THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

CULTURES OF ASPIRATION:

AFRICAN AMERICAN CHICAGO, 1929 TO 1959

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY

JULIUS LANGSTON JONES

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The internet is full of advice on how to write a dissertation, and yet there are many things that you experience as you write that no one can articulate or explain. The process of giving your ideas words and placing those words onto paper is one of the most difficult things a human being can do. Despite this, I have taken comfort in the fact that several people have constantly encouraged me and supported me throughout this process, giving me the confidence that I would be able to complete this dissertation. The list of names below is long, but it is not exhaustive, and for those whom I have omitted charge I hope that it is charged to my head and not my heart.

I will be eternally grateful to the Department of History at the University of Chicago for allowing me to earn my doctorate at one of the world's premier institutions of higher learning. I would like to especially thank those faculty whom I have had the opportunity to take courses with: Ramon A. Gutiérrez, Jane Dailey, Thomas Holt, Julie Saville, and Amy Dru Stanley. I would also like to thank the wonderful staff of the department who work tirelessly on behalf of all of us students to help us complete the process of earning our degrees: Joanne Berens, Cyndee Breshock, David L. Goodwine Jr., Peggy O'Donnell, and Sonja Rusnak.

My committee served as an important sounding board throughout my time, and I owe them a debt of gratitude. Adam Green, Matthew Briones, and Jim Sparrow, I simply want to say thank you for the countless hours of mentorship, the opportunity to serve as a teaching intern or assistant for each of you, and the countless hours you have dedicated to my dissertation.

My cohort, and students admitted the previous and preceding years, were an invaluable source of support and encouragement. I would like to thank Evelyn Atkinson, Nathalie Barton,

Keegan Boyer, Robert Burgos, David Cantor-Echols, Jessa Dahl, Chris Dingwall, Ashley Finigan, Nicholas Foster, Korey Garibaldi, Alexander Hofmann, Lily Huang, Caine Jordan, Robert Kaminski, Nicholas Kryczka, Savitri Kunze, Emily Masghati. Kai Parker, Traci Parker, Sarath Pillai, Allison Robinson, Alyssa Smith, Robert Suits, Elizabeth Todd-Breland, and Lael Weinberger.

Graduate school can be a difficult experience, especially during the first few years. I was fortunate to have the support of an extended village at the University of Chicago. I am thankful to have had my friend and fellow Mellon Mays fellow from Duke, Braxton Shelley, there when I arrived on campus to show me the ropes. And I am grateful for the relationships I made through my employment at the Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture on campus. I want to thank Tracye Matthews and the wonderful staff at the CSRPC for welcoming me into the fold all those years again. And to the lifelong friends I made there, each of you were an inspiration and a constant source of encouragement: Dara Epison, David Ferguson, Alfredo Gonzalez, Ainsley LeSure, and Marcelle Medford. Thank you for being just what I needed just when I needed it.

During my time in graduate school, I became involved in public history. I began what has now become a career as an intern at the DuSable Museum of African American History through the generous support of the UChicagoGRAD program. I made many friends there and learned a great deal about the world from my extended DuSable family. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work alongside each of you at such an esteemed institution.

From there, I was able to earn a job at the Chicago History Museum, where I have worked for five years. I still vividly remember my interview with Rosemary Adams, my first supervisor, and Russell L. Lewis, the Executive Vice President, who brought me into the

museum and turned a curiosity into a career. I am also grateful to my current supervisor, Charles Bethea, who gave me an opportunity to be a curator. The entire staff of the Chicago History Museum has supported and encouraged me throughout this journey, and I owe each of them a debt of gratitude.

As I conclude my time in graduate school, I dedicate this to two people I have lost during my time in graduate school. First, I know that I would not be here today preparing to graduate with my doctorate without the support of Raymond P. Gavins. Professor Gavins, all those years ago, agreed to serve as my mentor and sponsor my application to the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship. I will never know why Professor Gavins agreed to do so, as I was a good student, but not an exceptional one. But he did, and he meticulously walked me through each step to help me learn how to be a scholar. The care and attention he showed all his students made him a master educator. Strive to show that level of care to my students now. He also encouraged me to apply to the University of Chicago, which seemed foolish to me. But he was right, as he always was. He saw in me what I did not see in myself, and I will always be grateful.

