstood. Wallace implied that life could be good for him if he did not have the urge to send his three children to college and classified his frustrations with racism as hurt pride, not a systematic failing.

Later, when dealing with Allie Lee, *Life* showed they did not fully understand her plight. They seemed to focus on the fact she constantly asked them for money. Allie Lee Causey’s (Kirksey) story was of a person who had feelings about integration and openly expressed them. She evolved from a woman who was somewhat cautious about her words and interactions with White people (initially thinking of rescinding her words to the magazine or stating she was paid for the *Life* story when questioned by her former employee) to a woman who, by the late 1960s, evoked the idea of civil rights and her legal right to sue. Allie Lee was depicted as a woman who dreamt of being an educator and taking care of herself, free from a male partner. Her dreams were consistent and persistent, often about having a dignified life more than having money. Money was necessary for sure, but Allie also repeatedly expressed a desire for a career. She valued her time as a teacher, and her ability to make money outside of her husband, though her dreams often seemed to be diminished by *Life*. For Black Americans, the American dream was complicated, and this section showed it was about Black people seeking (a) the moral aspect of the dream, like freedom and equality for their community; and (b) the material, fighting for the individual need for upward mobility and income.

In 1968, the multiple aspects and layers to the dream were seen in Parks’s work, perhaps because Parks was responsible for both the images and the text. The Fontenelles
were humanized through the image and text produced by Parks and while their story was tragic, its presentation was different, and the family was given a more nuanced and complicated representation. The Fontenelles were seen as victims of an unequal system and as complex beings trying to work through their lives. Bessie was up front about her abuse and the text was explicit about discrimination and racism. In many ways, the reality of their situation was clearer. This stood in contrast to the reality of the Causeys, who both on the part of the writer and perhaps themselves, wanted to be portrayed as a respectable, upwardly mobile family when the reality was different. The Causeys wanted to present as the successful Black married family with the Cadillac and thriving business, although they were really faced with a failing, abusive relationship and debt. These problems do not nullify their American dream story but rather gives an understanding to readers as why it was so hard to achieve. Parks was successful with this ability through both his pictures and writing on the Fontenelles. His worked helped readers understand how personal failings and systemic oppression impacted the life of a Black family, while also showing how the family too had desires, even if hope was rare.

The brilliance of Parks’s imagery was his ability to bestow respectability and dignity to both the Fontenelles and the Causeys sometimes through a single picture. Parks understood the rage of the men in both families just as he understood the trap and cycle of poverty Black people were in. In both narratives, Parks’s sympathy is exhibited through the gaze of his camera. In the story of the Fontenelles, while Bessie interacts with Whites, she was not longing to be in their world. Rather the White readers were peering into her world. This showed a notion of Bessie, and Black people against the
world against the world, rather than the world against them. This revealed Parks’
enduring belief in the moral power of the American dream.

This chapter showed how stories about the Black American dream were framed
differently during various stages of the civil rights era. It revealed how the editorial
narrative changed when a Black writer was able to frame the story. Due to Life’s White
leadership and readership, the influence of Black creatives was likely was quite small, yet
Parks’s gaze had a tremendous impact on these stories. Being able to expose, not only the
woes of Black life, but the dreams of Black America, was an important part of Parks’s
work. He showed Black people dared, even in the worst conditions, to dream of a better
way.
Sky is the limit and you know that you can have/What you want, be what you want . . .
—The Notorious B.I.G., “Sky’s the Limit”

Mainstream hip-hop\(^2\) artists have always been obsessed with the American
Dream, though they have never quite figured out what to make of it. The genre has been
known for its dedication to the materialistic aspect of the dream, with even Barack
Obama repeatedly stating how “troubled” he was by the “materialism of a lot of rap
lyrics” (Gardner, 2008, para. 4). In 2008, music critic Eric K. Arnold wrote:

Let's face it: many rap songs celebrate, if not downright glorify, materialism. To
signify baller status, you're encouraged to have a “Rollie” on your arm like Snoop
Dogg, “cashmere thoughts” like Jay-Z, and “mustard & mayonnaise” like E-40.
Otherwise, as Too $hort might say, you's a "broke biatch." (para. 1)

Unlike other critics who have lamented that hip-hop’s love for the material came about
after its “Golden era” that began in the 80s, Arnold (2008) correctly called out hip-hop
artists for always being obsessed with money. “This trend isn't even a new one; back in
the old-school days, Grandmaster Melle Mel exclaimed, \textit{it's all about the money/ain't a
damn thing funny}” (Arnold, 2008, para.1). However, despite their reputation, hip-hop
artists have also engaged with the moral aspect of the American dream, often while also
questioning whether that wealth and material success they often talk about truly is the
dream.

\(^2\) Hip hop technically refers to the five elements of emceeing (rapping), deejaying, break dancing, graffiti
and beatboxing, but I use the word interchangeably with “rap.” Additionally, I define mainstream rap and
hip-hop as commercially successful music often produced by mainstream labels and played on major radio
stations.
Black music has always played an important part in the narrative of Black America. It has, according to hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose, “helped Black people to protect, nourish and empower themselves, and to resist forces operating against their freedoms” (Rose, 2008, p. 264). In this chapter, I conduct a close read of how three mainstream hip-hop artists have engaged with the American dream, the role that materialism played, and how it has been articulated in their lyrics in three distinct eras.

A More Complex Dream

Rapper Kanye West’s engagement on the subject of the American dream showed how complex the topic could be. On the single, “All Falls Down” (2004), he explained that he is insecure and material possessions make him feel good about himself:

Man, I promise, I'm so self-conscious
That's why you always see me with at least one of my watches
Rollie’s and Pasha’s done drove me crazy
I can't even pronounce nothin', pass that Ver-say-see!
Then I spent four hundred bucks on this
Just to be like, “Nigga, you ain't up on this.” (West, track 4)

In the next line, West (2004) is clear that he understands the problem of this ideology, and that having a lot of wealth does not always mean security, “It seem we livin’ the American Dream/But the people highest up got the lowest self-esteem” (track 4). As a Black man in the United States, he realized that these material goods were more than just a symbol of wealth, rather they were a symbol of his upward mobility and status, which helped push back against historic and ongoing racism that said Black people were less than. “We shine because they hate us, floss ‘cause they degrade us/We tryna to buy back our 40 acres/And for that paper, look how low we’ll stoop/Even if you in a Benz, you still a nigga in a coupe” (West, 2004, track 4). West also understood the limitations of that
material dream because of his racial status, yet he still craved it. But by 2016, West embraced another symbol of the materialistic American dream: New York City real estate mogul Donald Trump. It may seem odd that in the post-civil rights era, a hip-hop figure embraced a person who eight out of 10 Black people saw as a symbol of White supremacy (“Black Americans deeply pessimistic,” 2020). However, it represented the way the West has vacillated in his thoughts about the American dream, and how hip-hop continually seems to be in negotiation with the American dream, exemplified by the genre’s relationship with Trump.

Donald Trump was a prominent figure in the world of hip-hop long before Kanye West started wearing “Make America Great Again” hats. Over the past 30 years, as hip-hop artists engaged with wealth, poverty, and essentially, the American dream (Richards, 2019), Trump appeared in more than 300 songs; primarily because he stood for a dream that many in the world of hip-hop aspired to attain.25 Music critic Chris Richards (2019) has argued that the relationship with Trump was often more messy than black and white. He said these rappers were using “Trump’s image to praise themselves” (para. 3), which may be true. However, there was no denying the importance of that image, which many rappers identified with success.26

25 Rappers often looked up to the real estate mogul for his financial prowess, wealth, luxury, and power, which he seemed to have in the world of business. Popular hip-hop artists like Nas, Raekwon, and Nelly used Trump’s name in their songs. Method Man even put him on his sophomore album, Tical 2000: Judgement Day in a guest appearance (Late Night with Seth Meyers, 2017). In 2017, in an interview with Seth Meyers, Method Man said Trump was doing a favor for his friend Russell Simmons. His lines were as follows: “This is Donald Trump and um in Palm Beach and we’re all waiting for your album. Let's get going man! Everybody's waiting for this album.”

26 Not all in the world of hip-hop were charmed by Trump. Even in the 1990s rapper Boots Riley (who later directed the film Sorry to Bother You) seemed frustrated by Trump’s status and reminded people that Trump’s wealth was not something to be emulated because he made it off real estate mongering, often exploiting communities of color. As a member of the hip-hop collective, The Coup, Riley wrote the song “The Coup,” in 1993. The lyrics of the song, “Break yourself Trump, it’s collection day … You stole the s- -- from my great-granddaddy anyway” (Riley, 1993, track 4). He eschewed Trump’s royalty status stating
It would not be until 2016, when Trump ran for president, that most of the mainstream hip-hop community seemed to sever their ties with the mogul. As Trump’s campaign constantly invoked racism, xenophobia, and misogyny, mainstream hip-hop artists were clear they had limitations. Yet more importantly these artists did not eschew what Trump represented nor did they negate the importance of material possessions. The public renunciation of Trump still is important however, for it showed that while individual material success was important to Black hip-hop artists, equality and justice was also important in their community.

On the song, “FDT (Fuck Donald Trump),” rappers YG and the recently deceased Nipsey Hussle, talked about their deception (Jackson, et al., 2016, track 15). “Me and all my peoples, we always thought he was straight/Influential mothafucka when it came to the business/But now, since we know how you really feel, this how we feel/Fuck Donald Trump” (Jackson, et al., 2016, track 15). Not only did they express their frustration with Trump’s views on race, but they also seemed to note that having too much money also can corrupt:

Your racist ass did too much
I'm bout to turn Black Panther
Don't let Donald Trump win, that nigga cancer
He too rich, he ain't got the answers
He can't make decisions for this country, he gon crash us
No, we can't be a slave for him. (Jackson, et al., 2016, track 15).

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the dream life was about more than money, “We gives a f--- if you got money in the millions,” he rapped. “Mother f---er, we’ve got posse in the billions” (Riley, 1993, track 4) Yet Riley’s message of community and companionship did not seem to resonate with the broader hip-hop community, particularly those in the mainstream. Just a few years later, Nas rapped that he needed a place in Trump Towers, “I need a suite with the flowers complementary at Trump Towers,” (1996, Give it Up Fast, track 12) proving the image of Trump and Trump as the American Dream would endure.
In contrast, Kanye West, once called out President George W. Bush for not caring about Black people during Hurricane Katrina, stuck by Trump’s side. West told people that wearing the “Make America Great” hat (the logo of Trump) makes him “feel like superman” (“Kanye West Says,” 2017, para. 1), revealing his old need to be affiliated with symbols of status.

Yet, for all of the kerfuffle over West’s support of Trump, ideas about the American dream and materialism along with questions about money, success, and power remained to be a source of contention in hip-hop. Hip-hop, more than any medium, seemed to make clear that ultimately for Black Americans, the American dream is not a choice between a moral and a material ideal, but a tense conflation of them both. Each aspect is both embraced and questioned, with the material, at times being moral and the moral, at times, being material.

Most of the previous scholarship on hip-hop has not focused on the American dream. However, the dream is often on the periphery of conversations around materialism, conspicuous consumption, capitalism, and political activism. Most recently, Emmett H. Robinson Smith (2017) looked at conspicuous consumption in hip-hop music and among artists from the 1980s through the 21st century. He considered how hip-hop has been and continues to be political and commercial, instead of existing on strict binaries of either (Smith, 2017). Smith also noted the celebration of consumption by Black hip-hop artists might be a response to oppression and marginalization due to race and class. Communications scholar Damon Waymer however, challenged this perspective stating that the industry exploits Black artists. Waymer said, while hip-hop
gives people “something to hope for—dream about” (as cited in Young, 2007, p. 169), corporate interests have unduly influenced the medium:

While rap artists claim to be pro-Black in terms of racial identification, they sometimes act in ways that are anti-Black in the class struggle. That is to say, they are caught between a racial rock and a socioeconomic hard place because their corporate sponsors exploit the poorest segments of the Black community. (Waymer, as cited in Young, 2011, p. 163)

Waymer’s critique fails to consider how artists push back and even question the dream. His solution seemed to be the elevation of more politically conscious rap, a sentiment Claudia Christina Mendes Gisel agreed with. In the chapter, “Going Black: Disturbing the Peace of a Dream that Ain’t Mine,” Gisel (2007) stated hip-hop and African Americans have already “disturbed and are still disturbing” (p. 92) what she called the White American dream. However, she believed a more “political-based approach to hip-hop” (p. 79) would lead to Black liberation, rather than the constant promotion of a dream that excludes Black people while giving them false hope in an ideology they did not create. To me, however, hip-hop’s materialism is part of the moral aspect—a fight to show status, power, and, and is, in the least, a coping strategy, as Michael P. Jeffries (2011) noted in Thug Life. Still while Martin Kilson’s belief that “there’s nothing whatsoever that’s seriously radical or progressive about hip-hop ideas and values . . . [it’s] an updated face on the old-hat, crude, anti-humanistic values of hedonism and materialism” (cited in Neal, 2003, p. xiii), is not true, I agree, hip-hop’s oppositional position may not be as radical as it seems. Jeffries (2011), quoting Christopher Holmes Smith noted that the genre’s oppositional stance might be a negotiation to achieve mainstream acceptance, and therefore may not be as revolutionary as it appears.
I find myself in alliance with scholars who have advocated for a deeper understanding of these narratives, who have pushed back against blanket statements about hip-hop and materialism and who do not dismiss the genre as “bad” because it is materialistic. As Johnson (2017) noted in the “Search of the Beyond,” several scholars (e.g., Dyson, 2003; Jeffries, 2011; Neal, 2003; Perry, 2004) believe the hip-hop community was often scapegoated for America’s larger consumeristic woes:

Hip-hop was not created just as a way to access capital; it is part of a richer history of Black arts that questions and talks b(l)ack while seeking something new and beyond. Whether in the desire to assert one’s own humanity, the pursuit of a different kind of aestheticism, or the establishment of new and creative and political outlets, the Black literary tradition . . . [it]has always concerned itself with this search. (Johnson, 2017)

New York City

Although other regions have contributed to the success of hip-hop and arguably, might be even more influential in the 21st century, New York City was chosen for this analysis because it was the birthplace of hip-hop and is still considered as the home of hip-hop (Levine, 2007). By many, it is also considered to be the home of the America dream—a city where the playing field was level and anyone could find success if they worked hard enough. Hip-hop artists reinforced this idea. In the song “Empire State of Mind,” hip-hop artists Jay-Z and Alicia Keys sang of the dream in New York:

In New York (Ayy, ow) (Uh, yeah)  
Concrete jungle where dreams are made of  
There's nothin' you can't do (Okay)  
Now you're in New York (Uh, yeah)  
These streets will make you feel brand-new  
Big lights will inspire you (Okay). (Shux, et al, 2009)

Therefore, to root this analysis in New York only seemed natural. The chapter begins with a look at hip-hop’s origins in the 1980s with the first successful mainstream album,
self-titled, *Run-D.M.C.*, by a group of mainly middle class, young men from Hollis, Queens that explored how these college students dealt with marginalization, materialism, and just wanting to have fun. Next, I look at the lyrics of Brooklyn rapper The Notorious B.I.G. (with nicknames “Biggie Smalls” and “Biggie”), who has been touted as the greatest rapper of all time (“The Best,” 2015) and his rags-to-riches narrative before his assassination in 1997. Finally, I conclude with an analysis of the lyrics of Cardi B, a young Black and Latina woman from the Bronx. She rose to prominence after posting videos on social media about her life as an exotic dancer and parlayed that into successful reality television and rap career. All of these artists have engaged with the dream in a myriad of ways. Sometimes they uphold the moralistic aspect of the dream, while others seem more interested in the material. However, most are usually simultaneously trying to engage with both.

**Social Class**

In the past, theories of rappers’ marginalized status and their interest with the dream sometimes was often predicated on the assumption that hip-hop was made up of young people from poor urban backgrounds. Yet, that was not always true. Although hip-hop was created in the economically challenged area of the South Bronx and many themes center on urban life, its influence by Black people from the middle class also was important. David Samuels said it was a small group of Black middle-class New Yorkers who expanded hip-hop and made it mainstream (Forman & Neal, 2011, p. 531). Artists like West, Biggie and Run-D.M.C. all came from middle or working-class backgrounds, a fact that is not insignificant when thinking about the American dream. In 1991, historian Henry Louis Gates said that hip-hop was the “guilt of the Black middle class
about its economic success . . . falling back on fantasies of street life” (As quoted in Neal, 2003, p. 153). Four years later, political scientist Jennifer Hochschild found that middle- and upper-income Black people believed less in the dream. In contrast, poorer Black people’s faith in the dream did not significantly decline (Hochschild, 1995). Therefore, to understand hip-hop’s relationship to the American dream, we also considered how class worked among these various artists.