My family has consistently supported me over these eight long years, and I would not be here today as the man that I am without them, but one person who is no longer here is the person who dedicate this dissertation to. My great-grandmother, Hazel Massey, whom we all called Poonin. She died in October 2021, and although dementia had taken her from us many years beforehand, I regret that she is not here to share this moment. She was the first person to ever call me a professor, so she spoke my destiny into existence, and I am forever indebted to her for doing so.

Finally, I have been fortunate to have by my side the love of my life, my wife LeAndrea. Although I have known her for more than half of my life, our relationship grew as she supported me from afar during my early years in graduate school. From there, she agreed to spend the rest of her life with me and more to Chicago to be by my side. For three years she watched me work, providing me with loving support and encouragement as I pushed this across the finish line. Without her gentle kindness and generosity of time I would not have completed this dissertation. I am excited that I will be able to repay her with the attention and time she deserves now that I will have a little more time.

INTRODUCTION

Aspiration, the action or process of drawing breath, and an aspiration, a hope or ambition of achieving something, are technically homographs: words with identical spellings and pronunciations, but different meanings. Yet aspiration and aspirations are both essential, if not necessary, to experiencing a complete and whole life. I believe that people of African descent in the United States, and throughout the world, aspire within a context of racial restriction; they are denied the fullness of rights and opportunities their society affords to other members of that society due to the color of their skin. They are aware of the realities of racism and its potential to limit them. Despite this, I propose that even the awareness of the realities of racism does not stop, and has never stopped, African Americans from striving towards their goals. My project will seek to identify sites of African American aspiration in Chicago during the twentieth century from the Great Depression through the 1960s. Given the persistence of racial inequality in the world, an argument could be made for 1) the perplexing nature of African American striving, and 2) the futility of such efforts. Yet, research suggests that despite many African Americans' lack of optimism in the country's ability to transcend racism, many African Americans remain confident in their ability to successfully attain their personal goals, goals that they conceptualize as part of a broader project of advancing the entire race as well.[1]

[1] For my project, I define "African American" broadly as people of African descent living in the United States. I do not, however, intend to create a monolith, but to draw out the many differences that exist within this group.

This is because African Americans are the products of a culture that simultaneously places limitations on them based on their race while propagating notions of limitless possibilities and opportunities, an idea popularly known as the American Dream. African Americans then seek to achieve specific goals within a particular context of racial limitation, or as I have coined them, sites of aspiration. Put another way, we can understand a site of aspiration as a social sphere when African Americans have sought not only to break down racial barriers but to redefine the barometers by which success is measured as well. One common and well-explored example is homeownership. African Americans were bombarded with government propaganda to become homeowners, yet when they attempted to do just that, the same government, along with white homeowners, real estate brokers, and financial institutions, erected barriers to prevent them. When faced with these obstacles, African Americans resisted and persevered.

My project seeks to explore this and other sites where African Americans have sought to achieve, met resistance, and then resisted the resistance. More importantly, I want to explore the social and cultural practices of a people who occupy the space between racial restriction and limitless possibility to expose the vulnerability of African American aspiration. Gains made by African Americans seem tenuous and fleeting, yet this perception does not stop African Americans from striving to achieve their aspirations. I am planning to begin during the Great Depression and the efforts to save the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company. Using this as a launching point, I plan to follow a chronological narrative that identifies sites of aspiration along the way: obligation and resistance during World War II through the work of the Parkway Community House; struggles for homeownership, affordable housing, and integration; the rise of consumer culture in the 1950s and equal access to the marketplace as evidence by *Ebony*

magazine; and the evolution of a counter-consumer culture Black Nationalist ethos of economic empowerment as defined by the Nation of Islam into the 1960s.

Racial liberalism argues that instances of racism are the moral failings of individuals and antithetical to the ethos of the United States. In a liberal society, the rights of the individual are supposed to be valued, yet individuals have their rights violated for no other reason than the color of their skin. Charles Mills argues that liberalism often ignores issues of race in such a way that it is complicit in white supremacy. This is because rather than challenge racism, racial liberalism in fact supports racist structures. After all, it fails to locate racism as part of the very establishment of the liberal state. Racism and liberalism share their origins in modernity, meaning they exist "more in symbiosis than contradiction." Mills goes on to say that "whiteness is a prerequisite for individuality," meaning that the only persons' rights that the liberal state is designed to defend are those of whites."[2]