**Radical and Conservative Ideas in Mainstream Hip-Hop**

The meanings and value of materialism has long been debated in the Black community. African American studies scholar William Banks (1996) said African values were rooted in communal and collectivist values, but after Reconstruction, “group stratification and individual materialism” (p. 67) began to redefine the Black experience. As the Black community began to divide even more over class, the communal spirit was lost again. “Privilege, money, ambition, status—all frayed the ties of racial solidarity” (Banks, 1996, p. 67). W.E.B. Du Bois, for example, cautioned Black people against materialism and urged them to seek a moral and humanity-focused approach to success, particularly because of their experience as Black people. In 1926, in a speech given at a conference for the NAACP in Chicago, Du Bois asked,

If you tonight suddenly should become full-fledged Americans; if your color faded, or the color line here in Chicago was miraculously forgotten; suppose, too, you became at the same time rich and powerful; — what is it that you would want? What would you immediately seek? Would you buy the most powerful of motor cars and outrace Cook County? Would you buy the most elaborate estate on the North Shore? . . . Even as you visualize such ideals you know in your heart that these are not the things you really want. You realize this sooner than the average White American because, pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world; if we had the true spirit . . . not perfect happiness, but plenty of good hard work . . . where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they
enjoy life. It is that sort of world we want to create for ourselves and for all America. (Du Bois, as quoted in Early & Kennedy, 2010)

Material possessions make hip-hop artists, like many in America’s culture of consumption, feel good, as West (2015) noted. That can create a superficial feeling of parity and reinforce the notion that social mobility in America is real, despite the persistent evidence that it is low. In 1962, Michael Harrington wrote that people are poor because they are born poor, a fact that remains true today (as cited in Surowiecki, 2014). This dedication to the material could also be read as striving for equality that also reflects the moral aspect. In other words, it is the moral component of the dream, understood through the material. In Prophets of the Hood (2004), Imani Perry talks about the subversive nature of hip-hop’s materialism, making the genre’s dedication to consumption more radical than one may understand superficially:

Gadgets also enhance the public self; they declare an importance in being reached. . . . Status is attached to the goods, not in mimicry of White privilege, but rather in an effort to recast status. Status linked to the body subverts the image of low status associated with Black bodies. To adorn oneself marks one as a subject, rather than a commodity. (Perry, 2004, p. 197)

At the same time, hip-hop’s dedication to materialism can also reflect a more individualistic conservative ideology about consumption that is solely about wealth and pleasure. This pleasure instead could be read through the lends of a Black American working-class culture that was often not given room to enjoy things purely for pleasure. All too often, Black Americans, especially those from the working class, are not given room to enjoy things purely for pleasure. As historian Robin D. G. Kelley (1997) noted, culture sometimes can be more than just a simple response to “or products, of, oppression” (p. 4). Perry, too recognized this as she considered the importance of consumerism in hip-hop:
I want to consider the pleasures of shopping and dressing and using consumer goods. Consumerism touches on the pleasure derived from the beauty of things, from the adornment of the self. Hip-hop consumerism is in part the use of luxury to express Black style. (Perry, 2004, pp. 196-197)

While this statement does not excuse rampant materialism, it expands on the notion that joy and pleasure may be associated with it. However, it is often the artist’s rendering of how they acquired these material possessions (usually through some narrative of hard work or exceptionalism) where a more conservative analysis of the dream can be understood. These ideas can not only reveal hip-hop’s articulation of the dream through the moral and the material aspects, but also the tension around the radical and conservative ideologies in mainstream hip-hop.

Hip-hop has always been a medium of contradictions and its artists’ understanding of the American dream is equally schizophrenic. Artists seem to understand the importance of material goods in a capitalist society, while also questioning the importance. In reading the lyrics of several of these artists, I sometimes read a conservative understanding of the American dream that remained dedicated to ideas around hard work, respectability, exceptionalism, education for success, individualism, and the survival of the fittest mentality. At the same time, I also read a critique of racism, policing, and unabashed capitalism. This is not unusual. From the beginning mainstream hip-hop has reflected both a radical and conservative nature, particularly when looking at the treatment of the American dream. Run-D.M.C., for example, sang about their love for a material possession, their shoes, in “My Adidas” (Simmons & McDaniels, 1986, track 3), while also releasing tracks like “Proud to be Black” (Simmons & McDaniels, 1986, track 3).
Since its inception, mainstream hip-hop has given voice to a group of people that had been unheard for years, a radical act in itself. This genre takes up many modes of self-expression: foul language, bragging about expensive cars, positioning gangsters as role models, and boasting about sex, clearly resisting all conventional notions of respectability and conservative values. Through their music, mainstream rappers have also acknowledged racism, discrimination and police brutality, pushing against society’s social ills and reflecting progressive values. Hip-hop has provided a space for Black men and women, particularly the young, to voice their opinion, show off their style, and protest in ways that were previously unavailable to them. At first glance, the push back against respectability seems radical. However, when examined more closely, hip-hop artists reflect a conservative and radical stance and simultaneously, a consistent commitment to both the moral and the material aspects of the dream over hip-hop’s 45-year history.

The Early Days

Hip-hop was first bred in a post-civil rights moment where Black and Latinx people were trying to figure out how to make their dreams come true in America. This sentiment seemed particularly true for young people who were part of these rap groups as they struggled for a place in a society that continued to marginalize them and dismiss their voices. The South Bronx was ablaze in the 1970s, both metaphorically and physically, as the economic collapse and urban decay caused owners to burn down their own buildings for insurance money. City blocks were decimated, jobs were lost, crime increased, and heroin was rapidly becoming the drug of choice. Young people were caught in the undertow as the population declined and the situation became more dire,
with one police officer stating that the group was “lost in a maze of nothing” (Tolchin, 1973, para. 22). Despite the challenges, Black and Latinx youth found a way to ensure that the world could finally hear their plight through art. They created a new sound of music using deejays, music samples, and synthesizers and had people rap over these melodies. The rappers often used traditional African American art forms, such as capping and signifying that had roots in slavery and West Africa, while boasting about their possessions, talking of oppression, complaining about poverty and expressing their frustrations with their love lives (Banfield, 2009). Elena Martínez, an art director at the Bronx Music Heritage Center, said this was important for youth in the area:

> Young kids, out of nothing, used devastation to create. They didn’t have instruments. Grandmaster Flash used turntables as instruments. They used abandoned buildings to perform. Amidst all this destruction, they were able to create out of that sadness and decay. (Martinez, cited in McLaughlin, 2019, p. 115)

*Rapper’s Delight* (Edwards et al., 1979), hip-hop’s first hit song, evoked many of the glamorous images and high-flaunting lifestyle, seen on the pages of *Ebony* magazine with Big Bank Hank talking about Cadillacs, color televisions, and clothes, mixed with the confidence and braggadocio of the Black Power movement in the second verse of the 15-minute song. The song’s artists, the Sugar Hill Gang, a group formed in my hometown of Englewood, New Jersey, was created to capitalize on the work of the groups in South Bronx that had started this new trend. Composed of young men who were primarily from the middle-class suburbs of northern New Jersey and one transplant from the Bronx, the single became a hit after its release in 1979. The song, the group said, was not supposed to be a message record; it was about these young Black men having fun and experiencing things that gave them pleasure, which perhaps, in and of itself, was a radical idea.
It wasn't too heavy... It wasn't the message that was years later. It wasn't 'bash the police'—that was years after that. What I wanted to portray was three guys having fun. We were always bragging about stuff we didn't have to impress the chicks. (Wonder Mike to NPR in Blair, 2000, para. 10)

The single sold over 2 million copies and on January 5, 1980, *Rapper’s Delight* made it to the Billboard Top 40. Hip-hop had officially become mainstream (Blair, 2000).

**Black America 1984**

Black people in America in the 1980s, regardless of class, were dealing with a range of highs and lows. A range of Black men and women were elected to state and local governments and activist Jesse Jackson completed bids for the presidency in 1984 and 1988 that garnered a significant portion of the Democratic vote. These events added to this perception of progress. Black Americans seemed to be closing the skills gap with research showing the group was only 2.5 years behind White people in reading and math, a significant achievement considering the inequality of educational institutions that plagued the Black community (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 1998).

*The Cosby Show* (Carsey & Werner, 1984-1992), exposed Americans to another dream for Black Americans. This popular series led many, like conservative William F. Buckley, to believe that racism had been eradicated, as reflected by the show’s astounding success (Gray, 1989). Gray proved Buckley’s assertion was wrong and life remained challenging for Black Americans (1989). Crack cocaine emerged as a powerful force in Black communities, creating an epidemic by 1984, which led to mass violence and gang warfare in the inner city, as dealers tried to grasp the American dream and users tried to escape their nightmares. Black male homicide rates doubled in the 1980s and Black Americans seemed to be in despair. Moreover, the rhetoric of the post-civil rights era, and the period which gave the once deemed radical Martin Luther King, Jr., a
national holiday, seemed to fail in its promises to Black Americans. Historian Alphine W. Jefferson noted, the “war on poverty” had been lost, especially in the Black community, as 36% were impoverished and the commitment to civil rights ended in 1980 (Jefferson, 1986, p. 2).

In 1986, Black America as an aggregate is not better off than it was in 1963. King's dream has not become a reality for most people; in actuality, more people are further away from the elusive "American dream." The nation has not decided how to treat, nor what to do with, its Black population. Blacks are told to register and vote; when they do, there are attempts to dilute that strength through the "gerrymandering" of congressional districts. Blacks are told to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps," and when they do, they are denied access to equal education, housing and public services. There is a dichotomy between the rhetoric of racial progress and the reality of its acquisition. America's pronouncements of equal opportunity and personal and social equity are not possible for most of Black America. Reality for most Black Americans is lost jobs, lost food stamps and transfer payments, lost school lunches, lost student loans, lost colleges, closed hospitals and clinics, empty day-care centers, closed libraries and-most tragically-lost hope. (Jefferson, 1986, p. 5)

**Eighties New York City**

In New York, things for Black Americans also seemed bleak. The White population became the minority for the first time as the number of Blacks, Latinos, and Asians rose. However, segregation among the groups, particularly in housing, remained the same, with Black people increasingly feeling left out of the market (Roberts, 1992). Crack hit the streets, increasing the numbers of homicides and arrests. A group of White men attacked three Black men on Howard Beach in a racialized attack. A young Black woman, Tawanna Brawley, accused a group of White men of raping her. Five young Black boys, known as the Central Park Five, were arrested for the rape of a White woman. The death penalty was encouraged; Trump was a proponent. Ed Koch was the mayor of New York, and the city was considered grimy after facing bankruptcy a few years earlier. Race relations were tense. A poll from *The New York Times* found that 35%
of New Yorkers thought there had been no progress over race relations, 29% said things had become worse, and only 27% said things had improved (Freedman, 1987, p. 1). A White student at St. John’s University saw the problem of race:

There’s definitely a larger problem. . . . It's a quiet problem, a quiet kind of racism. It's not like you see marches or Ku Klux Klan cross-burnings. It's more racial jokes and slurs between members of the same race. The battle hasn't been fought and won. (Freedman, 1987, p. 1)

Marc Washington, a 32-year-old Black man who worked as a contractor for the city, was frank about the situation:

As a Black, you can have a summer house in Sag Harbor, you can have an I.R.A., you can have all the material things. . . . But you still can’t walk through Howard Beach. It takes something like that to smack you in the face. (Freedman, 1987, p. 1)

It was then that Run-D.M.C. decided they too had some stories to tell about life in New York. Though they did not struggle with poverty like so many other Black people, the trio had ambition and dreams they wanted to fulfill, and they knew those dreams would be harder to fulfill as young Black men from New York City. In their authorized biography Tougher Than Leather (Adler, 1987/2000), Joey said they were not interested in message music, even though Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five just had a hit with their 1982 song The Message.27 Instead, Run-D.M.C. left the wigs and the outrageous costumes that had defined early hip-hop (e.g., remnants of the disco era) and simply strived to do one thing: tell their story,

I just thought I’d tell people what the world is like, and how to improve themselves. . . . It wasn’t optimistic or pessimistic it’s just like that, and that’s the way it is. So we put together a pep talk for the kids that was also good dance music, to keep them on the right track. (Adler, 1987/2000, location 845)

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27 Russell Simmons, the group’s manager, said that while it was successful with music critics, it was not on the streets (Forman & Neal, 2011).
The genre of hip-hop, as it is known today, emerged with Run-D.M.C.’s self-titled debut in 1984, which solidified hip-hop’s place in the music world. Run-D.M.C., composed of Joey Simmons (Reverend Run), Daryll McDaniels (D.M.C.), and Jason Mizell, known as Jam Master Jay, did not necessarily promote a rags to riches American dream story that would become prominent in hip-hop (Leland, 2019) but told of their own journey. Their approach, known as “new school” and notable for its aggressive, assertive lyrics, took rap music out of the world of funk and into the streets, telling of the realities young Black men faced combined with boasting, dissing, and social commentary. Run-D.M.C.’s album told the story of how three young boys from Queens engaged with their dreams and failures from the perspective of urban America in a way that music had not done before. As critic John Leland (2019) said, they talked not just about “how cool they were . . . but also about who they were: where they lived . . . where they went to college . . . dishing out advice, integrity, sex appeal, and glamour” (para. 6).

Run-D.M.C. was, as Leland (2019) said, the first group to embrace street life and culture and to romanticize the “b-boy image” (i.e., the bad boy image) even though they were middle-class college kids. This seemed to both make them more accessible to White executives and audiences, while also affirming the experiences of Black youth around the country. Reflecting back on the groups debut, McDaniels noted, “It made the good kids know that they could be associated with this hip-hop thing” (Touré, 2019, para. 6).

Like most of the Sugar Hill Gang, Run-D.M.C. came from a suburban environment. Hollis, a predominantly Black section of Queens, was within the city limits but known as a middle-class suburban enclave for Black and Latino executives or civil
servants “seeking a better life” (Rondinaro, 1985, para. 1). Bill Adler, a White critic, noted their appeal:

They were the first group that came on stage as if they had just come off the street corner. But unlike the first generation of rappers, they were solidly middle class. . . . Neither of them was deprived and neither of them ever ran with a gang, but on stage they became the biggest, baddest, streetest guys in the world. (quoted in Forman & Neal, 2011, p. 149)

The question of class here is important because it presumably shaped the way the group understood and engaged with their American dream, which crossed class lines. That was a novel idea, according to media scholar Herman Gray, who said the Black middle class was often depicted in mainstream White popular culture as being isolated from the Black poor (Gray, 1989, p. 379). Run-D.M.C. sought to disrupt all those notions.

**Run-D.M.C.’s Middle-Class B-Boy Fantasies Bring Rap to the Mainstream**

Run-D.M.C. may not have intended to make a message record with their debut (1984), but their album presented a view of life as young Black men in urban America that many had not heard of before. The lyrics reveal that they, like many in the middle class, believed in the dream but were skeptical that they could achieve it (e.g., “It’s Like That,” “Hard Times”). They believed in the moral component of the dream that focused on equality and sometimes advocated for it (e.g., “Proud to be Black”), considering themselves to be revolutionaries. Yet, at the same time, they also believed in the material version of the American dream that favored individualism, material possessions, and the idea that hard work could guarantee success. Sometimes these conflicting components of the dream were articulated in the same song like in “It’s Like That” (McDaniels et al., 1984, track 6). They do not often engage with systemic marginalization; rather, they
merely allude to it. Sometimes they expressed frustration with their station in the world; sometimes they expressed doubts about change.

**The Moral**

One song, “It’s Like That,” exposed the problems in America as well as an inherent nihilism. “Unemployment at a record high/People coming/People going, people born to die/Don’t ask me, because I don’t know why/But it’s like that, and that’s the way it is” (McDaniels et al., 1984, track 6). On this track, while they understand the importance of money—it is also not everything: “Prices go up, don't let your pocket go down/When you got short money you're stuck on the ground,” but they didn’t ruminate in the situation, and framed it as a simple fact of life.

There is a reference that things may be different for Black people in one stanza: “Bills rise higher every day/We receive much lower pay” (McDaniels et al., 1984, track 6), but it is not pointedly about race or racism. The song received much acclaim for its social consciousness. This recognition may have been well deserved, but at the same time, the lyrics also revealed the group’s belief in the Protestant work ethic based on a Calvinist worldview that values hard work, discipline, and thrift (Weber, 1958). “I said you got to work hard, you want to compete,” D.M.C. said on the track (McDaniels et al., 1984, track 6). Although the group may have felt the need to stress working harder (a reference to the popular quote that Black people have to work twice as hard to get half as far), they seemed to suggest that attaining success was about harder work, as opposed to changing unjust working conditions. “All day I have to work at my peak/Because I need that dollar every day of the week” (McDaniels et al., 1984, track 6).
On “Wakeup” (1984), a song about the dreams of Run-D.M.C., they disengaged from youthful bragging and boasting and talked about their dream of society. Not rooted in any materialism, the song is about working as a collective with no guns, where equality rules the land and everyone’s voices can be heard. “Just people working hand in hand/There was a feeling of peace all across the land/It was a dream (wakeup)” (Simmons et al., 1984, track 7). They invoked a serious tone rather than the sometimes playful boasting tone evident in other tracks and revealed their American dream, a place where they are not just equal but can reveal who they truly are, “Everyone was treated on an equal basis/No matter what colors, religions or races/We weren't afraid to show our faces” (Simmons et al., 1984, track 7).

**Hard Work**

Despite their articulation of the problem of inequality, the group often connected hard work and success, echoing a conservative and religious ideology at the time. Reagan once said, “My philosophy of life is that if we make up our mind what we are going to make of our lives, then work hard toward that goal, we never lose—somehow we win out” (as cited in Hennessey, 2014, para. 8). Repeatedly, the group shows hard work will render success, while indolence will equal failure. On “It’s Like That” (1984), they continue, “You should have gone to school, you could've learned a trade/But you laid in the bed where the bums have laid/Now all the time you're crying that you're underpaid/It's like that (what?) and that's the way it is” (McDaniels et al., 1984, track 6).

How Run-D.M.C. advocated for defeating hard times was less radical than initially appeared to be the case. Though they seemingly understood the problems around
them and dared to dream of a better way, they embraced a “survival of the fittest” strategy, which upheld the idea of exceptionalism as the way to beat hard times:

I'm gonna use my strong mentality
Like the cream of the crop, like the crop of the cream
Beating hard times, that is my theme
Hard times in life, hard times in death
I'm gonna keep on fighting to my very last breath. (Bralower, et al., 1984, track 1).

Run-D.M.C. echoed notions of Alger’s pulling yourself up by your bootstrap ethos constantly stating their success was because they were the best, not just the lucky ones, in their community (Waring, 1983).

**Respectable Guys from Hollis**

In addition to the mantra of hard work, Run-D.M.C. seemed to believe in the importance of the politics of respectability. Hip-hop scholar Nelson George (2005) argued the “survival of the fittest” mentality was critical to hip-hop culture and the competitive nature it bred. With Run-D.M.C it appeared to be more than simply competition. The bars implied that they do not just work hard but are also upstanding citizens, who were “respectable,” and believed in God, which led them to success. They hid their drug usage and promiscuity and instead rapped about their enrollment in college (e.g., D.M.C. boasted, “I go to St. John's University/And since kinde-garten I acquired the knowledge/And after 12th grade I went straight to college”; (Bralower et al., 1984, track 5). Most importantly, they continuously noted their success was because of hard work created through legal means. On *Rock Box*, they made it clear they were “not thugs. . . We don’t drop dimes/And we don’t do crimes” (McDaniels, et al., 1984, track 2).