Despite the persistence of racism in the United States, many people feel that these acts of racism should first be individualized, then understood as abnormalities, and not emblematic of the character of the nation, which itself is fundamentally egalitarian. Mills astutely points out that historically, structural critiques of America's racial order have been undercut due to societal factors. During the 1930s, as the left in the United States began to grow in prominence with the Great Depression causing new critiques of capitalism's failures and shortcomings, African Americans began to draw structural linkages between white supremacy, colonialism, and

[2] Charles Mills, "Liberalism and the Racial State," in *State of White Supremacy: Racism, Governance, and the United States* (Stanford University Press, 2011), 23.

economic subordination. During the rise of Nazism and Fascism throughout Europe, a phenomenon that led to the second world war, African Americans again drew connections to racism in the United States. It was not until the Cold War and its anti-Communist fervor that critics of racism in the United States began shifting their critiques from the societal and structural to the social and personal to inoculate themselves from potential Redbaiting.[3]

But what if this is not the case? What if American racism is, well, American? Not an aberration, but part of America; a defining feature that cannot be disassociated from the whole. Many thinkers have, at different points and times, dealt with these questions. Black nationalism and radical thought introduced the United States to the idea that racism, and various other forms of oppression, were the result of structural factors that move racism from the personal to the societal. Leveling the strongest critiques, many writers have rejected the American Dream "as insufficient to traditional appeals for equal justice in a white-dominated nation" instead of promoting "black identity and black nationalism, in the service of black liberation." The American Dream holds in it the specter of full integration into a just and fair society; African Americans critics of this ideal believe(d) that America would never fully and equally integrate them into the broader society, and as a result, this hope is merely an illusion, a distraction from the real work of liberation.[4]

In short, these critics argue that the American Dream is antithetical to the experiences of African Americans. This is due to an uneasiness about the roles and prospects for African

---

[3] Ibid., 28.

[4] Joanna Schneider Zangrando and Robert L. Zangrando, "Black Protest: A Rejection of the American Dream." *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Dec., 1970), 142.

Americans to fully achieve equality in the United States. More importantly, there remain important critiques of notions of equality themselves. Many African Americans fear that equality is too often equated with assimilation; that to achieve the equality they seek they need to comport themselves more like their white counterparts. Others believe that the very act of seeking equality is an exercise in futility; the notion that white Americans would allow African Americans to ever achieve anything remotely resembling parity is laughable and, more importantly, dangerous.

The most extreme manifestation of this phenomenon is Afro-pessimism. Elements of Afro-pessimism ebb and flow from the forefront of African American consciousness. Afro-pessimism is the notion that "[…] anti-Blackness can emerge at any moment with the existence of Blackness."[5] Whiteness is at the heart of what holds the western world together, meaning "that the structures of the world we live in are inherently anti-Black [….] Thus, to maintain and reform the system around us is to uphold whiteness, and to uphold or positively identify with whiteness will always be anti-Black."[6] The current condition of anti-Blackness is rooted in slavery, which rendered the slave as an object and thus "socially dead." Because of this, the slave was open to "gratuitous violence," "natally alienated," and "generally dishonored," conditions that the end of formal chattel slavery did not eliminate for African Americans.[7]

Not only is the western world constructed on anti-Blackness, but the most common strategy also employed to address this—asserting the equality of African Americans—only

---

[5] *Afro-Pessimism: A Reader* (Minneapolis, MN: racked & dispatched, 2017), v.

[6] Ibid., vi.

[7] Ibid., 8.

serves to affirm anti-Blackness and white supremacy. Afro-pessimism "problematizes any positive affirmations of identity," because these practices sustain the status-quo: "If as Afro-pessimism shows, it is not possible to affirm Blackness itself without at the same time affirming anti-Black violence, then the attempts at recognition and inclusion in society will only ever result in further social and real death." The status quo is constituted of a world that is interested in its preservation, not reformation, and trying to reform a society based on anti-Blackness is an exercise in dangerous futility that must be taken to task.[8]

While the overwhelming majority of African Americans are not Afro-pessimists, many find elements of Afro-pessimism compelling because different moments over the course of their history in the United States have legitimated it. Yet, other moments tell a much more hopeful story about the nation and the racial progress it has made. A highly visible class of successful African Americans emerged during the second half of the twentieth century, serving as a powerful symbol of that racial progress. Because of this, it is becoming increasingly difficult to make claims of the continued, wholesale marginalization of African Americans as a group when so many racial barriers are being broken. This is precisely the reason for the fervor of the most recent protest around the country concerning police brutality; it seems antiquated, like a bad memory, for protests reminiscent of the Civil Rights era to even be necessary. Many people believed we were past this, but a closer reading of the past and present makes reconciling the history that America is taught of the progress it has made with the memory of racial discrimination—a memory reinforced with a constant stream of new, racially-divisive events—a challenging task that the county still grapples with today.

[8] Ibid., 9-11.

My project stakes out this ground, making the claim that the typical categories scholars use—integrationist or separatist, assimilationist or nationalist—are insufficient to conceptualize the African American experience properly and accurately in the United States. African Americans more than any other group in the United States understand both the power of the nation's founding ideals and creed, and the burden of a history that contradicts those ideals. Their lives reflect the paradox that although certain rights appear as though they should be unalienable, African Americans have been alienated from them; the limits of the country's willingness and ability to actualize a racially-equitable reality for all its citizens, and the possibilities for a better life for all those citizens—an idea that has been colloquially referred to as the American Dream.

The origins of the term "The American Dream" can be traced back to the publishing of historian James Truslow Adams's *The Epic of America* in 1931. *The New York Times* noted that Adams had "already established" his competency as a historian and the *Los Angeles Times* that "through his body of work, Adams had already distinguished himself as a scholarly and original historical gifted with great charm of style…." Over the course of his career, Adams had "done much to revolutionize thought about the United States and its history." Adams was a prolific writer as well. By the time *The Epic* was published, he had already authored a three-volume book on the founding and history of New England and its cultural impact on the early republic, as well as additional monographs on the Puritan settlers and a biography of the family of presidents John and John Quincy Adams.[9]

[9] Allen Sinclair Will, "AMERICA, NATION OF DREAMERS: In The Quality Mr. Adams Finds the Key to Our History," *The New York Times*, October 4, 1931, 61; Lillian C.

This body of work had earned Adams the respect of many students of history for his demonstrated ability "to examine the record with scientific exactitude and to judge according to the facts."[10] He was seen as a pure historian who was willing, to tell the truth as he saw it:

> It will not be necessary to suggest to any reader of his earlier works that he rejects the definition, rather commonly accepted by a passing school of historians, that the epic of America is a heroic tale of men mighty in moral virtue whose superior perceptions of right and wrong have been a light in the darkness in an unregenerate world. He idealizes nothing and nobody, but searches, in the pursuit of the highest mission of his craft, for the truth as he may find it by the exercise of insight fortified with sound scholarship.[11]

If there was consensus on Adams' abilities as a historian, there was also agreement on the central argument of *The Epic* and the mastery with which Adams achieved his desired end.

Adams' main argument, as summarized by *The New York Times*, was that America was "predominately a nation of dreamers. There is an 'American dream' of a better, richer, and happier life for all citizens of every rank, and it is still held by a large body of the people with a tenacity which nothing has been able to shake."[12] *The Baltimore Sun* defined the American Dream as "a hope eternal, a great American dream, of a land in which life should be richer, better and happier for all citizens of every rank, with opportunity keeping with his or her own ability."[13] What made *The Epic* unique was its desire to move beyond the history of the United State and

---

Ford, "IDEALIST INTERPRETS PAST: J. T. Adams Applies Own Criteria of Progress to a Dynamic Study of Our History," *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 1931, B8.

[10] Ford, "IDEALIST INTERPRETS PAST," *Los Angeles Times*.

[11] Will, "AMERICA, NATION OF DREAMERS," *The New York Times*.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Nathan G. Goodman, "The Pursuit of the American Ideal: James Truslow Adams Undertakes to Analyze Our Country," *The Baltimore Sun*, October 4, 1931, SM7.

instead provide a sort of psychoanalysis of the development of a uniquely "American" character. How did Americans become who and what they are?

Adams all but ignores issues of race, painting a picture of an "authentic" American that is both white and male. The definition of an authentic "American" by its very function creates an "other," someone who is not an American. Barbara Jean Fields writes provocatively on the "othering" of African Americans in the United States, noting how there are writers and *Black* writers, politicians and *Black* politicians. Fields goes on to explore the systemic nature of race in the United States that places peoples of African descent outside of the nation's polity. Few challenged the idea "that people are more readily oppressed when they are already perceived as inferior by nature. The reverse is more to the point. People are more readily perceived as inferior by nature when they are already seen as oppressed."[14] For most of the nation's history, the United States defined African Americans as less than full citizens, a condition that many believe remains into the present day.