However, Run-D.M.C. also showed they could relate and understood the street life. They engaged with street life and culture rather than ignored it, embracing rather than isolating
themselves from street life, like shows like *The Cosby Show* (Carsey & Werner, 1984-1992) did. This representation was likely closer to reality for most people in Black America, especially those in the middle class. As sociologist Mary Pattillo explained, “The Black middle class is connected to the Black poor through friendship and kinship as well as geographically” (Pattillo, 1999, p. 12). The way the group straddled these class lines and themes distinguished them from previous groups, but also may have had a role in how they understood the dream could be reached. Their lyrics showed they could relate to the streets. They understood the street. But they were not actually *of* the streets and their aspirations were often more “mainstream.”

**Money Is Key**

Despite their engagement with the more moralistic notions of the dream (especially in songs like “Wakeup”), materialism was a big part of Run-D.M.C.’s act. Reading their lyrics from their debut, it is clear material wealth was part of their American dream fantasy. “Money is the key to end all your woes/Your ups, your downs, your highs and your lows/Won’t you tell me the last time that love bought you clothes?” they rap on “It’s Like That” (McDaniels, et al., 1984, track 6). They bragged about their cars: “I'm drivin Caddy, you fixin a FORD” (McDaniels, et al., 1984, track 2). They defined their clothing preferences while dropping references to specific labels: “never wear the vest they call the Calvin Kleins . . . Cause Calvin Klein's no friend of mine/Don't want nobody's name on my behind (McDaniels, et al., 1984, track 6), and even boasted about their cars and style together at times: “I got a big long Caddy not like a Seville/And written right on the side it reads 'Dressed to Kill’” (McDaniels, et al., 1984,
track 5). However, it is not until their 1986 album, *Raising Hell*, that their material desires became clear.

**Raising Hell**

A few years after the release of another album, the *King of Rock*, that did modestly well, Run-D.M.C. was ready to create new energy and sound, which they did with *Raising Hell*, released in 1986. The album cemented hip-hop as a truly new art form and demonstrated the commercial success of the genre. *Raising Hell* was less about their aspirations and more about their success and fame, told through a merging of rap and rock music. On these tracks, instead of talking about their dream, they visualize their idea of success. This vision often involved the newly rich artists hanging out with women, showing off their vast Adidas collection: “Now the Adidas I possess for one man is rare/Myself homeboy got 50 pair” (Simmons & McDaniels, 1986, track 3), traveling around the world, and boasting about their lyrical skills. However, like on their debut album, the group continued to allude to the fact the American dream may be more than about money and possessions.

On “Dumb Girl” (Simmons & McDaniels, 1986, track 10), a song with a misogynistic tone, the group criticized a young woman who they said was materialistic, uninterested in school, and used drugs. They shamed her because she liked a man, J.C., for his Mercedes and the money he had, instead of focusing on how he would treat her. They denied the woman any agency—something Cardi B reclaims in her lyrics—while they made clear that liking a man for their money was problematic. This problem was not solely gender-based. The group continued to reinforce the notion that wealth gained from the “street” was also unacceptable. But, they also conveyed the fact that they still love
material possessions, like their sneakers. It is implied their goods were bought in a “respectable,” legal way rather than a short cut to the dream by breaking the law:

I wore my sneakers but not a sneak
Nowwww—me and my Adidas do the illest things
We like to stomp out pimps with diamond rings
We slay all suckers who perpetrate
And lay down law from state to state
My Adidas, only bring good news
And they are not used as felon shoes. (Simmons & McDaniels, 1986, track 3)

These proclamations may have been necessary as the media often depicted the group as thugs, blaming them for a barrage of gang fights at their concerts. The group even got lambasted for wearing their Adidas without laces—a style that became popular after prisoners wore them in jail (so they could not strangle anyone)—a trend that was carried on to the street. The group was living the American dream, but even a hit sitcom that was all about the Black dream, the “mainstream” Cosby Show, refused to book them for an appearance (Adler, 2000).

Run-D.M.C.’s platinum album provided plenty of crossover appeal, especially their remake of Aerosmith’s “Walk This Way.” However, the album ended with a single that was less about their individual dreams and more about the progress in Black America. Gone was the boasting and the showing off of success. “Proud to be Black” (Simmons & McDaniels, 1986, track 12), like “Wake Up” (McDaniels, et al., 1984, track 7) on their debut album, was entirely about the moral aspect of the dream. Instead of fancy clothes and cars, at least part of their vision for the dream seemed to be progress for Black people. They rap about the work of people like Harriet Tubman, Jessie Owens, George Washington Carver, and Malcolm X. They acknowledged the problems of
discrimination more clearly than in the past while also stating despite their cool appearances, they also will not turn their back on racism, with lines like:

God damn, I'm tired my man
Don't worry bout what color I am
Because I'll show you how ill, this man can act
It could never be fiction cause it is all fact
And if you get in my way, I will not turn back. (Simmons & McDaniels, 1986, track 12)

It appeared to be a letter to the Black Power movement, a reaffirmation that they too were ready for change and wanted their voices to be heard, “I got a message for the world so listen up it’s brief,” (Simmons & McDaniels, 1986, track 12) they rap, and their words were radical. The group firmly aligned themselves with the radicalism of Malcolm X—noting they “won’t turn the right cheek” (Simmons & McDaniels, 1986, track 12) and stated they were proud of their race. The song ended on a positive note as they rapped that, like civil rights icon Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “We shall overcome.” This showed while the dream of success for this group was about wearing nice clothes, hanging out with women, and being the best, they also had deeper concerns about their community at large. As the years wore on, a new generation of rappers became popular and the mainstreaming of hip-hop, along with its increased alliance with corporate America, shifted the direction of hip-hop.

**Gangster Rap and the Emergence of Biggie**

Soon after *Raising Hell*, a subgenre of rap, gangster rap, known for its glamorization of gangster life, started to gain commercial success after the California group NWA (Niggas With Attitudes) released *Straight Outta Compton* on August 8, 1988 (Grow, 2018). Unlike Run-D.M.C., NWA was unafraid to say they were thugs; they embraced it along with the idea young Black men were living an American nightmare
rather than a dream (Jackson, et al., 1988, track 1). In “Fuck da Police”, the group rapped about their problems with the police and explicitly tied them to being young and Black in America, “Fuck the police comin' straight from the underground/A young nigga got it bad 'cause I'm brown/And not the other color so police think/They have the authority to kill a minority” (Curry, et al., 1988). Like Run D.M.C., they worried about the assumptions people made about them but were more verbally aggressive and violent in their assessment. Though Straight Outta Compton was condemned by the FBI and one of NWA’s videos was banned by MTV, the album went platinum, put the West Coast hip-hop scene on the map and is now widely considered to be one of the greatest hip-hop albums of all time (Grow, 2018). By the time Tupac Shakur, another West Coast rap artist entered the field in 1991, it was clear gangsta rap was officially mainstream (Grow, 2018). But Tupac, the son of a former Black Panther, did not just tell the story of the nightmare, but also the dream, as he merged the political and popular. On one of his earliest tracks, “Panther Power” he rapped about the moral aspect of the American dream:

As real as it seems the American Dream
Ain't nothing but another calculated schemes
To get us locked up shot up back in chains
To deny us of the future rob our names
Kept my history of mystery but now I see
The American Dream wasn't meant for me
Cause lady liberty is a hypocrite she lied to me
Promised me freedom, education, equality
Never gave me nothing but slavery (Shakur, ca. 1988-1991/2007, track 1).

This early single was never one of Tupac’s popular songs—it was not even officially released until after his death—but it did illustrate many of the moral themes of the American dream that would pepper his music and propel him to become one of the most successful rappers of all time. Tupac eventually became a platinum-selling rapper and a
movie star and soon took a young man from Brooklyn, Christopher Wallace, under his wing. Wallace, also known as the Notorious B.I.G, or simply, Biggie, would serve as a bridge, moving the success West Coast rap was having firmly back to the East Coast (Quinn, 2004). Biggie often did this through the use of the rags to riches narratives, where he often explored materialistic riches and deeper thoughts about what the American dream really meant. Unlike Tupac, whose lyrics often focused on street life, Biggie’s music is often concerned with his transformation from street life and what happened after he became successful illustrating the different ways two rappers engaged with the dream. Eithne Quinn (2004) noted that this could also be a regional difference. He found that the rappers from the East coast were preoccupied “with the higher echelons of the criminal chic … replacing the street-gang, laid back imagery of the West was the resplendent ‘bling’ lifestyle of the Black don/mogul” (Quinn, 2004, p. 186). Biggie was influenced by both the gangster trend in the West but also by acts like Run-D.M.C.

However, he put his spin on the American dream, using stories from his life and times as a drug dealer to fuel his rhymes. In doing so, Biggie composed narratives that were vulnerable, optimistic, and gritty about life as a Black man in New York City. Like many in music and film in the past, Biggie turned the traditional “bad man” (Levine, 2007) into a hero, turning the gangsters and thugs into heroes of the hood who desired the American dream.

**Life in the Nineties**

By the mid-1990s, Black America was still attempting to thrive. The median income for Black men was a little under $15,000 (about $25,000 adjusted for inflation), less than 25% had college degrees, and their unemployment rate was at 10.8% (Morrison,
2015. Even Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall seemed to be down about progress, noting in 1992, “I wish I could say that racism and prejudice were only distant memories, but as I look around I see that even educated Whites and African Americans . . . have lost hope in equality” (as quoted in Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 1998, para 30.). In 1997, according to research from the Brookings Institute, only 33% of Black people thought their lives and race relations were better than in 1980, a sharp decline from previous years (as cited in Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 1998) and the Black homicide and victimization rate peaked (Cooper & Smith, 2011). Despite these facts, Black people, particularly Black men, seemed to be in the media more than ever. There was the dominance of Michael Jordan on the basketball court. The murder case against football legend O.J. Simpson, dubbed by many as the trial of the century. A slew of films spearheaded by Spike Lee and John Singleton were box office hits and the Million Man March in Washington, DC, brought together hundreds of thousands of Black men. One columnist from the *Los Angeles Times* said “Black men were everywhere:”

> Never before in this country have Black men sold so many newspapers or books, been on the cover of so many magazines, been the topic of so many radio and television talk shows. (Ross, 1995, para. 2)

But just because the stories of Black men may have been everywhere, it does not mean their stories were *heard*, especially in New York.

Like hip-hop, New York City was also becoming mainstream. Rich people were moving back and the city was undergoing a sort of metamorphosis. Times Square had begun a cleanup process due to re-zoning laws; Harlem was gentrifying, and despite the brief rule of a Black mayor, a new regime was in power, once again sparking racial tensions (“Did Giuliani really clean up Times Square?,” 2007) in the city. As mayor,
Rudolph Giuliani cut welfare rolls by 500,000 saying that welfare “enslaved” Black people, laid off Black political appointees and replaced them with White conservatives, and refused to meet with Black leaders, stating they had to “learn how to discipline themselves in the way in which they speak” if they wanted to talk to him (Hicks, 1994, para. 2). He also implemented harsh policing policies that received mixed reviews. Crime rates were down by 60% in the city, but police officers “stopped and frisked” 16 Black males for each one who was arrested (Powell, 2007, para. 50). Despite the changing city landscape, the world for young Black people had changed little from what Run-D.M.C. had experienced nearly a decade earlier. However, hip-hop had changed. Not only did the genre rise to the mainstream, but it had become big business, meaning hip-hop was no longer just about artists rapping about the American dream. Instead, it had become the American dream.

**Things Done Changed**

From the beginning, Biggie set up his dream story as distinct from that of Run-D.M.C., who were his idols. Whereas being good at music and being upstanding people (not thugs) was critical to Run-D.M.C.’s success, Biggie’s pathway to success first began as a drug dealer. Only after he signed a record contract was he able to leave street life. Yet Biggie seemed to believe both music and drug dealing were hustles needed to access the dream and whether that hustle stemmed from the music industry or the streets seemed irrelevant since both were a game. The music industry represented a new way to be a hustler that did not constantly involve putting his life at risk and a way in which he could be independent and make money like he always wanted to.
His 1994 debut album, *Ready to Die* chronicled his new legal path to the American dream as a hip-hop artist. On the first single “Things Done Changed,” Biggie sets up his transformation story. He tells of a previous life where upward mobility had been challenging.

If I wasn't in the rap game  
I'd probably have a ki, knee-deep in the crack game  
Because the streets is a short stop  
Either you're slingin' crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot  
Shit, it's hard being young from the slums  
Eatin' five cent gums, not knowing where your meal's coming from  
And now the shit's getting crazier and major (Wallace et al., 1994, track 2)

Unlike the rappers in Run-D.M.C., who mentioned poverty and the awful state of the world as somewhat distant problems, Biggie gave a first-hand account of the challenges he faced. Biggie was ambivalent, at the time as to whether hip-hop could lead to the dream. Back then, it seemed like he believed the only way success happened to a Black man in America was if you were a drug dealer or basketball player. Given the context of Black male disenfranchisement, one can understand why Biggie would be concerned his success story may not come true, despite the fact he, much like Run-D.M.C., did not grow up in poverty.

He was born to two Jamaican immigrants who moved to America (his dad from London, his mother from Jamaica) in pursuit of their own American dream. While his father exited his life at an early age, Biggie, according to cultural critic Marcus Reeves (2009), lived a “relatively quiet and middle-class” (p. 186) life in a spacious three-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. His mom was a preschool teacher who enrolled him in Catholic School, and, by all accounts, it seemed the young man had a life filled with most of his everyday desires because his mom did
not want him to get caught up in street life (Reeves, 2009). Still, as with so many members of the Black middle- and working-class, street life was not far away. Much in the way the middle-class youth of Run-D.M.C. experienced the world in Hollis, Biggie lived in a community where “crime, hopelessness, and urban blight,” lingered just a few blocks away on Fulton Street (Reeves, 2009, p. 186), and he too enjoyed fantasizing about life on the street. Around the end of middle school, Biggie, an award-winning student who had dreams of studying English or being a dentist, decided he wanted to see what the street life could offer him.

According to Reeves (2009), a combination of “curiosity, adolescent materialism, and the aching desire to free himself from an overprotective mother” (p. 187) led him to start dealing drugs. A charming persona with a good business sense, Biggie began to making money in the drug game as crack grew in popularity. He was finally able to afford the expensive clothes that his mother refused to by him, but because his mother also did not know about his new occupation, he was forced to hide them. By age 16, Biggie dropped out of high school and dealt drugs full-time. He had some encounters with the criminal justice system and ended up living in the South for a while, a place where he believed there was more opportunity for his growing business. He also began rapping on the side.

One day Mister Cee, the deejay for Brooklyn rapper, Big Daddy Kane, heard his tape and knew he had discovered a talent. The tape made its way to the leading hip-hop magazine at the time, and after ended up in the magazine’s “Unsigned Hype” column. A&R representative, Sean Combs (later known as Puff Daddy or P. Diddy), signed him and Biggie’s official music began (Reeves, 2009). As a new artist, who was perhaps
unconvinced fame and fortune could be his, Biggie still saw dealing drugs as his main path to upward mobility. Biggie recorded a few tracks when Puffy was still at Uptown Records, but then went back to selling drugs in the South. In “Gimme the Loot,” he rapped, “When it's time to eat a meal I rob and steal/Cause mom duke ain't givin' me shit/So for the bread and butter, I leave niggas in the gutter” (Wallace & Harvey, 1994, track 3). Similarly, on the track “Ready to Die,” he echoes the sentiment and the need for money in his life but also ties his drug business to wanting material things.

I want it all from the Rolexes to the Lexus
Getting paid is all I expected
My mother didn't give me what I want, what the fuck?
Now I've got a Glock making motherfuckers duck
Shit is real and hungry's how I feel
I rob and steal because that money got that whip appeal. (Wallace & Harvey, 1994, track 6)

When Puffy left that label to start Bad Boy Records, Biggie finally left the drug dealing industry after a reported $25,000 signing deal. Finally, it seemed Biggie had made it.

**Material Wealth**

To Biggie, much of the American dream can be viewed in terms of riches. Hip-hop scholar Nelson George (1998) blamed the crack epidemic and its easy get-quick money, plus the value of American culture at large, on some of this sentiment:

Materialism replaced spirituality as the definer of life’s worth. An appreciation for life’s intangible pleasures, like child rearing and romantic love, took a beating in places where children became disposable and sex was commodified. The go-go capitalism of Reagan’s America (and its corporate greed) flowed down to the streets stripped of its jingoistic patriotism and fake piety. The unfettered free market of crack generated millions and stoked a voracious appetite for ‘goods,’ not good.” (George, 1998, p. 41)

George also noted:

It is also essential to understand that the values that underpin so much hip hop—
materialism, brand consciousness, gun iconography, anti-intellectualism—are very much by-products of the larger American culture, all of its most disturbing themes are rooted in this country’s dysfunctional values. (George, 1998, p. xiii)

Success for Biggie was making money. On “Machine Gun Funk” (Wallace & Harvey, 1994, track 4), he said, “used to sell crack, so I could stack my riches” and on “The What” (Wallace et al., 1994, track 9), Biggie plainly stated, “I want the Fuckin Fortune like the Wheel.” On the rhythm and blues-laced track, “Big Poppa” he showed off his newfound money:

No need to be greedy, I got mad friends with Benzes
C-notes by the layers, true fuckin' players
Jump in the Rover and come over
Tell your friends jump in the GS3, I got the chronic by the tree. (Wallace et al., 1994, track 13)

Biggie continued on that same song to show off his riches, mentioning his beloved Coogi sweaters and convertible BMWs, as signs his dream had come true.

At the same time, his lyrics revealed an understanding the dream was deeper than material success. When Puff Daddy asked Biggie how he was doing on the same track: “How you living, Biggie Smalls?” Biggie answered, “In mansions and Benzes/Givin' ends to my friends, and it feels stupendous” (Wallace et al., 1994, track 13). Biggie felt good about being able to provide for his friends (Wallace et al., 1994, track 13).