Despite the reality, I would like to offer another reading of the African American experience, one where instead of a wholesale rejection or acceptance of the American Dream, African Americans negotiate the liminal space between restriction and possibility. In our present moment, with the non-indictments of the white police officers responsible for the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, millions of Americans find themselves questioning how much racial progress African Americans and other racial minorities in this country have made. At this moment, the rallying cries of "Black Lives Matter" and "I Can't Breathe" represent a deep-

[14] Barbara Jean Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America." *New Left Review*, vol. 181, no. 1 (May-June 1990).

seated belief that the dehumanization of people of color, particularly black men, will never cease being a reality in the United States. How, then, has the dream of what America can be survived the often-disappointing reality of what life in the United States has been? This is the question my dissertation will seek to answer.

A project of this nature requires a firm grasp of several bodies of literature that when woven together will paint a complete picture of the context that shaped the African American experience in the twentieth century. Chicago owes the fact that it has become the city that it is to its geographical location. Founded as a fur trading post by Jean Baptist Point du Sable at the mouth of the Chicago River and Lake Michigan, its location allowed it to become a major hub connecting the still-young nation to its east with the expansive continent beyond its borders. At the time of the city's incorporation in 1837, it had become the premier destination for crops, livestock, and other raw materials to be brought to market to be manufactured into the good that the expanding United States needed.[15]

As the crossroads of America, the city emerged as one of the primer cities in the world as the nineteenth century ended. To celebrate the city's and the country's emergence as players on the world stage, Chicago was chosen to host the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, commonly known as the world's fair. The event was to celebrate the 400 years since Christopher Columbus arrived in the New World and highlighted the advancement of the United States.

---

[15] The best treatment of the role that Chicago's geographical location played in it becoming a major economic and cultural hub in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be found in: William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).

Nearly fifty countries produced displays highlighting aspects of their history and culture. Attractions included new inventions and scientific advancements, as well as modern amusements seen for the first time, such as the Ferris wheel and the moving sidewalk. More importantly, the fair marked the arrival of America, and Chicago, on the world stage.[16]

At the time of the 1893 world's fair, Chicago had a small African American population. The economic growth of Chicago and the prominence of its African American community to the civic and cultural life of African Americans throughout the country, coupled with the decline of agriculture in the south, the imposition of the Jim Crow racial regime, and the economic boom taking place in Chicago and other northern metropolises due to the outbreak of the Great War in Europe, led to the massive migration of African American into Chicago bringing in the second decade of the twentieth century. African Americans believed that Chicago represented a "Promised Land" of sorts for them, free from the racial restrictions that had come to define life below the Mason-Dixon Line after the end of Reconstruction and full of economic activity and opportunity unimaginable on the farms of the Mississippi Delta. These hopes, however, were dashed as they found few opportunities beyond the prescribed boundaries of domestic and

[16] Norm Bolotin and Christine Laing, *The World's Columbian Exposition: The Chicago World's Fair of 1893* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Chaim M. Rosenberg, *America At the Fair: Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2008); Erik Larson, *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2003).

menial labor, limited housing options in racially segregated communities, and unspoken but clear limitations of where African Americans were welcomed in the city.[17]

This confluence of old settlers and newly arrived migrants created a cultural milieu that would lead to Chicago becoming the cultural epicenter of African American life in the twentieth century. African Americans strived to adapt to the expectations of their unfamiliar environment and worked tirelessly to build a civic, economic, and cultural life that would support them in their new communities. Civic institutions, such as the Chicago chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Chicago Urban League worked to guide recent African American migrants, while various churches encouraged lives of religious devotion to dissuade migrants from taking part in the excesses of urban life. African Americans created economic opportunities for themselves, buying and selling amongst themselves, to support a cultural market economy that combined notions of economic self-sufficiently and racial pride to be successful. They created everything from grooming products to recording albums, magazines, and newspapers to food, insurance companies to motion pictures to take their economic destiny into their own hands.[18]

---

[17] James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) and Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

[18] Wallace D. Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915-1952.* (Princeton University Press, 2005); Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, & Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Christopher Robert Reed, *The Chicago NAACP and the Rise of Black Professional Leadership, 1910-1966* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Arvarh E. Strickland, *History of the Chicago Urban League* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966).

One could make the case that there is not a more studied group of people in the world than African Americans in Chicago. The sure volume of scholarly work about this community is daunting. Despite this, key themes emerge from this body of scholarship. One prevalent theme is the notion of African Americans as suffering from an almost pathological dysfunction that resulted in disproportionately high negative social indicators in their community. Scholars held up higher rates of crime, poverty, unemployment, out-of-wedlock childbirth, and disease as the result of some sort of maladjustment to urban life on the part of African Americans. Over the course of the twentieth century, scholars began to give more attention to the structural conditions that may have led to these, but ideas of African American deficiency remained embedded in the scholarly literature. Additionally, the African American community in Chicago showed remarkable dynamism and diversity. There was a strong economic base that provided many of the necessities of modern life to the community. Residential racial segregation meant that African Americans of every socioeconomic status lived near one another in the community; this cultural and economic diversity was not without problems and conflict, but community life was defined by the ties that held people together rather than their differences.[19]

The Great Depression unleashed sheer havoc on Chicago. The very same factors that made Chicago an economic powerhouse at the turn of the twentieth century made the city vulnerable to economic collapse. The slaughterhouses that processed the world's meat for

[19] By no means exhaustive, the following books are a sampling of the body of work: St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1945); Dolinar, Brian, ed. *The Negro in Illinois: The WPA Papers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Otis Dudley Duncan and Beverly Duncan, *The Negro Population of Chicago: A Study of Residential Succession* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957); Spear, *Black Chicago*.

consumption began to decrease shifts or close altogether as demand and prices plummeted. Railroads that made their living shipping poultry in and out of Chicago lost revenue because of a decrease in cargo as meatpacking, steel production, and the city's other industry dealt with those same economic forces. The lack of industry and demand led to brutal layoffs that left half of the city's workforce unemployed. Joblessness throughout the city resulted in steep declines in municipal revenue, resulting in city and county employees going months without receiving their paychecks. Soon, the situation turned violent and contentious with disturbances becoming common. Teachers and other government employees demanded their pay, unemployed workers demanded jobs, and mobs prevented law enforcement officials from evicting tenants who fell behind on their rent.[20]

Despite the best efforts of Chicago and the city to lift itself out of the economic doldrums, it was not until the nation became mobilizing for World War II that the economic tide turned permanently. Long before the United States was drawn into the fighting as a result of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the economic mobilization the war unleashed turned Chicago's economy around. New Deal policies instituted by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had begun to help the nation's recovery. However, this recovery occurred in fits and starts with periods of economic growth followed by sudden and sharp declines.[21]

---

[20] Christopher Robert Reed, *The Depression Comes to the South Side: Protest and Politics in the Black Metropolis, 1930-1933* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2011); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Erik S. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

[21] David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Depression and war fundamentally altered the already unique relationship of African Americans to the government, both in Chicago and the federal government. Chicago, located in the home state of America's most revered politician, Abraham Lincoln, had been a largely Republican town. Its mayor at the time, William "Big Bill" Thompson was a larger-than-life politician who used many antics to his advantage. Despite positioning himself as an anti-crime, law and order leader, he was considered to be one of the most corrupt men to ever hold office. During his two reigns as mayor, organized crime flourished, and Thompson turned a blind eye due to his not-so-secret alliance with Al Capone. Thompson allowed Capone to control organized crime in the city to keep the peace and arrested Capone's opponents to burnish his image as an anti-organized crime. When Thompson decided not to run for reelection in 1923 and was succeeded by a Democrat William Deaver, a "wet" who still enforced prohibition due to his belief in upholding the laws of the land, all hell broke loose as the city fell into an all-out gang war by 1926. Thompson was reelected in 1927 and returned Chicago to the status quo.[22]

Thompson's victory was helped in no small part by the fierce loyalty of Chicago's African American population to the Party of Lincoln. Thompson knew that this voting block was key to his electoral success and rewarded their loyalty with political appointments that held significance in the African American community despite being powerless. Thompson seemed

[22] William J. Grimshaw, *Bitter Fruit: Black Politics and the Chicago Machine, 1931-1991* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Roger Biles, *Big City Boss in Depression and War: Mayor Edward J. Kelly of Chicago* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1984); Dominic A. Pacyga, *Chicago: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Robert G. Spinney, *City of Big Shoulders: A History of Chicago* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000); Thomas Dyja, *The Third Coast: When Chicago Built the American Dream* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2013).

destined to hold on to his perch atop the city until the bottom fell out of the economy after the stock market crash in October 1929. Before the country would elect Roosevelt president in 1932, Chicago elected a Bohemian immigrant named Anton Cermak mayor in April 1931. Despite the strong headwinds against Thompson, African American leaders, and the voters they mobilized stayed loyal to Thompson and rejected Cermak. This decision proved fateful as Cermak took out his political revenge on the African American community for their lack of political support.