Biggie certainly was showing off the wealth he had acquired, but he also continued to rap about the importance of sharing his riches with his community. His dream, it is implied, is not just about individual success, but the collective ability for all of his friends to also be able to find material success. Even with his newfound pleasures, he did not seem to place his entire dream on material possessions (Wallace et al., 1994, track 13).
In his song, “Big Poppa,” Biggie quickly dismissed his enjoyment of his money as a “foolish pleasure,” and seemed to be increasingly questioning whether material riches were the key to the American dream. Like Run-D.M.C, Biggie seemed to believe some of the more conservative values around success, namely in the hard work narrative and the “respectable” hustle: “Fuck the world, don't ask me for shit/Everything you get you gotta work hard for it,” (Wallace et al., 1994, track 9). As Biggie wrestled with his new life in his lyrics, he too, despite his love for the gangster persona, seemed to want to show off the fact that his wealth was achieved through a legitimate hustle—through the music industry. Additionally, like when Bungleton became wealthy and tried to explain his previous behaviors, as Biggie became more successful, he constantly engaged with the notion of redemption and justification for his past. He was not exactly apologetic, but was clear that he did not rob, steal, and sell drugs, because he wanted things, but because he had to eat (Wallace et. al., 1994, track 14). Later, his mother would dispel the idea Biggie was so impoverished he needed to turn to the drug trade.

Still, certainly, Biggie understood how hard it was for a Black man to be upwardly mobile in America. Biggie implied he had no other option but the drug trade because he did not want to risk his health to play football, and government was corrupt: “Our Mayor Giuliani ain’t trying to see a Black man turn to Gotti.” (Wallace, et. al., 1994, track 11). He said his mom warned him, but he did not realize the error of his ways until he was in jail:

Scarface, King of New York, I want to be it  
Rap was secondary, money was necessary  
Until I got incarcerated, kinda scary  
C74-Mark 8 set me straight  
Not able to move behind the great steel gate
Time to contemplate, damn, where did I fail?
All the money I stacked was all the money for bail (Glover, et al., 1994, track 14).

Biggie’s narrative, while often violent at the core, was about being a decent stand-up and moral person who had goals, good intentions and wanted to help his friends and family. He cared about the material success of the dream, but also saw success as more than just about money. This rags to riches redemption can be read through many of the songs on *Ready to Die*, but nowhere is the American dream story clearer than on one of his most famous songs, what James Braxton Peterson (2016) called the “come-up narrative”, “Juicy.”

**Juicy**

Considered by many one of the best hip-hop singles of all time, “Juicy” (Wallace, et al., 1994, track 10), defined Biggie’s engagement with the American dream. In the song, Biggie called out the teachers who told him he would not be anything and the people who lived in front of the building where he sold drugs. He noted he sold drugs so he could feed his daughter, making another reference to respectability he desired. From the start, Biggie showed his power and disregard for the naysayers because his life was great. In the first verse, Biggie referred to the dreams he had growing up in his famous line:

> It was all a dream, I used to read *Word Up!* Magazine
> Salt-n-Pepa and Heavy D up in the limousine
> Hangin’ pictures on my wall
> Every Saturday *Rap Attack*, Mr. Magic, Marley Marl
> I let my tape rock ’til my tape popped
> Smokin’ weed in Bambú, sippin’ on Private Stock
> Way back, when I had the red and black lumberjack
> With the hat to match. (Wallace et al., 1994, track 10)
“Juicy” is the quintessential American dream story. Biggie raps about his desire to become a famous rapper, like the ones he read about in magazines, and then he actually becomes the person that others read about. Here we see another apparent theme. Biggie’s success was growing with hip-hop’s. He represented the American dream, but for him, so does hip-hop: “Remember rappin’ Duke, duh-ha, duh-ha/You never thought that hip-hop would take it this far” (Wallace et al., 1994, track 10).

Biggie attributed his success to individual skills—both his hard work and talent: “Now I’m in the limelight ‘cause I rhyme tight,” Biggie said on “Juicy” (Wallace et al., 1994, track 10). But at the same time, he was defining success in terms of his new wealth and making sure that it did not change him. We see the moral and the material version of the dream consistently converge as Biggie tries to redefine what the American dream is for him. Biggie had made it in the White run music industry and was “legitimate” in a different way than he had been previously as a drug dealer. On “Juicy” it becomes clear that wealth to him was increasingly become less about material possessions but more about having power and a stake in this country, an equality of a different sorts and a broader worldview. Biggie boasted about being a homeowner in Queens, a place with more homes for the Black middle and upper classes, and traveling—another traditional marker of the dream, according to Jim Cullen, (2003). He also rapped about giving back to his community, a trait Feng (2009) believed to be a particularly unique way people of color related to the American dream. He said he was “far from cheap” and wanted to “spread love, it’s the Brooklyn way” (Wallace et al., 1994, track 10).

Unlike Run-D.M.C., Biggie questioned the need for education in order to find success and acknowledged the treatment of Black men in America: “Interviews by the
pool/Considered a fool 'cause I dropped out of high school/Stereotypes of a Black male
misunderstood” (Wallace et al., 1994, track 10). His success reflected progress; people
now wanted to hear his voice and story and he seemed to believe his success was not just
a win for him, for Black people, and Black men in particular.

By the final verse, Biggie was more focused on the material gains of his dream
(e.g., his “Super Nintendo, Sega Genesis, cars and big screen tv”), but also urged people
to “reach for the stars” and not to let people hold them back (Wallace et al., 1994, track
10), clearly a nod to the moral component of the dream. Biggie believed his American
dream story came about because of his persistence, his survival skills, his pure talent,
and, of course, his redemption. He was unapologetic about success and was rather happy:
“Damn right I like the life I live/Cause I went from negative to positive” (Wallace et al.,
1994, track 10).

**Life After Death**

Biggie’s first album was about his struggle and transformation to become a hip-
hop star, but his second, released in 1997, mirroring Run-D.M.C’s trajectory, was about
life at the top. He was even more preoccupied with the materialistic aspect of success
than in the past. *Life After Death* (1997) begins with him dreaming about “leap jets and
coupes” (Coombs, et al., 1997, track 2), but he is also struggling to reconcile his new
world with his past violent lifestyle. The song “Somebody’s Gotta Die,” seemed to be
another way of engaging with the American dream as well as the guilt he seemed to
struggle with as he became enmeshed in his new lifestyle. On the song, though he
partook in a revenge shooting spree until he heard a baby crying and realized how violent
his life still remained. Biggie struggled with that duality on *Life After Death* (1997), both
frustrated by and enjoying his success. Biggie wanted to claim he was street, while he also acknowledged he was different. On “Hypnotize,” Biggie differentiated himself from the ordinary and common man, and again we read his self-view as exceptional: “Sicka than your average” (Wallace, 1997, track 3).

Biggie continued to promote his “come up,” but even within those lyrics, he was a gangster who nevertheless toed the line of respectability. His condo and car were paid, he paid off his debts, and he was in control of his finances. Biggie was flashy and while he understood why people might be upset at his new lifestyle and his flaunting of his wealth, he did not care. He was enjoying the privileges wealth brought to his life--travel, cars, jewelry, clothes, women, and caviar. His rapping was more mellow, and his lack of stress showed. While some people thought he was less “hungry” and perhaps less dynamic on this album, a sentiment I agree with, Biggie’s skill as a lyricist had expanded. He largely used it to show off his wealth, “You got it nigga flaunt it,” he said on “Hypnotize” (Wallace, 1997, track 3). On a track with rapper Jay-Z, called, “I love the dough,” Biggie talked about how much he liked having expensive things and barely mentioned poverty (Wallace et al., 1997, track 7). However, Biggie’s obsession with material possessions was not just relegated to rapping about luxury items, like platinum watches and designer clothing, now he was also interested in good wines and hanging out with celebrities. His food choices had been upgraded from his Welch’s grape juice and steak to lobster; a sign, it seems, that he defined success as more than expensive things but also an exclusive lifestyle:

We hit makers with acres
Roll shakers in Vegas, you can't break us
Lost chips on Lakers, gassed off Shaq
Country house, tennis courts on horseback
Ridin', decidin' cracked crab or lobster
Who say mobsters don't prosper? (Wallace et al., 1997, track 7)

Biggie tried to maintain his connection with his community but knew that was hard because he, too, changed: “Way niggas look at me now, kinda strange/I hate y'all too/Rather be in Caribbean sands with Rachel” (Wallace et al., 1997, track 7). This line reflects his realization that he did not want to go back to his old life. Despite the fakeness implied in his new one, like the new women who now desire him, he was happy with his new American dream story. At the same time, he was cautious and still recognized that he had problems. In “Mo’ Money Mo’ Problems” (Wallace et al., 1997, track 10) and Niggas Bleed (Wallace et al., 1997, track 11), he showed that he understood the system was stacked against him and that material wealth did not necessarily mean that one was happy nor equal. Still, his critique of the American system was not strong on this album, with the systemic slights against him seeming more like inconveniences than problems all people who look like him faced. Marcus Reeves (2009) said Life After Death (Wallace et al., 1997) was the signaling of the new commercial era of hip-hop more focused on materialism rather than the struggle; based on his lyrics alone, this is clear.

Overall, on Life After Death, Biggie was more relaxed and prouder he had achieved a better life for him and his family. The freedom associated with achieving some aspect of the material American dream was now present in his life. Perhaps this breezy aesthetic was due to the increased presence of Puffy, who seemed more interested in mainstreaming the genre: “I make music because I want to make people dance” (as cited in Bronson, 2003, song 856, “I’ll be Missing You”). Perhaps it was also because of the freedom and level of success he had finally achieved. On “Notorious Thugs,” the chorus “Let’s ride/get high” (Coombs et al., 1997, track 2), life feels different for the
rapper. The energetic song, a collaboration with Bone-Thugs-N-Harmony, feels lighter and less weighed down. He seemed less worried about poverty, racism, or even the criminal justice system. He made it clear that these troubles have not evaporated but having secured more money and more access to power, he knew things had changed. He was not just a poor man or street hustler with wealth, but a mainstream successful artist. It seemed freeing for him and he relaxed. This freedom—as for Bungalton Green, the comic strip character when he escaped racism and then poverty—seemed hard for Black men like Biggie, and this, too, could subtly be read as the American dream. It was also clear on the track, “Going Back to Cali,” another song about him having fun, “Goin back to Cali, strictly for the weather/Women and the weed—sticky green” (Harvey et al., 1997, track 16). California was often used as the American dream realized, and for Biggie, it represented a respite from his stressful life in New York. Even though “Going Back to Cali” was fueled with some stress for him, namely his conflict with Tupac, he liked it because he could enjoy himself. At the same time, he was clear that life was not equal for him and whether or not he achieved the more moral aspect of the dream seemed unclear. The chaotic positioning of songs that seemingly go from happy to sad proves how fleeting this feeling of happiness was for Biggie and shows how he may not have been able to enjoy the spoils of the American dream because he was too saddled by the American nightmare.

**Sky’s the Limit**

The dream theme is clear throughout both of Biggie’s major albums, but the themes initiated in “Juicy” are carried through in “Sky’s the Limit” from the 1997 album *Life After Death* (Wallace et al., 1994, track 10; 1997, track 20). The song “Sky’s the
Limit” attempted to recreate the positive upward mobility story told in “Juicy.” Despite all of his success, life was also challenging for Biggie during this time; he was in a car accident, which required him to use a walking cane and left him in a lot of pain.

The track starts with Biggie’s mother, Voletta Wallace, telling Biggie while she loves him, she worries because his lifestyle is trouble, and she always wanted him to understand he could fulfill his dreams “‘cause the sky’s the limit.” The track was more produced and less raw, but reproduced the rags to riches narrative, or as Biggie put it, going from “ashy to classy.” His main goal seemed to be to show people in the streets the American dream was accessible to them:

Sky's the limit and you know that you keep on
Just keep on pressing on
Sky's the limit and you know that you can have
What you want, be what you want
Sky's the limit and you know that you keep on
Just keep on pressing on. (Wallace et al., 1997, track 20)

Biggie’s message was conservative and limiting in that he placed the burden for success on the individual and ignored the reality that most Black Americans, particularly if they did not come from wealth, could not be anything they wanted. By continuing to propel the Horatio Alger story, Biggie placed the burden on individuals to do better. If you just “keep pressing on” and just work harder, you can be better and have better things, instead of asking the systems and institutions that discriminate against people of color and poor people to do better. The “work hard to win” ideology has major implications for young people who want to make it, especially for those who do not realize the role of luck in success for most people, especially Black Americans.

The conservative aspect of this dream continued, and unlike in the past, Biggie promoted education as a path to success, stating he wanted to make enough money to put
his daughter through college, so she “don’t need no man” (Wallace et al., 1997, track 20). At the same time, there is a progressive aspect to the lyrics, as much of hip-hop remained deeply misogynistic. Biggie understood gender inequality in the country and wanted his daughter to have her independence. Like at the end of “Juicy” (Wallace et al., 1994, track 10), Biggie advised people to believe in their dreams by enacting on their own agency and doing what is in their heart: “Stay far from timid/Only make moves when ya heart’s in it/And live the phrase Sky’s the Limit” (Wallace, et al., 1997, track 20), another optimistic and hopeful cry to Black Americans. The song never became as popular as “Juicy,” but was certified gold after its release.

**Nobody**

On the last few tracks of the *Life After Death* album, Biggie became increasingly worried about his American dream (Wallace, et al., 1997, tracks 20-22). I attribute this anxiety to Biggie not fully feeling like he had achieved the moral dream, which included equality and equity because as a Black man in America he still lacked power both in the industry and from the criminal justice system. He finally understood why he had constant anxiety about success, realizing that even with material success, he still did not have power and thus had not obtained the entire American dream.

In “My Downfall,” a track written and performed by Run-D.M.C. with Biggie, Biggie knew he had gotten to the top, but he was worried about staying there. He was worried the music game, like the drug industry, would ultimately lead to his demise. Using the line inspired by Run-D.M.C.’s “Together Forever,” D.M.C. rapped, “That's not all, MC's have the gall/To pray and pray for my downfall (they pray)” (Wallace et al.,
1997, track 22). It was a line, D.M.C. said later, only a few people, especially Black men, would understand. He believed the lines connected the two prominent icons of hip-hop:

Here is the hottest dude at that time, in the era of that generation, wants to use my little piece of my rhyme. . . . Because when I said that, he understood. See, only kings can understand what that meant: Shut ‘em down, step back, because they pray for your downfall. (Dukes, 2010, para. 5)

Despite attaining material wealth, power, and success in his life, Biggie still worried about his precarious position at the top: “Competition still fear it, shit don’t ask me/I went from ashy to nasty to class, and still” (Wallace et al., 1997, track 22). In the end it seemed, despite his desire for wealth, he realized the importance of achieving the moral aspect of the American dream too and without it, nothing mattered.

His last song on Life After Death makes clear exactly how Biggie felt about the American dream and its attainment. It seems he felt like even with all his success, his life would not matter until he was dead. Biggie, who often reflected the nihilism in hip-hop that Cornel West (1994) talked about, understood that in the end money does not really matter because “you’re nobody until somebody kills you” (Wallace et al., 1997, track 24). He raps, “You can be the shit, flash the fattest five (that's right)/Have the biggest dick, but when your shell get hit/You ain't worth spit, just a memory” (Wallace et al., 1997, track 24). It was only in death Biggie believed the dream came true and perhaps he was right. It was only after his fatal shooting in California that his records went platinum. Ready to Die, now recognized as one of the greatest albums of all time, was certified platinum in 1998, a year after Biggie’s death.

**The Obama Era**

Nearly 20 years after Biggie’s death, hip-hop was still going strong and continued to engage with ideas around the American dream and materialism. It had become a global
phenomenon and though sometimes far removed from the streets, its artists still wrestled with notions of the American dream and success, though the moral component of the dream was still on the mind of rappers perhaps because of the 2008, which disproportionately impacted Black families. One report stated Black households would have 40% less wealth—or be $98,000 poorer—by 2031 due to the recession (White, 2015, para. 2) after the election of the first Black president Barack Obama.

Obama, a hip-hop fan himself and a representative of hope and change seemed to inspire good feelings. After the 2008 Democratic Convention, Jay-Z, who went to school with Biggie, told reporters after the that Obama’s success was a big step for Black America: “You can be anything you want to be in the world. Black people are no longer left out of the American Dream” (cited in Yanes & Carter, 2014, p. 90). Hip-hop artists continued to show a more nuanced rendering of the dream. Young Jeezy’s song was the perfect song; “My President,” showed pride at the moral victory of having a Black president as well as his joy about his own material riches: “My president is Black, my Lambo's blue/And I'll be goddamned if my rims ain't too” (Jenkins & Jones, 2008, track 18). Combining the moral argument and the excitement of having a Black president with materialism, Jeezy showed how intertwined these concepts are in Black American success narratives.

Obama embraced the hip-hop community. He invited rappers like Run-D.M.C. to the White House and seemed to develop genuine relationships with some of its biggest stars, such as Jay-Z and his wife, superstar Beyonce Knowles (Andrews, 2017). In 2017, after he left his second term in office, Obama said he and Jay understood each other, repeating the American dream story: “We know what it’s like not to come from much,
and to know people who didn’t get the same breaks that we did” (Andrews, 2017, para. 7). Jay-Z, a former colleague of Biggie who rapped about money, drugs, and hustling, becoming friends with the President of the United States, showed just how far the hip-hop genre had come.