Cermak was a "wet" and supported the repeal of Prohibition, yet he needed to appear tough on crime and vice in the city to keep one of his main campaign promises. "Policy," a lottery-like system that was popular among African Americans that provided jobs in the community and funding for African American politicians' campaigns, was the ideal target for Cermak to crack down on vice in the city. African American leaders cried racism, and while Cermak certainly showed no affinity for them, his motivations were political; African Americans were Republicans and thus political enemies. However, he was more than willing to be gentler if they were willing to become friends. Cermak never was able to actualize his plan however after being assassinated while touring with President-elect Roosevelt in Miami in February 1933. His predecessor, Edward Kelly, took a slightly gentler approach but the ultimatum was clear: join the Democratic party or suffer the consequences.[23]

The consequences for African Americans refusing to join the Democratic party became coming into stark reality as Roosevelt began putting his New Deal policies into place. Few

[23] Grimshaw, *Bitter Fruit*; Biles, *Big City Boss in Depression and War*; Pacyga, *Chicago: A Biography*; Spinney, *City of Big Shoulders*; Dyja, *The Third Coast*.

mayors championed the president's agenda more forcefully than Kelly and as a result, Chicago was one of the largest funding from New Deal programs in the United States. Kelly used this influx of cash to rescue the city from the economic wasteland it had become while simultaneously rewarding his political base and excluding those wards that had supported his opponents. Kelly was more than willing to share the benefits of the Roosevelt administration's largess with the African American community, as well as turn a blind eye to what was left of the Policy racket, in exchange for political loyalty to the Democratic party. Given the economic devastation of the city's African American communities, and the collapse of the Republican party in Chicago, it was a deal too good to pass up. As a result, the movement of African Americans into the Democratic party occurred simultaneously, although each process had its unique contours that have been glossed over by many, albeit not all, historical accounts.[24]

All Americans, and particularly African Americans, began to see that government at every level could, and should, play a more significant role in the everyday lives of its citizens. The expansive slate of programs instituted by President Roosevelt to lift the country out of the depression began to change the relationship between the federal government and African Americans. Many New Deal programs, particularly those focused on the arts and cultural pursuits, provided employment opportunities, as well as the dominant financial support for African American cultural production during the 1930s. Writers, painters, sculptors, photographers, and scholars all received much-needed income thanks to the federal government. The picture was not all positive, however, as many of the New Deal's economic programs failed to eliminate discrimination and racial disparities; Roosevelt allowed southerners,

[24] Ibid.

a key constituency, to manage New Deal programs in accordance with the racist customs of the times. Additionally, fear of angering these powerful southern Democratic Senators and Congressmen prevented the Roosevelt administration from forcefully supporting civil rights and anti-lynching legislation.[25]

More recent scholarship on the increasing role of the federal government in the lives of its citizens has placed this creation of this phenomenon not in the New Deal but with the country's entry into and prosecution of World War II, and the expenditure of wartime spending dwarfed the spending of New Deal programs. This massive intrusion into the everyday lives of Americans opened the door for new claims to be made on the federal government and increased the likelihood for those claims to be addressed. No group of citizens benefitted more from this than African Americans. Since before the Civil War, African Americans had made direct appeals to the United States government to step into their everyday lives to ensure that they, too, could enjoy a full and equal share of the benefits of citizenship. The federal government nearly always failed to provide redress, arguing that to do so would be to step outside of the scope of appropriate action and to encroach on the rights of the states. However, total war required asking for sacrifice from all, and the egregious hypocrisy of asking African Americans to fight for democratic values abroad that they could not practice at home was an inconsistency that would not be allowed to stand unchallenged.[26]

---

[25] Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

[26] James T. Sparrow, *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

The next body of literature I will be in conversation with is the work on housing in Chicago's African American community after World War II. The second world war had a similar effect as the first when it came to drawing African Americans to Chicago. However, this migration occurred on a scale previously unimaginable. The influx of African Americans made an already-strained housing market untenable. It was a confluence of several factors that would make housing the defining issue of African American life in Chicago during the twentieth century.[27]