Still, as the Black Lives Matter movement challenged police brutality, the #MeToo movement fought against sexual assault, and climate activists began calling for environmental justice, artists began challenging the privilege and power in America by engaging in conversations about the state of the country. Even Jay-Z, who collaborated with Biggie on the song, “I Love the Dough” seemed to realize the post-racial America he believed was possible years earlier may not come. In “Story of OJ”, a song about racial stereotypes, culture, and media, Jay-Z recognized the systemic oppression Black people face: "Light nigga, dark nigga, faux nigga, real nigga/Rich nigga, poor nigga, house nigga, field nigga/Still nigga,” (Carter et al., 2017, track 2). He said the song was about how as a culture “we’re gonna push this forward. . . . How, when you have some type of success, to transform that into something bigger” (Carter et al., 2017, track 2). Still Jay-Z’s American dream continued to rest on a conservative vision of the dream and one that favored the individual versus the social and structural despite his acknowledgment of racism and White supremacy. His dream it seemed remained to be based on ownership, credit, and consumption. While Jay-Z spoke about building wealth and legacy, he believed money would solve his problems: “Financial freedom my only hope/Fuck livin' rich and dyin' broke” (Carter et al., 2017, track 2). He criticized the superficial materialism he once cared about but did not renounce material goods or wealth building as part of the American dream:
I bought every V12 engine
Wish I could take it back to the beginnin'
I coulda bought a place in DUMBO before it was DUMBO
For like 2 million
That same building today is worth 25 million
Guess how I'm feelin'? Dumbo (Carter et al., 2017, track 2)

At the same time, hip-hop continued to grow outside of the coasts with other regions, particularly the South, producing some of the more popular mainstream artists like Migos, OutKast Lil Wayne, and Trina. The genre exploded so much that in 2009, The New York Times donned Atlanta as “hip-hop’s center of gravity” (Caramanica, 2009, para. 12).

New York Today

The rise of southern rap was not a surprise considering the state of New York in the 21st century. Young Black people were leaving New York and moving to the South. A report released in 2016 by the New York City comptroller, Scott Stringer, found between 2000 and 2014, about 61% of young people moving to New York were White, while only nine percent of 18- to 29-year-olds moving into the city were Black (Allen, 2017). Additionally, another study found that out of 314 “super-gentrified or exclusive” neighborhoods in metro New York, 71 of them had transitioned between 1990 and 2016, seeing areas transition from low-income classifications to a median household income of $140,000 (UC Berkeley, 2019, para. 8) and creating more exclusionary communities.

Areas in Manhattan, Queens, and particularly Brooklyn, were overrun with gentrifiers looking to live in the very brownstones where Biggie had grown up. The economy was booming—at least for a certain class of people—and despite the 1.5 million New Yorkers living in poverty, rents were at an all-time high (Taylor, 2019). In 2018
alone, the city reached its largest economic boom in 70 years (Conley, 2018). The median rent had become $3,500—twice as high as the national median rate (O’Regan, 2019).

Race relations remained strained. After a range of high-profile killings of Black Americans by police officers, including Eric Garner in Staten Island in 2014, who famously uttered, “I can’t breathe” Black Lives Matter protests raged in New York City. Black people were tired, frustrated, and wondered about the change they had thought had occurred years ago all while Wall Street profits soared. Hate crimes rose (Allen, 2017) however, homicides were at a 70-year low in 2018 (Kanno-Youngs, 2019). The city for some was once again the site of the American dream and others the nightmare as it continued to be a place for the have and have nots.

**Cardi B**

Belcalis Marlenis Almanzar, also known as Cardi B, came to prominence after Trump’s election. The South Bronx rapper had increasingly gained notoriety after posting a number of popular videos on Instagram but really craved success as an artist. Soon after, she began bringing her American dream story to a mass audience in the vein of both Run-D.M.C. and Biggie.

In the era of Me Too, a movement founded by a Black woman who exposed the pervasiveness of sexual assault, Cardi B’s voice through her online media persona and trap inspired music that was focused female empowerment and pleasure added another lens to look at the American dream in hip-hop. Her rhymes were often about material riches—sociologist Matthew Oware (2018) found bravado and braggadocio were just as prominent in the lyrics of female rappers as their male counterparts because “money conveys status and power” (Oware, 2018, p. 88)—but her voice on social media often
was about the moral aspect of the dream. Cardi B embraced a fairly radical political position for a mainstream artist. She did not shy away from her past as an exotic dancer; instead, she was open about it both in her music, on social media, and in interviews. Like Biggie, she saw her past life as an avenue for her dream story to come true and it became a critical part of her narrative. After being discovered from videos she posted online about her life, Cardi B found fame on the show Love and Hip-Hop: New York in 2015, which charted her pursuit of music fame.

In 2017, she again found success and signed a record deal. She released two mixtapes before releasing the track “Bodak Yellow” in 2017. Cardi B’s likeability, business savvy, and charm, along with a pretty face, light skin, slim build, ample implants and most importantly, true rhyming skills made her first release a hit. “Bodak Yellow” reached Number 1 on the Billboard charts and stayed on the chart for 35 weeks (Billboard, n.d). Cardi B was the first female rapper to achieve that status since Lauryn Hill, 19 years earlier. Cardi B’s rise was a modern-day success story, combined with social media savvy for a true millennial story for the new hip-hop era. Soon Cardi B, the child of Trinidadian and Dominican parents, was being called the new American dream (Ellis-Peterson, 2017). A writer for Vogue.com echoed those sentiments:

In many ways, Cardi B represents a new generation of the self-made American Dream, rising from reality TV to the top of the Billboard charts, all while remaining unapologetically true to herself and her voice (which we hear loudly and proudly through her epic Instagram feed). (Bobb, 2019, para. 2)

Though much of Cardi B’s fame is based on her genuine talent as a hip-hop artist, her persona is also an important part of her work. More than in previous sections, I complicate Cardi B’s vision of the dream by examining both her lyrics and her social media presence, as she has a different relationship with the media than past artists. While
Cardi B engaged with the American dream through her music, primarily through the come-up narrative, she also interfaces with the dream outside of her music. In these different locations, she engaged with the dream in different ways. In her music, she often engaged with the material aspect of the dream and on social media, the moral, though overlap still occurred. It does not make one version of her dream better or worse, but it does show again that the dream is still far more complicated in the world of hip-hop than it is often given credit for.

**Cardi B’s Radical Social Media**

On social media, Cardi B has been honest about what she has done to achieve her dreams. She has shared her opinions on many subjects, including plastic surgery, love, inequality, and what she believes will help make America better. She has consistently engaged in politics. She has criticized Donald Trump, especially his treatment of immigrants (DJ Vlad, 2017b) and talked about her love for Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Judd, 2018). Cardi B has thrown her support behind democratic socialist, Bernie Sanders, and noted that because she believed in Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling protest against brutality, which he was criticized for, she declined to perform at the Superbowl in 2019. At that moment, she revealed that wealth was not her ultimate dream: “You have to sacrifice that. . . . I got to sacrifice a lot of money to perform. But there’s a man who sacrificed his job for us, so we got to stand behind him” (cited in Landrum, 2019, para.4).

Cardi B was one of the first hip-hop artists to support looters after the death of a Black man George Floyd at the hands of several police officers sparked nationwide protests in 2020:

Seeing people looting and going extremely outraged, it makes me feel like, 'Yes! Finally! Finally motherfuckers is gonna hear us now. Yeah!' And as much as
people is so against it, at this point I feel like I'm not against it. . . . It's really frustrating . . . police brutality been going on even way before I was born. . . . I've been doing police brutality videos ever since my teeth been fucked up. And the only shit that changed has been my fucking teeth. (Kaufman, 2020, para. 7)

On her Instagram page, Cardi B continued to advocate for justice for Breonna Taylor, a woman who was killed by police officers during a raid on her home (Belfiore, 2020).

On her social media sites and during interviews, Cardi B has consistently shown a dedication to the moral side of the American dream. She gives nuance to important political issues of the day, even the ones that may feel radical, and makes issues of working-class people a prominent part of her platform. She also seemed to focus on issues concerning women and sex work. From the beginning, Cardi B asserted that her life as an exotic dancer was a vehicle of female agency, empowerment and the American dream. To her dancing was a source of money, female autonomy and as a source of pleasure:

Would people feel some type of way if I was a cashier-turned-rapper. . . . People want me to be so full of shame that I used to dance. I would never be ashamed of it. I made a lot of money, I had a good time and it showed me a lot—it made me open my eyes about how people are, how men are, about hunger and passion and ambition. (Macpherson, 2017, para. 7)

However, Cardi B also connected her personal life story to the more significant problems of systemic inequality and connected them to questions of social justice: “How was I gonna leave if I only made $200 every week? Ain’t no way” (DJ Vlad, 2017a).

However, this critical lens is sometimes missing in Cardi B’s music and seemed to change when she engaged in the American dream in her lyrics. For example, when talking about sex work in her music, Cardi B first acknowledged she had no choice but to engage in this type of work because of the limitations on her earning potential,
presumably as both a woman and a person of color. However, she quickly moved on to a more conservative commentary that distinguished her work as an exotic dancer from those who have penetrative contact with their clients. This hierarchical separation seemed less than radical:

Look, they gave a bitch two options: strippin' or lose
Used to dance in a club right across from my school
I said "dance" not "fuck," don't get it confused
Had to set the record straight 'cause bitches love to assume. (Mill et al., 2017, track 1)

The song, “Get Up 10,” (Mill et al., 2017, track 1) the first on her debut album, Invasion of Privacy was reminiscent of “Juicy” (Wallace et al., 1994, track 10) as a come-up narrative. She used the single to tell her own rags to riches story, which had become a prominent part of her media narrative:

Mama couldn't give it to me, had to get it at Sue's
Lord only knows how I got in those shoes
I was covered in dollars, now I'm drippin' in jewels. (Mill et al., 2017, track 1)

Cardi B showed how choices were constrained for people with limited means growing up in New York City and how a strip club provided her more than the education system. Cardi B has been very sex-positive and seemingly sex-worker positive. Still, her continued emphasis on the fact she danced and did not sell sex shows how she embraced a certain level of respectability politics. Cardi B said she became a stripper because her parents could not provide for her. While this is positive because it showed her agency, it takes something away from her message of female empowerment. It is not surprising. In the world of mainstream hip-hop, any so-called immoral action seems acceptable, as long as it is justified. Cardi B, it seemed, like Biggie, could not engage in nefarious behavior
solely for pleasure or solely to attain money; there had to be a moral reason to justify or excuse such actions, and her lyrics reflect this.

On the same song, Cardi B also began talking about her material success. In an interview on the topic of money, Cardi B plainly stated that she believed it could bring happiness, but at the same time, said she understood why the dream was about more than wealth (DJ Vlad, 2017a). Cardi B does not engage with this dark side of the dream on her album at all. Instead, she focused largely on the material aspect of the dream and individual success. It was a departure from her presence on social media where she takes a more evenhanded approach about the dream, often highlighting the nightmare just as much as the dream.

**Money Moves**

Like the other artists, Cardi B’s success also meant providing for her family and making sure that her community was also financially stable too:

> I went from rag to riches, went from WIC to lit, nigga  
> Only person in my fam to see six figures  
> The pressure on your shoulders feel like boulders  
> When you gotta make sure that everybody straight  
> Bitches stab you in your back while they smilin’ in your face  
> Talking crazy on your name, trying not to catch a case (Mill et al., 2018, track 1)

On “Get up 10,” she repeatedly said, “we gon’ win.” It showed a commitment to the moral aspect of the dream, which was about equality and democracy, making sure her entire community has access to her wealth. However, despite the fact that she boasted about the importance of community winning, Cardi believed that her journey to the American dream was a solo endeavor, and she continued to use the word “I” rather than “we” as she stated that she went from “nothing to glory.” Cardi B made it clear rapping is not just fun and games; it is a business about earning money. Like other trap artists,
music for her is a constant grind. Unlike Biggie, who was able to enjoy his lavish lifestyle, Cardi B always talked about her constant hustle. Her world is far from that of Run-D.M.C.; she is not rapping solely for the love of music. Music is a capitalistic endeavor and she is using the system for all she can, “you in the club just to party/I’m in there, I get paid a fee” (Almanzar et al., 2017, track 4). Like other rap artists, she repeated the problematic trope that hard work gets people to the top: “Dropped two mixtapes in six months/What bitch working as hard as me?” (Almanzar et al., 2017, track 4). Her lyrics imply once again hard work is why she is successful, not luck (or even colorism). This message to young men and women is the classically conservative mantra that they too, can be whatever they want to be if they work hard enough.

On “I Do,” Cardi B distinguished herself as a “chosen one”:

I think us bad bitches is a gift from God (Gift from God). . . . I think you broke hoes need to get a job (Get a job). . . .
Look, broke hoes do what they can (Can)
Good girls do what they told (Told)
Bad bitches do what they want (They want)
That's why a bitch is so cold. (Almanzar et al., 2018, track 13)

It is clear from her presence on social media and previous statements that she understands the power dynamic among poor women and the systemic reasons they do not have freedoms she claimed. Nonetheless, these statements seem devoid of any real critiques of the system, which she can be very clear and poignant about on social media. In her music, though, she seems unsympathetic and sometimes cavalier towards people who are not “bosses” like she is. Unlike Biggie, Cardi B has been comfortable with her success whether it was tied to sex work or the music industry., she seems completely comfortable being at the top, making her “money move,” and living away from the Bronx. She has been happy about her transformation and happy about being rich.
**Boss Moves**

Cardi clearly has seen her power in the industry as feminist endeavor and often lectures people (especially women) to make sure they get what they deserve from men. Some people may see this as materialistic, but it often seemed to be based more in the world of female empowerment. Cardi stated she was also successful because she was skilled at business once again reaffirming her commitment to hard work but also getting pay for her labor—sexual or otherwise, which is another empowering message for women of color, in particular. “When I’m done I make him cum/But then he comin’ off that cash” (Almanzar et al., 2018, track 3). Her lyrics show that she is a businesswoman who believed Black women should not merely serve for the pleasure of men. In several songs she rapped not just about being equal to men but being a boss and in control of her body and her business. This sometimes can give a bifurcated sense of the American dream as she embraced both the material and the moral. Cardi B’s most successful song from her first album, “Bodak Yellow,” though not a rags to riches story, showed her not just making money as a dancer, but her doing so as a boss, but again we see the pull between the moral and material. While politically Cardi B may embrace the proletarian struggle on social media, she boasted about the power and control she has in her life now:

I don't dance now, I make money moves (Ayy, ayy)  
Say I don't gotta dance, I make money move  
If I see you and I don't speak, that means I don't fuck with you  
I'm a boss, you a worker, bitch, I make bloody moves. (Almanzar et. al., 2017, track 4)

This statement, although partially playing into this notion of progressive feminism, also seemed to establish Cardi B as some sort of manager or capitalist. Cardi B made clear she is the one commanding the labor; she is not a worker, but the one making the decisions
and in control. It is a slightly different sentiment than the Cardi B, who supported democratic socialist candidate Bernie Sanders, a champion of the working class. It is also different from her comments on Twitter that she posted criticizing President Trump for ordering a government shutdown and ordering workers to return to work without pay: “I just want to remind y'all, because it's been a little over three weeks. . . . Trump is ordering and summoning federal government workers to go back to work without getting paid” (Cardi B in Bowden, 2019, para. 3). This statement once again showed Cardi B’s disconnect from the dream she talks about in real life and the dream she raps about in the studio.

Occasionally her lyrics very clearly align with the moral aspect of the dream. Cardi believed the way she achieved her dream was by staying true to herself and using her voice as power in a world that is dominated by men. Women like Cardi are often told to be quiet and not to express themselves. For Cardi B, her voice was her power: “I started to speak my mind and tripled my views” (Almanzar et al., 2018, track 1), showing how important being her authentic self was in her music and that there were other things more important than money. On the track, “Be Careful,” she flipped the gendered narrative of men providing for women, stating she gave her man everything and did not care about finances: “I gave you everything, what’s mine is yours” (Almanzar et al., 2018, track 5). Once again, Cardi B affirmed her power and ability to earn money and to provide for herself and her man. The dream, in this case is their relationship, which she believed mattered more than wealth: “You might have a fortune, but you lose me, you still gon’ be misfortunate” (Almanzar et al., 2018, track 5).
Kulture

Materialism is an integral part of her part of her dream, and Cardi B continued to boast about how good her life is and the importance of money and having luxury items:

“Now I like dollars, I like diamonds/I like stunting, I like shining/I like million dollar deals” (Almanzar et al., 2018, track 7). She has been proud of her rise to the top, her struggle, and her Caribbean roots, but most proud of her agency as a woman, who is both sexual and in charge: “I’m a boss in a skirt, I’m a dog, I’m a flirt/Write a verse while I twerk, I wear Off-White at Church/Prolly make the preacher sweat, read the Bible, Jesus wept” (Almanzar et al., 2018, track 11).

However, it is on the one of the few tracks released after Invasion of Privacy, “Money,” where Cardi really doubled down on how money is important to her American stream story. Unlike Biggie, she was not nostalgic and did not focus on the past. Instead, she rapped about her success and how she was born for this glamorous lifestyle:

I was born to flex (Yes)
Diamonds on my neck
I like boardin' jets, I like mornin' sex (Woo)
But nothing in this world that I like more than checks. (Almanzar et al., 2018)

Cardi B admitted she is driven by money and does not need sex. She reached the top, wants to stay there, and is okay with the criticisms she has become a mainstream pop music artist. Although she continued to rap about how she loves money, at the end, she explicitly revealed her dream is about her daughter, Kulture, not money, “I like boardin' jets, I like mornin' sex/But nothing in this world that I like more than Kulture” (Almanzar et al., 2018). Cardi B, like others, believes in a world where money is important because it gives once access to a world and a power structure they may not normally have, but family seemed to be the ultimate sign of the dream still. While it may seem that the genre
idealizes money and diamonds, Cardi B revealed the world of hip-hop is often more complicated than a simple desire for cash and family in the end is the most important thing.

**The Disconnect**

Still Cardi’s lyrics are far less clear and direct about what the American dream should look like—beyond money—than her social media. On social media Cardi seemed to have a very explicit vision about the dream, but her lyrics have been less focused and direct about the ills of our society. It is unclear why there is such a disconnect between Cardi B’s lyrics and her public persona. Perhaps her lyrics, which she often co-writes with others, and must be approved by record labels, are a filtered version of her dream. Her lyrics generally are more focused on the material aspect of the dream, while much of her social media presence is about the moral aspect. That is not to say the two are mutually exclusive. Her lyrics often talk about female empowerment and her social media presence can also focus on material possessions like her homes and clothes. Still, the public personality that Cardi B seemed very comfortable showing is aware of issues like inequality and poverty. Growing up in the 1990s in the South Bronx, an area that remains one of the poorest in the nation, it would be hard to ignore the growing inequality in New York City. Yet in many of her songs, Cardi remained silent about these problems. Perhaps Cardi B has simply chosen to express the contradictory and complex Black America dream in a bifurcated way. Although the city has changed to a place of rampant inequality, in many ways hip-hop has not changed. Hip-hop artists still focus on a dream fueled by material possessions and designer brands, while slowly showing signs that change may be coming.
Conclusion

According to hip-hop scholar James Braxton Peterson, “Hip hop is much more about the Horatio Alger mythology or the ideals of some rugged individualism than it is about any sense of community progress and advancement” (Peterson, 2016, Ch 3, p. 3). The lyrics in many of the hip-hop artists’ songs examined here are, at times, in sync with that statement. However, the artists and lyrics are more complex: they show a myriad of interpretations of the American dream. The artists within the genre consistently push the idea of exceptionalism, hard work, and money as the solution to many problems, while acknowledging the problem of material goods and challenging the American dream. While there are other genres of rap, particularly political rap, that engage in the idea of the American dream with a more critical lens, it will be interesting to see how mainstream hip-hop artists continue to handle the dream. I wonder how long the lyrics of hip-hop songs can remain committed to materialistic, individualistic, and Alger-themed versions of the dream, as globally, demonstrators shout “Black Lives Matter” to protest police brutality against Black people. The hip-hop world is a space where Kanye West can be a fan of a racist president and blame Black people for slavery, Jay-Z can make deals with the NFL after they ostracized Colin Kaepernick, and Cardi B can support a socialist running for president, while declaring her love for money.

As mainstream artists increasingly speak out for social justice and equality, hip-hop’s engagement with the American dream may change, though that change has yet to become a reality. I suspect the American dream will remain an important theme in hip-hop, though how that dream will be articulated may look different. Materialism has always been an important theme in hip-hop and that is unlikely to go away soon.
However, so has the moral component of the dream. Hip-hop artists have been looking towards the dream for material pleasures, but they also look for its moral components, which ensure they are equal in a world that often marginalizes people who look like them. Mainstream New York hip-hop, and Run-D.M.C., Biggie and Cardi B have shown they understand the inequality of the system, the need for Black pride, and in Cardi’s case have fought for gender equity. However, some of the ways the artists believed the dream should be realized, particularly narratives of exceptionalism and hard work, can be problematic. More subversive themes about systematic inequality are less talked about—a disappointment for sure—it does not mean that this genre has ignored these ideas. Like other parts of Black popular culture, hip-hop has engaged with both aspects of the American dream. While the material aspect is often at the forefront of these conversations, the moral seems to be no less important to many of these artists.
Wakanda Forever.

—T'Challa, *Black Panther*, 2018

At the end of June in 2020, after weeks of racial unrest over the death of George Floyd at the hands of four Minnesota police officers that had the world shouting “Black Lives Matter,” Sprite, a part of the Coca-Cola Company, released a sixty second television advertisement about the Black American dream. Over pictures of various aspects of Black life an announcer read:

The American Dream. It wasn’t made for everybody. It forgot about one very important detail. Black America. It’s why this land of equal opportunity was built on the backs and genius of Black people, and why Black success isn’t always a story of accomplishment, but a story of getting out. But Black Americans woke up a long time ago and set out to make their own dream. They had to…..and communities around America... Black America’s dream is the real American dream because it means everyone has a chance to succeed (Sprite, 2020).

The commercial was supposed to show Sprite’s dedication to helping young Black peoples’ dreams become a reality and “inspire the next generation to do more and dream bigger.” (Coca-Cola, 2020). The advertisement had been watched by over thirty thousand viewers on YouTube a little over a month after its debut; out of those 583 gave the ad a thumbs down while only 315 gave it a thumbs up. Comments left about the commercial were also overwhelmingly negative and said things like the ad was “divisive” and “racist.” One user named “A J” said that it was “very degrading as viewpoint because Working Hard is the American dream so if your not living it your [sic] fault (YouTube, 2020).” Despite the negativity surrounding the spot, the commercial was important because it explicitly reinforced what Black popular culture had been trying to state for decades—that the American Dream often excluded Black America. Like the previous
chapters have shown, this commercial acknowledged that the Black community had questioned, debated and reconfigured the American Dream story to fit their own needs, an important admission as mainstream culture, as one can see through the comments, often omitted these ideas. However, it is clear that many consumers still do not understand the experience that many Black Americans have in relationship to the American dream. Though Black America has continued to try to create more nuanced narratives of how they have experienced the dream, mainstream America has persistently tried to ignore their voices.

The Sprite commercial was certainly not created in a vacuum, it was a product of a culture that had been begging for a racial reckoning for years, particularly after the election of Donald Trump when Black cultural producers seemed to increasingly show hesitancy in the validity of the American dream. Yet, the ad, which was created in the last year of Trump’s first term felt more like the culmination of the work that Black artists had begun during Trump’s first three years in office. In those years, as Trump stoked racial flames for anyone who was not a white heterosexual male, Black popular culture shifted in a way that marked a noticeable difference from previous years. While Black popular culture still wrestled with the dream and still questioned if success was about the moral or the material, it seemed that there was a wholehearted shift towards art that uplifted the moral component that Jiang believed was so vital to the experience of Black people and other people of color. This does not mean that Black popular culture did not connect material wealth with success anymore, but rather it somewhat faded into the background as Black creators focused on the themes like freedom, justice, democracy, community and equality rather than material riches when it came to the dream. This can
be most clearly seen with Black film. Cinema that is centered around Black characters and stories created by Black artists, thrived between 2017 and 2019, the first three years of Trump’s presidency, and contributed to a body of art that helped bring ideas about race and White supremacy to the national conversation. These films all engaged with the dream in different ways and from different genres, but there was less tension about the moral and the material. Though Black filmmakers have always been in dialogue with these ideas (especially Tyler Perry who seems to have a particular frustration with upper middle-class Cinderella tales and for years has cautioned against the wealth as the dream narrative), the films of Trump’s first term have not just lobbied against the idea that material success is the American dream but rather they have actively advocated for the moral ideas of justice and equity. These filmmakers did not try to convince their audiences that there is inequality or that Black people experienced racism. Instead, they seemed to start with the notion that America is unequal and unjust and used their films to explore questions about how Black people can live, exist, and find happiness in a country that inherently sees them as unequal.

**Trump’s rise**

In 2016, presidential candidate Donald Trump seemed to believe the American dream was dead for Black people. Their communities, he said, were in shambles and politicians and public policy had largely failed them: "You're living in poverty, your schools are no good, you have no jobs, 58% of your youth is unemployed—what the hell do you have to lose?" he said, urging them to vote for him (LoBianco & Killough, 2016, para. 3). He repeated this pitch to potential Black voters several times, much to the chagrin of media commentators and liberal activists, but on election day, Black people
granted him only 8% of their vote (BBC, 2016). However, the notion that the American dream was dead in Black America, or at least radically on life support, seemed to stick.

Black people were not all living in slums, the majority of the Black population would not be classified as poor, but Black people continued to experience extreme disadvantages, especially when compared to Whites. A report for the Economic Policy Institute found 50 years after the Kerner Commission concluded America was "moving toward two societies, one Black, one White—separate and unequal" (Harris & Curtis, 2018, para. 1), Black Americans still had not made strides in homeownership, unemployment, or incarceration rates. The report indicated the situation in Black America failed to improve relative to Whites or had gotten worse: (a) the Black unemployment rate was at 7.5%—twice the rate of White unemployment, (b) Black homeownership was at 40%, unchanged from 1968—and 30% lower than White rates, and (c) the number of Blacks in prisons or jails was six times the number of White people, tripling since 1968 (Harris & Curtis, 2018).

Additionally, troubling to many was Trump’s flagrant and unapologetic embrace of racism, xenophobia, and misogyny. It wasn’t exactly a surprise, his rise to politics after all, came from questioning whether Barack Obama was born in America, but many found his antics disturbing, though he labeled himself "the least racist person on Earth" (Danner, 2016, para. 2). After he was elected, he called places like Haiti, El Salvador and Africa “shithole countries,” said people from the inner cities were uneducated and refused to condemn right-wing white nationalists after a rally that led to the death of a protester (Gonzalez-Ramirez, 2019).
As many Black Americans questioned what their lives would look like under an openly racist and misogynistic president, Black film writers and directors responded. They showed that while Black artists were certainly open to exploring whether the American dream was rooted in the moral or the material, that the moral component of the dream was more important than ever. Black film has always engaged with the idea of the American dream, from the first Black feature film, Oscar Micheaux's *The Homesteader* (1919), to Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1957), to Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992), but this recent trend is notable due to the number of mainstream films that took up these issues and did so often to financial and critical acclaim.

Looking at just five films from this era written and directed by Black people, world record-breaking *Black Panther*, by Ryan Coogler (2018); creepy horror flick *Us* by Jordan Peele (2019); Barry Jenkins's romantic adaption of the James Baldwin novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018); lefty rapper-activist Boots Riley's, *Sorry to Bother You* (2018) and the Lena Waithe (writer), Melina Matsoukas (director), Black-Lives-Matter-driven *Queen and Slim* (2019), one can see that the question of the moral vs the material no longer hangs in the balance. I chose these films because they were critical and or commercial successes and represented a range of styles and genres.

Success in all of these films was not about material wealth but about employing some kind of moral compass. In a study of films from the late 20th and early 21st century, scholar J. Emmett Winn (2007) said cinema did not critique the American dream itself, only certain problematic components and people in it. However, the Black films of the Trump era directly engage with the systemic failings of the American dream. In many ways these works are not just about striving for the dream, but an indictment of the dream
itself. Between 2017 and 2019, Black filmmakers, whether mainstream or independent, seemed particularly focused on articulating the moral components of the American dream often highlighting the persistent anxiety the Black world seemed to be feeling in the Trump era.

**Black Panther: Erik Killmonger's American Dream**

Y'all sittin' up here comfortable. Must feel good. It's about two billion people all over the world that look like us. But their lives are a lot harder. Wakanda has the tools to liberate 'em all.

—Erik Killmonger, *Black Panther*, 2018

In 2018, "Wakanda Forever," and its accompanying cross armed salute became a popular catchphrase and gesture around the world (Mohdin, 2018). It was an expression that evoked Black pride and power across the diaspora. The phrase came from the Marvel film, *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018), based on the comic strip of the same name, written and directed by Ryan Coogler. It was the signature phrase of a nation of rich, beautiful, powerful, educated Black people from the hidden African nation of Wakanda (Figure 59). *Black Panther* highlighted the American dream of Black America, contesting the stereotype of Africa in the American imagination and upholding it as a place of eternal Black power.
The movie's protagonist, T'Challa, was not just a superhero that went by the name of Black Panther, but also the head of Wakanda, a fictional kingdom hidden from the world. In many ways, the notion of Wakanda is a Black American fantasy, much like it was for the antagonist, Erik Killmonger, an orphaned child who grew up in Oakland, California, in the 1990s. In Killmonger's mind, Wakanda was a land of power, wealth, and, most importantly, Blackness—his American dream—but it was also problematic. Like his father, Killmonger's dreams were about more than the individual wealth of one nation, but about the possibility of a redistribution of wealth and power to "Black and Brown people" around the world. Unlike villains in the past, Killmonger's dream was not just about material riches but freedom for oppressed people around the world.

*Black Panther's* (Coogler, 2018) American dream was less about the traditional narratives of upward mobility, rather, it explored what success looks like when one has access to wealth and power. While the divide between Black people in Africa and Black people in America was also a thread of contention, one of the film’s main question revolved around the idea of success when the material part of the dream is already satisfied. Should Black people focus on material success, even if it was only for a select isolationist few? Or was there a larger moral obligation about collective responsibility and equality for all? It was a question Black America itself seemed to be trying to figure out, especially after actress Issa Rae said that she was “rooting for everybody Black” at the 2017 Emmys (Nyren, 2017). The more conservative rich leader, T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman), struggled with these different worldviews, wondering whether to follow on the individualistic path to the so-called dream that focused on wealth and riches for his nation alone or follow the more moral radical pan-African component of the dream that
Erik Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan) continued to advocate as he told of what life was like for Black people around the world. Killmonger's late father explained the problem of America in a flashback, "Their leaders have been assassinated. Communities flooded with drugs and weapons. They are overly policed and incarcerated" (Coogler, 2018, p.71), he said. "All over the planet our people suffer because they don't have the tools to fight back. With vibranium weapons, they could overthrow every country…" (Coogler, 2018, p. 71). He passed on this belief to his son. Killmonger's American dream was a communal one based on a sort of pan-Africanism in which Black and Brown people of the world engage in revolution and liberate themselves from decades of oppression. The real success, Killmonger implied, was not about money or the vast resources like Wakanda has (namely the fictional resource known as Vibranium); rather it was about duty, solidarity and honor--the moral obligation of the dream. "You know, where I'm from, when Black folks started revolutions, they never had the firepower or the resources to fight their oppressors. Where was Wakanda?" (Coogler, 2018, p. 92). Killmonger was full of flaws and it was T'Challa, with his rugged individualism, wealth, entitlement, love for a woman, and duty to the nation over anything, that was supposed to be the hero. But Coogler clearly and intentionally blurred the line between hero and villain, with Killmonger's vision of dream seeming reasonable at times.

Erik Killmonger: Y'all sittin' up here comfortable. Must feel good. It's about two billion people all over the world that look like us. But their lives are a lot harder. Wakanda has the tools to liberate 'em all.
T'Challa: And what tools are those?
Erik Killmonger: Vibranium: Your weapons.
T'Challa: Our weapons will not be used to wage war on the world. It is not our way to be judge, jury, and executioner for people who are not our own.
Erik Killmonger: Not your own? But didn't life start right here on this continent? So ain't all people your people?
T'Challa: I am not king of all people. I am King of Wakanda. And it is my responsibility to make sure our people are safe and that vibranium does not fall into the hands of a person like you. (Coogler, 2018, p. 79)

The last lines of Killmonger's life were about the fantasy and promise of better land. He spoke of the importance of having that dream, while seemingly uncertain, he even believed in dreams. "My pop said Wakanda was the most beautiful thing he ever seen. He promised he was gonna show it to me one day. You believe that? Kid from Oakland, running around believing in fairytales" (Coogler, 2018, p. 117). This cynicism showed that Black people in America understood there is no real Wakanda and no path to escape their oppression.

In the end, T'Challa was a better leader who could own up to his past mistakes. While he stopped Killmonger's mission to send aid to Black and Brown revolutionaries, a victory the audience was supposed to celebrate, he also finally listened to the complaints of his former rival. T'Challa's solution, however, was a less revolutionary vision of the future, but one that did aim at ensuring there was equality and justice for more people than just the Wakandans and helped people of color around the world to have a chance at a better life.

In the final scene of the credits, two images prove that in the end, while the villain had died, his moral vision of the dream had won. First, T’Challa revealed to a United Nations-type body that Wakanda was actually a wealthy nation and will give aid to the world. He then pledged to help the Black youth of Oakland, where Killmonger grew up, by building a community center, proving the commitment to education as the key to liberation. The dream, in some ways, was a more moderate one of Killmonger’s, but it was a start and showed the moral component of the dream.
Coogler’s vision for Black liberation was a hit with audiences, earning over a billion dollars worldwide. Though the dream of Killmonger was the dream of a villain, *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) exposed the different visions for success that exist in the Black community. It portrayed different iterations of the American dream that remain in Black popular culture and highlighted the fact that all Black people do not have a single vision or idea of future success. More importantly for this argument, the film showed that material wealth for Black people, as Jiang said, was not the clear path to the American dream. The film placed collective responsibility and helping fellow citizens as being critical for true success. Similarly, Peele’s *Us* also makes a call for collective responsibility through horror.

**Us: Growing Up With the Sky**

How it must have been to grow up with the sky. To feel the sun, the wind, the trees. But your people took it for granted. We're human too, you know.

-Red, *Us*, 2019
Figure 60. *Us* theatrical release poster, 2019. Retrieved from https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6857112/mediaviewer/rm3483724800?ref_=tt_ov_i
On the surface, *Us* (Peele, 2019) is a film about a family vacation in Santa Cruz after the protagonist, Adelaide’s (Lupita Nyong'o) mother died (Figure 60). After a day on the beach with family friends, a group of murderous doppelgangers invaded their house and they fought them off. The family eventually learned that every person in America had a doppelganger that was tethered to them, the result of which was implied to be a government project. The experiment was abandoned, leaving the tethered to live underground, eating rabbits and chained to the will of their counterpart above, turning them into monstrous creatures unable to speak or control their lives. Though the movie is a horror film, it is also a commentary on inequality in America and the American dream, and just how different lives can be due to different conditions. This is shown through the different experiences of the tethered (Adelaide and Red, who swapped places with her tethered doppelganger when they were children) and through the different experiences the Wilsons had from their White family friends, the Tylers.

Peele said that the film, written after Trump became president was a reaction to the apparent growing divide in the United States, where people seemed to fear “the other.”

When I decided to write this movie, I was stricken with the fact that we are in a time where we fear the *other*: whether it is the mysterious invader that we think is going to come and kill us and take our jobs, or the faction that we don’t live near that voted a different way than us. We’re all about pointing the finger, and I wanted to suggest that maybe the monster we really need to look at has our face. Maybe the evil is us. (Setoodeh, 2019, para. 7)

While the central plot may have been about those who have privilege and those who do not *Us* was a film, from the beginning, informed by the experience of Blackness in America and the dream is different and often a nightmare for those do not have
privilege. *Us* (Peele, 2019), like other Black cultural products in the past, wrestled with the notion of the American dream in Black America and the tension between the moral and the material like other works in the past, but like with *Black Panther*, clearly seemed to argue the material aspect of the dream as secondary to its moral dimensions.

Adelaide made it clear there was an equality in opportunity if you work hard at it, repeating the same mantra had been used for decades in the Black community in one of the film's earliest scenes. As her daughter Zora, (perhaps named after the famous writer Zora Neely Hurston) complained she would never be a good enough runner to be in the Olympics, Adelaide told her, “You can do anything you set your mind to.” For Adelaide, who made her dreams come true by kidnapping, this may have rung true, but she was the exception not the rule, and most people were stuck in their lot in life if they did not have any privileges in society. Like with the tethered and untethered, the Wilson family also experienced the inequalities of life firsthand. Though they were middle class, they were not living the same type of lifestyle as their White peers. They had to sell their summer home to pay for their children’s education and had less material wealth than their real-life mirrors—the Tylers, a fact that bothered the family patriarch Gabe (Winston Duke).

Gabe tried to keep some perspective on the American dream showing that he understood that material possessions did not equal success, but it often seemed like he had to convince himself of this notion the most. Early on in the film, he was shown steering a small boat that he had just bought. He was proud of the boat that barely worked, but when his son made fun of the sputtering and noted that Josh’s (the white man’s) (Tim Heidecker) boat was probably better, he told his son, “it’s not a contest. It’s something I thought would be nice for the family” (Peele, 2019, p. 21), though the
audience knew this was not true. Later in the day, as his family met with the Tyler’s, the boat again became a focal point of discussion as Gabe tried to reframe what he knew was a smaller item as “a real classic.” This showed how Black people sometimes had to redefine their dreams when faced with vast inequality. In the film, Josh and Gabe laughed, both acknowledging the inequality of their boating lives (and their lives at large).

It soon became obvious that while the Tyler’s had more wealth, they were a vapid family with little morals. Josh and Kitty (Elisabeth Moss) seemed to barely like each other, soothing their pain with alcohol and their kids are obnoxious. Their house and possessions showed that they had, in theory, achieved the dream, but it was not making them happy. As Kitty and Adelaide talked of the best moments in their lives, Adelaide fondly said hers was the birth of her children, but Kitty could not relate. Kitty coldly said that the birth of her twin girls would not even make her top 10. Rather, her children ruined her life since sacrificed her acting dreams after they were born. In that moment, it is clear to Adelaide that Kitty and Josh’s American dream story was not a success. However, this was not clear to Gabe, who still complained about Josh’s so-called success when they arrived back home from the beach. “You saw their new car right? He had to do it. He just had to get that thing to fuck with me too” (Peele, 2019, p. 36).

One could read the subtle differences between the families as one of class, not race, but the decision to cast an all-White family did not seem to be an accident. The two worlds reflected the reality in Black and White America, which shows that even Black people who have the privilege of calling themselves middle-class Americans are often economically and socially behind White people.
Later scenes in the film confirmed the vast inequality between the two houses. The Tyler family had a big spacious house, where each member can comfortably retreat from another. They have fancy cars, high end-speakers, and Ophelia, a high-end virtual assistant speaker. But Peele (2019) was not necessarily portraying them as the life to covet. Rather, he consistently showed that the family's material possessions, but lack of moral compass, was what lead to their destruction. It was the moral center that the Wilsons had that seemingly saved them for their murderous doppelgangers who arrived at their house and try to kill them. The difference in the dream for the two families can be seen not as some sort of failing on behalf of the Wilson’s but rather the failure of a system to treat everyone equally. Adelaide’s tethered Red explained this idea through her narrative about the tethered and untethered.

Once upon a time, there was a girl, and the girl had a shadow. The two were connected; tethered together. So whatever happened to the girl happened to the shadow... When the girl ate, her food was given to her, warm and tasty, but when the shadow was hungry, she had to eat rabbits, raw and bloody. On Christmas the girl received wonderful toys, soft and cushy, but the shadow’s toys were so sharp and cold they’d slice through her fingers when she played with them. Time passed…. But they are not animals, they aren’t any different. In fact, they are the same. (Peele, 2019, p. 49)

The film showed that Red may not have been the villain, but rather a person who has suffered through trauma, oppression and inequality. Both the stories of Red and Adelaide, and the story of the Wilson’s and Tyler’s, show the inequities of the American dream.

The tethered world underground was a government creation, and its abandonment, also a product of systemic failure that left people no choice but madness, can be seen as a literal interpretation and failure of the American dream.

Red’s showed the madness that people without privilege can resort-even Americans like her- to just to get their voices heard. Red was not a character who was
angry, crazy, or upset, but a rational person who had been oppressed. As Red continued to tell of her plight, it became clear that her ultimate goal, much like many in Black America, was freedom. While one can read Peele’s narrative of the untethered in many ways, not just about race, the racial commentary is clear. Black and White Americans are tethered to each other, with a common history, ancestry, and culture, but due to discrimination and racism, they experience America in very different ways.

Red and Adelaide were the same person. But their conditions and circumstances changed them. In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois talked about the double consciousness, the twoness that Black people in America constantly feel as “an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (p. 2). Perhaps Us (Peele, 2019) was about the twoness that Black people feel in America, a desire to fit in and be accepted into the broader society, while also being true to themselves and their family, but it was also about the dream. While much of the focus was on becoming, accessing, and attaining the American dream, which Adelaide achieved by stealing Red’s life, Us was also about what happens when Black people seemingly reach that dream. For Black America, Peele seemed to say, the American dream is not in the material, but in the moral, a lesson Gabe continuously tried to reconcile. Throughout the film, Gabe most clearly showed the tension in the American dream story, as he constantly tried to reconcile his material middle-class aspirations and his own American dream story, which the film implied he had already achieved through a loving and supportive family. Adelaide, having seen both worlds, always understood that her family was the most important part of the dream.
However, we cannot dismiss Red’s American dream story. While in the end, Red became a monstrous psychopath, her dream of equality for the tethered is important to acknowledge. She was not looking for material riches, or it seems, even personal glory, but equality for her community since, as Red proclaimed, they were all Americans. Though Red was not a tethered person by birth, she saw humanity in the tethered and understood they had some humanity too. She wanted to give their story a voice (they cannot speak) and a place to be visible to all humans, a theme that various Black cultural products have consistently explored over the years. *Us* (Peele, 2019) showed audiences that the American dream, for Black Americans, like the Wilson’s and like Red, was about not just material possessions but family and the liberation of all oppressed people, and theme that we continue to see in films of the early Trump era.

**If Beale Street Could Talk: Dreams of Love and Freedom**

That White man, baby, he wants you to be worried about the money, that’s his whole game. But if we can get to where we are without the money, we can get further. I ain’t worried about the money. It don’t belong to them anyhow, they stole it from us.

If Beale Street Could Talk (Jenkins, 2018) was a film about the broken American dream, about unfulfilled dreams and promises, but mostly it was a film about love (Figure 61). Though based on a novella written by James Baldwin in 1974, when the hope of the civil rights movement was fading, Jenkins’s (2018) film still felt relevant in 2018. From
the onset, Jenkins was clear the dream was about survival, not material wealth but about family, loyalty, friendship, passion for your work, and of course, love. Shot with a dream-like aesthetic that sometimes makes one question what was reality and was a dream, the film was about a young man, Alonzo “Fonny” Hunt (Stephan James) and his pregnant girlfriend Clementine “Tish” Rivers (Kiki Layne), as they navigated the complex criminal justice system after he has been falsely accused of rape. The story was told through the eyes of Tish, as she and her family try to free him, and she looks back at how their dreamy romance first blossomed before the reality of being Black in America stole their youth from them.

Love, not money, was always at the center of the narrative, whether it was about family love, the love between Tish and Fonny, or the love of a dream. Material wealth was shown to be a necessary evil in a racist capitalist society to get the freedom they want and to access their dreams. It was also needed for survival. Money was needed to get the apartment they wanted, to have dinner with Fonny’s friend who had just gotten home from jail, and most importantly, to help with Fonny’s legal assistance, causing understandable stress among the characters. Yet Tish’s father summed up the film’s analysis of the importance of material wealth noting that it did not define who they were, rather it was a tool of white supremacy.

Joseph: That White man, baby, he wants you to be worried about the money, that’s his whole game. But if we can get to where we are without the money, we can get further. I ain’t worried about the money. It don’t belong to them anyhow, they stole it from us…. I can steal too. (Jenkins, 2018, p. 66)

He understood that they should not be blamed for their circumstances in their life, but they simply needed money to help their children. “These are our children and we got
to set them free.” (Jenkins, 2018, p. 68). Fonny too constantly articulated that love and freedom, not material riches was the real dream for him. As he told Tish:

I ain't offering you much. I ain't got no money and I work at odd jobs just for bread because I ain't about to go for none of their jive-ass shit. And that means that you going to have to work, too. And when you come home most likely I'll just grunt and keep on with my chisels and maybe sometimes you'll think I don't even know you're there. But don't ever think that, not ever. You're with me all the time—without you, I don't know if I could make it at all. (Jenkins, 2018, pp. 33-34)

The real villain in this film, however, is not capitalism, but racism and no amount of love could save the couple from this impediment to their American dream. In the end, to avoid a death sentence, Fonny took a plea bargain. The young lovers, worn down by the system and tired of America’s unfulfilled promises aged and decided make their child the new focus of their American dream. In the closing scene with Fonny and Tish’s child four or five year old child, the three sit for a prison visit. In a voiceover, she does not despair, rather she seemed to accept the fate of America, and like many in the past, put her hope in it in the future, “We must live the life we’ve been given . . . and live it so that our children can be free” (Jenkins, p. 2018, p. 103). The couple sat quietly for a few seconds. They held hands as their child looked on, gazed at each other, then unwound their hands. They stared at each other as they did in the first scenes, still in love, but more broken, older, as they attempted to hold on to their American dream story that had long been deferred. As the credits rolled, a soulful version of “America the Beautiful” played showing the fraught and often faithful relationship Black America has with America’s great beautiful promise.

**Sorry to Bother You: Capitalism and the Dream**

It’s not about sounding all nasal. It’s about sounding like you don’t have a care. Like your bills are paid and you’re happy about your future and you’re about to jump in your
Ferrari ...It’s not what all White people sound like—there ain’t no real White voice, but it’s what they wish they sounded like. It’s what they think they’re supposed to sound like. —Langston, *Sorry to Bother You*, 2018

Unlike Jenkins’s world, the interconnections between race, capitalism, and the American dream are much more explicit in *Sorry to Bother You* (Riley, 2018). The story centered around Cassius Green (Lakeith Stanfield) (known as Cash) as he struggled to

become promoted to a “Power Caller,” and literally “move up” to the top floor of the telemarketing company he worked for (Figure 62). He felt like a failure until an older Black coworker Langston (Danny Glover) advised him that to sell things to people, he has to use his “White voice.” The White voice, Langston noted, was distinct from speaking proper English, but the ability to connote freedom. In many ways, it sounds like it is the American dream.

It’s not about sounding all nasal. It’s about sounding like you don’t have a care. Like your bills are paid and you’re happy about your future and you’re about to jump in your Ferrari when you get off this call. Put some extra breath in there. Breezy, like you don’t need this money, like you never been fired, only laid off. It’s not what all White people sound like- there ain’t no real White voice, but it’s what they wish they sounded like. It’s what they think they’re supposed to sound like. (Riley, 2018, p. 15)

As Langston started speaking in his “White voice,” clearly dubbed by another actor, Cash finally seemed to understand. The White voice presented many issues, like code-switching, that warrant scholarly inquiry. But for this discussion, the White voice satirized the material American dream and provided a way for Cassius to get what he believed would give his life meaning: wealth through success at his job. Cash understood this and perfected this voice, and soon, he was rising in stature, on his way to be a power broker.

Cash was shown to be an ordinary, working-class Black man looking to feel like he was contributing to society, though he initially was not sure what that meant. When he saw members of his high school football team playing an evening game, he was not nostalgic. Rather, he disparaged their lives. “They were stars in high school, now all they do is work at home furniture and play football every day. Just stuck” (Riley, 2018, p. 19) he said. His friend and coworker, Salvador, did not understand Cash’s comments.
“What’s wrong with that? They enjoy it. They’re friends” (Riley, 2018, p. 19). Like many of the other films of this era, Salvador (Jermaine Fowler), who was also Black, showed the dream is not the same for all Black people, and tension between the two mounted as he became a union organizer. The divide increased as union head Squeeze (Steven Yeun) called the Power Caller status that Cash had been dreaming of a “scam.” “So you don’t like ambition,” Cash retorted. “You want me to settle for life where all I do is work, fuck, and sleep” (Riley, 2018, p. 24). When Squeeze articulated that middle management was barely making more than the rest and everyone needed to make money, Cash maintained that he supported unionization. It was a Fisher’s conflict in the American dream between the moral and the material.

Success for Cash was about making money (he noted that Power Callers make “house payment” and Benz money), the material but it was also about him feeling like a valuable contributor to society, the moral. In a society where money is valued and connected to worth, it was not until Cash began to thrive at work that he found meaning in his life. Soon however he became disillusioned with his job as he discovered the corruption behind material success was based on slave labor.

Riley made it clear that the individualistic, materialistic nature of the dream was a problem and caused people to lose their moral compass. For example when Cash is asked to shed his White voice for his new boss, and act like his “real” self, thought to be rapping or telling stories of gang life,” he questioned whether material success was worth it (Riley, 2018, p. 67). The crowd went wild. This is a turning point for Cash as he realized the American dream of wealth that he had reached caused him to sacrifice his values. After a wild twist that revealed the true nature of the company he was working
for, Cash realized that ultimately, he believed in a more socially just vision of the dream rather than material success fueled by wealth. Riley made it clear he was not against making money, but he wanted the wealth to be distributed more equally amongst a diverse range of people. Riley, a known socialist, was a very clear critique of the self-made individualistic notion of the American dream, and while there was tension among the characters, particularly with Cash about whether the material or moral was more important, Riley was clear about his thesis— that collective actions that force the country into a worker led society would be the key to freedom for all. Riley’s film cautioned against hero-worship and pointed toward the failure of a system that prioritizes wealth over human beings. The film’s message seemed to resonate with critics, who gave the movie rave reviews, but in a reminder to just how conservative even a “radical” place like Hollywood can be, *Sorry to Bother You* was locked out of any nominations for the coveted Academy Award.

**Queen and Slim**

I want proof we were here.
—Slim, *Queen and Slim*, 2019

Unlike *Sorry to Bother You* (Riley, 2018), which at its core was about the exploitation of labor, *Queen and Slim* (Matsoukas, 2019) was a justice-oriented story about an awkward first date that went awry after two young people killed a White police officer in self-defense and fled the scene (Figure 63). The film was about their six days on the run from the law as they get to know each other. The duo was at odds with the state that continued to criminalize Black bodies, with a world where they realize they did not always have power, and sometimes, with each other. It was a damning critique of the criminal justice system and its indictment of Black people, and while the filmmaker
clearly showed that not all police officers are bad, it was about Queen (Jodie Turner-Smith) and Slim (Daniel Kaluuya) trying to find their freedom as young people in America. The film constantly questioned what the American dream looks like for two very different people. Slim is a worker at Costco who was fairly with life and his family. Queen, on the other hand, was a lawyer who appeared to have few family or friends. Both, however, seem to be searching for something more in their lives, though it took their time together to figure out exactly what it was.

*Figure 63. Queen and Slim theatrical release poster, 2019. Retrieved from https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8722346/mediaviewer/rm1194496513?ref_=tt_ov_i*
Like If Beale Street Could Talk (Jenkins, 2018), Queen and Slim’s (Matsoukas, 2019) running thesis was that Black Americans will never find justice in America. In the first scene, Queen was upset after the state decided to execute one of her clients. While Slim too was disturbed by the news, the differences between them soon emerge. Queen felt like she needed to prove herself to the world, be a good lawyer, and make society a more just and better place. Slim’s dreams seemed to be just about living with his family and having his lady remember him. He did not feel like he had to be a certain way or prove anything to anybody. He was happy with his life and living and loving seemed to be enough. The film did not chastise either, rather it seems to explicitly tell us once again that for Black people, there is no singular American dream. However, it did seem to question respectability politics that tell Black people they have to aspire to excel at everything they do in order to be successful in life. The film set us up for this early on when they are on the run as they are still learning about each other now as fugitives.

Slim: Are you a good lawyer?
Queen: I’m an excellent lawyer.
Slim: Why do black people always feel the need to be excellent? Why can’t we just be ourselves? (Waithe, 2019, p. 33)

This is important because once again it showed that Black people were not a monolith and did not always share in the same ideas about how the dream or how it should be achieved.

The film also continued the fantasy of Black people getting justice (one reviewer called it Black Lives Matter fanfiction (Wheeler, 2019, para. 4), a particularly important aspect of the Black American dream that had previously been seen in works like Bungleton Green. The characters themselves initially did not understand:

Large Black Man: I support what y’all are doing:
Queen: What do you mean?
Large Black Man: Killing these crooked ass cops. We need to take all these muthafuckas out.
Slim: That’s not what we’re doing.
Large Black Man: I saw the video, okay. If a cop shot at my bitch, I’d kill his ass too.
Large Black Man: Cop killllaaaaassss!!!
Slim: Shut the fuck up, man! (Waithe, 2019, p. 23)

Once again, for Black America, the American dream here is not just tied to one person, but the community. Queen and Slim’s story, they soon realized, was not just about them, but about a marginalized community, tired of feeling defenseless against an unjust system. While this dream of justice some Black people were craving was different than they imagined, they soon realized that in an unjust world, people were trying to make their dreams come true in whatever way possible and their action became a legend.

The way Black people make their dreams come true, the film told us also was different because they often lacked money to make the material a reality or the power to make the moral aspect of the dream come true. Instead, Black people seem to make their dreams happen in the best ways they can. This was seen most clearly seen at Queen’s Uncle Earl’s house. Earl (Bookem Woodbine), Queen’s law-evading uncle, lived with a group of strippers and Cadillacs in a run-down house, as he dealt with post-traumatic stress disorder from the war in Iraq. He had a dark past, and accidentally killed her mother but he also loved his niece and wanted her to succeed. She was surprised that in this decrepit house, dreams still can occur, and like with Slim, she saw another aspect of the American dream, not predicated on the dominant White society for validation.

Her conversation with one of Earl’s girlfriends showed both a spiritual need and a materialistic nature can be part of the American dream for Black people. When Queen asked what made one of the women Goddess (Indya Moore), happy she tenderly said:
“Robes at fancy hotels. A good lacefront. And when your uncle kisses me on my forehead” (Waithe, 2019, p. 50). Goddess also understood the role she played in Earl’s dream. She needed him, but he too needed her. “He don’t always deserve it, but he needs us to worship him. Out there he ain’t shit. But in here - he a king” (Waithe, 2019, p. 50). In the script, Waithe (2019) wrote about the corrupting nature of the dream: “In another life Goddess could’ve been a nurse with an affordable mortgage, but in this one she occupies the fantasies of working-class men who will never understand how innocent she really is” (p. 50). In the film, Goddess seemed content, even fulfilled, by her place in the household and perhaps in some way her dream had been fulfilled. Or at least her dreams were malleable, about surviving her conditions and that too was enough.

Certainly, both Queen and Slim’s American dream story slowly changed over the film as they fell in love. Queen became more interested in love and could be more honest about what she wanted, while Slim realized the importance of having his life recognized in the world. At some point, much like Uncle Earl, Queen and Slim tempered their expectations of life and just let go. In one of the most prominent scenes in the film, Queen stuck her head out the window of a car, then encouraging Slim to do the same. Finally, they found something they were both missing. To see young Black characters, experience this moment of freedom was almost as mythical as was rare. Waithe’s script read: “Queen sticks her head out the window and lets the wind hit her face. For the first time in her life she feels completely free. No fear” (Waithe, 2019, p. 99). The visuals are powerful, and the dialogue more subtly reflects this unburdening taking place. Soon too, Slim was experiencing the same joy. Waithe’s script confirmed the visual of a cautious Slim, letting go of his anxiety. “Queen picks up a little speed and Slim gets a whiff of the
freedom she just got. Slim doesn’t know if he’ll ever feel this free again—so he cherishes the moment” (Waithe, 2019, p. 100). This shows, while the film was no doubt a commentary on the state, it was also about two young people simply looking for their freedom, trying to be seen in ways that they had not been in their previous lives.

In the end, money, it is implied, was the reason for Queen and Slim’s downfall by a Black man who betrayed them. The unnamed man understood their struggle as well as the support they had among many in the Black community. As he took them to the airplane that was supposed to carry them to Cuba, he told them. “Y’all really gave niggas something to believe in. We needed that. For real” (Waithe, 2019, p. 107). The film depicted the Black man as struggling financially on the margins in a small trailer. For him, his desire for success through material wealth trumped his commitment to the moral aspect of the dream for Black people, and his contradictory behavior revealed just how complicated the dream could be in Black America, where survival was essential to achieving any dreams. Yet like the other films of this early Trump era, in the end, being morally just was shown as the most liberated path to the dream, and though Queen and Slim were killed by police who claimed they were armed, their newfound freedom and love that they had long craved showed that they too had attained a version of the dream that was often so inaccessible for young Black people. They were free.

In the end, the Black man, unremorseful, was seen happily counting his money, while the rest of the characters grieved the deaths of Queen and Slim. Money seemed to satisfy his desires, and while the emotional heart of the film was clearly with Queen and Slim, Waithe (2019) did an important job by also not erasing his story and showing again the American dream was complicated for marginalized people and means different things
to different people. Still, while the film showed different paths to the dream, much of the
dream lay in the spiritual realm—in the world of love and justice, things routinely denied
to Black people. While Goddess and Earl both revealed a love of material possessions—
Earl with his Cadillacs, and Goddess, with her lace fronts and fancy robes, the thing they
both seemed to desire and crave was being loved, something in the end, Waithe and
Matsoukas (2019) showed, was enough of a dream, perhaps the only real dream that
mattered. As the credits rolled, a song by Lauryn Hill played on the danger of not being
true to one’s self: “Tryna mix myself for society/But can you tell me where is love in
anxiety?/Can you tell me where is love in anxiety?/What you say to me/I don't mind at
all/What you say to me/I don't really care at all/'Cause I'm in love/Don't you wish you had
real love?” (Hill, 2019, track 9)

One has to wonder by waiting to reveal their names until the end—Angela
Johnson and Ernest Hines—that Waithe (2019) intentionally wanted to show how their
story was universal, the story of many others. In the script she wrote:

And just like that, they’ve gone from skin and bones to mythical beings that
everyone wishes they knew. Heroes that everyone admires and young people will
emulate for generations to come. Whether you call them sacrificial lambs,
revolutionaries or just two innocent people that defended themselves—their
names will live on forever. But for the purposes of this story—they will always be
known as Queen and Slim. (Waithe, 2019, pp. 111-112)

Just like the American dream was a myth, through their action, Queen and Slim too,
became a myth. And through their death, they became immortal, and as a picture of them
was painted on the side of a building, they were finally being seen, in the ultimate
triumph of moral redemption over material improvement.
Filmmaker Luis Buñuel said, “Dreams are not the symbols of reality, but reality” (as quoted in Wander, 1975, p. 3). Perhaps the dream Black Americans continue to engage with is less about a dream and more about participating in the reality that Black people face in America. The American dream, a dream of a better day, might provide the hope that keeps Black Americans going and surviving in a nation that continuously marginalizes them. In a 1975 essay on the power of dreaming in Black films, Brandon Wander said the core of the films of that era created “Black mythology,” fantasies necessary for every culture; “Every culture needs myths to aid in its survival. The myths give unscientific explanations, but explanations nonetheless, of a confusing world” (Wander, 1975, p. 3).

I agree with Wander (1975) that every culture needs myths to survive, but I continuously wonder if the American dream is the myth that Black Americans need? It is important to understand the harm resulting from continuing to propel ideas around the American dream to Black communities. Hope is vital, but while the continual belief in the American dream may seem necessary for Black communities, it often takes accountability away from systems and institutions and instead holds individuals accountable for their particular circumstances. The belief in the moral aspect is important, but that too, in a racist country like America, often puts the onus on Black people to attempt to change systems of oppression for their dream of equality to become true. Therefore, I believe the attachment of Black Americans and Black popular culture to the American dream remains problematic; it represents a bond to Berlant’s (2011) notion of
cruel optimism, which encourages Black people to remain fixed on this American falsehood.

My research has shown how the American dream is a prominent narrative in Black popular culture and has been for decades. However, Black popular culture has often made the American dream into something of its own that is unique, yet adjacent, to the mainstream American dream. Black popular culture has turned the American dream into the Black American dream, a dream that is filled with the promise of America, but also the reality of racism and oppression in a society where all too often dreams were not said to be meant for Black people. To many people this definition of the American dream may be troubling, but it also seems to be a more productive understanding of how this simple idea deals with the nuances of a complicated idea like race in America. Perhaps that is why Fisher’s idea of the moral and the material cannot always be pulled apart in Black cultural texts because Black culture so often has to deal with multiple obstacles to the dream that are deeper than just a striving for one thing or the other. For Black Americans, where the material and moral are often tied to each other, where concepts like freedom, wealth, and whiteness are all interrelated, the American dream becomes more than just two warring ideals but a complicated web to success. This complexity is important to understand because the mythology regularly impacts the way people understand race and racism in America. If people believe that the American dream is easily accessible to Black people— if they just work hard enough—then there will be no attempts to correct the many systemic failings that make it more likely that White Americans rather than Blacks will succeed in obtaining their dream.
This dissertation has shown that the Black American dream has to be more nuanced and complex because of the perpetual marginalization and lack of freedom of the Black community. In these seven chapters, I have shown how several important texts in Black popular culture have told this narrative of opportunity in America and how those stories have continuously evolved to explain a dream far more complicated and diverse than often acknowledged. For decades Black popular culture has defined and redefined what the American dream is and it must continue to do so in order for mainstream America to understand both the challenges and the promise of America. It is important for America to understand that the American dream looks different when a cop's foot is on your neck, when you have to perpetually work twice as hard, and if you are still being redlined in the communities you live in. Black popular culture often engaged with the myth of the dream, but more often than not, also depicted its reality. It is a sobering assessment that is more complicated than the work hard for success narrative that many believe is the heart of dream.

These works proved that the Black American dream is about hope and opportunity but is also about struggle and freedom. The Black American dream is about being able to define and fulfill your own dreams, and ultimately it seems about a freedom to define your own destiny for yourself. Audre Lorde reminded James Baldwin that her American Dream story was different from his. There is no one Black American dream nor is there a defining vision, but there does seem to be in all these popular culture works a desire for a freedom to not be constrained or defined by wealth, by racism, or by struggle, rather the Black Dream is dominated by a desire for the freedom to “just be”.
At times, some Black cultural producers have heavily emphasized the material aspects of the dream; the narrative that hard work and dedication can earn an American from any background a materially comfortable place in the middle class. However even these remakings of the dream have had to acknowledge a moral component, a fight for freedom and respect that went beyond a simple “moving on up” narrative.

For example, Chapter 2 highlighted the failed attempts of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* newspaper to sell a dream of the South to restless Black Americans who were simultaneously trying to figure out how to deal with racism in the Jim Crow South and faltering economic conditions. The *Norfolk Journal and Guide* failed to sell a dream to an increasingly conscious Black America looking to improve their lives. The *Guide’s* job, to convince Black southerners that the South, with its low wages, Jim Crow laws, and the Ku Klux Klan was the better place to live, was not an easy task. While the North proved not to be the “promised land” many dreamed of, the *Guide’s* appeal to the material components of the dream, including homeownership and entrepreneurship was ultimately unpersuasive. Instead of showing life with integrated schools and a range of factory jobs, the *Guide* put the onus on its readers to picture a different reality of southern life from the ones they were living. The *Guide* had to fall back on moral arguments, including self-determination, duty, and obligation. This defensive dream strategy was not successful, and the exodus from the South continued through the 1960s.

Similarly, the covers of *Ebony* magazine deployed an ideology I call Black glamour, conveying upward mobility and the American dream to its readers through images and notions of materialism, wealth, and status. According to Stephen Gundle (2001), glamour transmits desire. During the civil rights movement, glamour was
deployed as a way to explore the possibility and promise of America and the American dream in the Black community. As we saw in Chapter 4, *Ebony* advanced the transformational concept of glamour in the Black community, which “contained the promise of a mobile and commercial society that anyone could be transformed into a better, more attractive, and wealthier version of themselves” (Postrel, 2013, p. 138). This portrayal often hid the reality of life for most Black Americans. The magazine covers of *Ebony* were problematic and often upheld material aspects (e.g., riches, light skin, and celebrity status) and was not reflective of the world in which the majority of most Black people lived.

Nevertheless, *Ebony* also had to engage with a moral dimension of the dream. Black glamour is about transformation. Sometimes it is about showing off fur coats and exotic locales, but it is also about upholding the possibility of Black people entering spaces they traditionally could not, fighting off stereotypes, and changing conception around Black identity. *Ebony* used glamour as a tool to convey the notion of the American dream, which, at its core, was about freedom and access. *Ebony’s* aesthetics of glamour were often more conservative than radical, and though its cover images did not change to embrace a radical ethos until the middle of the civil rights movements, the ideas of Black people transforming and entering a new reality were always the heart of Black glamour for *Ebony*.

New York City hip-hop in the late-20th and early-21st century also emphasized the material parts of the Black American dream. Mainstream hip-hop was often thought to be overwhelmingly materialistic (Arnold, 2008, para.1). The artists examined in Chapter 6 had a more conservative understanding of the American dream that remained
dedicated to ideas around hard work, respectability, exceptionalism, education for success, individualism, and the survival of the fittest mentality. Yet, while artists like the Notorious B.I.G. often rapped about expensive clothing and cars, he was skeptical that material possessions would lead to happiness. He often questioned the idea that money could buy success, though looking for the same freedoms it seemed to bring to people in the namely White power structure in the United States. At the same time, these artists also embraced a more radical notion of the dream rendering a critique issues around racism and policing, a tradition that artists like Cardi B seemed to continue albeit in a different way. While Cardi B’s lyrics are still similar to previous rappers, her social media presence has been increasingly radical and shows a very direct and clear commitment to the moral aspect of the dream. More than any medium, hip-hop seems to reveal that ultimately for Black Americans, the American dream is not a choice between the moral and material aspects. It is a tense composite of both, where each is embraced and questioned.

Even if the Guide, Ebony, New York hip-hop, put forward a vision of the Black American dream that emphasized material success, other cultural producers, in contrast, led with the moral struggle for freedom and equality, even if they vacillated between that vision and the material aspects of the dream. The antics of the cartoon Bungleton Green (Rogers, 1920), for example, constantly redefined its understanding of the dream and the way it should be articulated as four different artists created the cartoon. As we saw in Chapter 1, over the cartoon’s 40-year history it celebrated the moral aspect of the dream by advocating to end racism and systematic discrimination, and then moved back to the material aspect by showing Bungleton becoming successful through oil wealth and as a
middle-class business owner. Bungleton used several means to find his American dream (e.g., physical violence, respectability politics, gambling, becoming law enforcement), while still having agency and generally believing in the notion that a better day could come. *Bungleton Green* found a way to use humor to explore the various aspects of the dream and showed how different artists and different periods impacted how the dream was understood in the Black community. The cartoon gave readers a way to visualize success in an everyman, but also the trappings of material social advancement. For Bungleton, even when he achieved an aspect of the dream, it never felt satisfying for him, showing how the full aspect of the dream that Fisher (1973) believed in was never truly available for a Black man in America, regardless of decade or period.

Madam C. J. Walker also moved back and forth between different aspects of the dream, through her promotion of beauty culture and entrepreneurship. Walker’s advertisements contained slogans like “Attractive Faces and Beautiful Hair are the Symbols of Success,” (Madame C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company, n.d.-b). These slogans made clear that for Walker, and eventually her daughter, A’Lelia Walker, hair was tied to success, life, and the American dream. One advertisement read:

> TOO GREAT STRESS cannot be laid upon the matter of appearance. As you seem, so others judge you! Radiate an air of prosperity and who is to know if your purse is lined with gold or not? Personal cleanliness, neatness, Whitened teeth, luxurious hair, a flawless complexion and dainty hands—these are the things that impress others and pave the way for your success by building confidence. Look your best . . .—you owe it to your race. (Bundles, 2018, “Amazing Progress”)

For the Walker Company, achieving the American dream was both about material success and also a moral duty to your race. The advertisements of Walker clearly showed that while ideals like equality and independence were important, a theme especially emphasized for women of color, individual success also mattered. The advertisements of
Madam C.J. Walker were about beauty, appearance, and wealth, but also about the agency and independence that Black women could have from Black men if they indulged in beauty culture either through the use of her products or becoming a person that sold them. The message of the Walker company was often centered on how women could engage in the dream, a difference that distinguished this cultural text from the editorials of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* or the *Defender’s Bungleton Green* comic strip.

*Life’s* sole Black staff photographer in the mid-1950s to late-1960s, Gordon Parks, evolved over his career towards a greater engagement with the moral component of the dream. In Chapter 5, I explored the multiple ways *Life* magazine engaged with the American dream in Black America through three different narratives. Unlike the other sections, this chapter sought to look at how the Black American dream was portrayed at a mainstream White publication with content largely produced by Black Americans and reflected how Black cultural producers and subjects responded to and viewed the American dream in different eras, in contrast to white publishers and writers. Despite Parks’s beautiful and complex photos, it was clear that in 1956, the American dream in Black life was not fully understood by the White writer, Robert Wallace. The text for the article often competes with Parks’s vision of the dream, emphasizing a material narrative while the photos reveal a moral struggle against segregation. In the aftermath of the Parks piece, *Life* magazine again showed they did not fully understand the plight of another Black family, the Causeys, as Allie Lee constantly asked the magazine for monetary assistance, which she wanted not just to obtain material wealth, but to complete her moral dream of being a teacher and helping students. In 1968, when Parks was responsible for both the images and the text, the moral struggle of the Harlem Fontenelle’s comes
through clearly. Like in other chapters, this revealed the ways in which the desires of freedom and equality intertwined with the monetary aspect of the dream.

Finally, in this conclusion, I looked at Black film during the first three years of the Donald Trump presidency. Using five popular films, *Black Panther*, *Us*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, *Sorry to Bother You*, and *Queen and Slim*, I analyzed how the mediums’ engagement with the dream seemed to be more focused on issues around social justice and equality—the moral version of the dream. These films all engaged with the dream in different ways and articulated vastly different paths to the dream from more moderate neo-liberal appeals to union organizing, to standing up to the criminal justice system. In a time where the United States was more divided than ever and fear and anxiety seemed to be commonplace, a more uniform narrative around the moral component of the dream could be seen. I do not mean material wealth was not as important as a part of the dream in any of the narratives, but it was less a part of the dream story. As a whole, the films reveal the anxiety, fear, and deep frustration that Black Americans are feeling after a period of extreme hope with the election of Barack Obama.

Still, even within this similar framework, these films also prove that the dream is far from monolithic in the Black community as the paths to the dream, whether love, compromise, or revolution, vary. This chapter proved that after a period of great hope and during times of despair, artists responded not by doubling down on a desire for wealth and riches, but by moving completely away from this aspect of the dream.

Ultimately, this dissertation showed how complex and nuanced the American dream is in Black America. To be clear, the American dream is the Black American
The American dream was never meant for Black people, yet Black people embraced it and made it their own over the years molding it to serve their purposes. It was a malleable dream, and all too often had to be deferred, yet it was constant in Black popular culture. Yet most Americans still don’t understand that the American dream was not universal and that the path to achieving is not and has never been equal. As protests around the nation continue in the wake of George Floyd’s death, and police violence against Black people continues, perhaps this has caused mainstream popular culture to continue to wrestle with the complexity of the American dream in Black life and acknowledge the challenges of the dream for Black Americans, something that Black popular culture has recognized for decades.
Today, as the Sprite advertisement shows, mainstream popular culture has at least finally begun to understand the burden that the dream has been in Black America. We need more cultural products like this, and more realism when it comes to depicting the American dream in Black life. The American dream in most cases has been a nightmare for Black people, but Black popular culture has constantly contested it, reworked it, and shaped it into a dream that responded to their needs. Most importantly, even during the darkest moments in Black America, Black popular culture retained a sense of hope in America’s promise, creating and re-creating the American dream and will most likely continue to do so in the future.
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