Chicago, like the country as a whole, had allowed its housing stock to rapidly deteriorate beginning with the onset of the Great Depression. Banks were in no position to underwrite homes on a large scale and few new homes were built in the 1930s, meaning that Americans interested in procuring their own homes had little opportunity to do so. Chicago, bursting at the seams with new migrants, had a full-blown housing crisis as the war drew hundreds of thousands into a city with nowhere for them to live. Exasperating the situation in Chicago was the strict racial housing regime that kept African Americans from moving outside of the prescribed boundaries of the city's Black Belt. Efforts by the federal government allowed for the private housing market to slowly begin picking, enabling those who were able to move outside of the city into growing suburbs on the city's boundaries. For those who were unable to afford

---

[27] Arnold Hirsch, *Making of the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1950* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); Preston H. Smith, *Racial Democracy and the Black Metropolis: Housing Policy in Postwar Chicago* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Lionel Kimble, Jr., *A New Deal for Bronzeville: Housing, Employment & Civil Rights in Black Chicago, 1935-1955* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015); Beryl Satter, *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate, and the Exploitation of Black Urban America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009); Stephen Grant Meyer, *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

to purchase a home, efforts to build public housing were welcomed, so long as they did not alter the city's racial status quo.[28]

After the war, African Americans determined to exercise the freedom they fought for in Europe and the Pacific themselves in the United States. To achieve these ends, they activated the same civic institutions that had dealt with in the aftermath of World War I and into the depression. Yet, these organizations and their efforts seemed ill-suited to deal with the unique contours of racism in the aftermath of World War II. While the Civil Rights Movement began to be successful in its efforts to end *de jure* racial segregation in the south, efforts to combat the racial regime in the north proved difficult to achieve; there were no laws left on the books to challenge in court, only a clear racial order that ensured that the status quo remained intact.[29]

Achieving the unique objectives of the civil rights struggle in Chicago required multiple specialized and multi-faceted approaches. The Chicago Freedom Movement was different from the broader civil rights struggle largely because there was no law to get changed. Martin Luther King and his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference achieved success throughout the decade following a clear strategy: use direct-action, non-violent protest to draw

---

[28] For the best discussions of federal housing policy and its implications for African Americans, see David M. P. Freud, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007) and Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[29] For a history of the NAACP and Urban League in Chicago in the years after World War II, consult Reed, *The Chicago NAACP*, and Strickland, *History of the Chicago Urban League.* One of the best descriptions of the perceived ineffectiveness of traditional civil rights organizations in the aftermath of World War II and its implications for activism in Chicago is Chapter 1 of Jakobi Williams' *From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

attention to an unjust law until the policymakers, either local or national, changed the law. In Chicago, there were no racist laws to challenge. Rather, the racial regime of the city was enforced by custom and corruption; Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley used his political machine to keep a small group of African American elected leaders in power in exchange for complete loyalty to him and the machine's platform. When it came to matters of race "plantation" politics ruled the day where loyalty was rewarded, and the racial status-quo was not challenged.[30]

---

[30] For a comprehensive treatment of Martin Luther King Jr.'s work for the Civil Rights Movement, consult Taylor Branch's trilogy: *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998); *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); as well as David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: W. Morrow, 1986). For information on how Mayor Richard J. Daley came to power and governed Chicago, please consult Roger Biles, *Richard J. Daley: Politics, Race, and the Governing of Chicago* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1995); Mike Royko, *Boss: Richard J. Daley of Chicago* (New York: Dutton, 1971); Len O'Connor, *Clout: Mayor Daley and His City* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1975); Adam Cohen and Elizabeth Taylor, *American Pharaoh: Mayor Richard J. Daley, His Battle for Chicago and the Nation* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000); Bill Gleason, *Daley of Chicago: The Man, the Mayor, and the Limits of Conventional Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970). The scholarship on the Civil Rights Movement in the North is now quite extensive: Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2003); Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Patrick Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Clarence Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway: Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936-1975* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Kimberley L. Phillips, *Alabama North: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working-class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-45* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for the Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008); Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Joe William Trotter, Jr. *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

On the Daley plantation, a few black overseers served as Alderman and Democratic Committeemen or worked in municipal positions while the majority of African Americans lived in concentrated poverty on the South and West Sides of the city. When King came to Chicago at the request of Al Raby, who served as the nominal head of the loosely organized Coordinating Council of Community Organizations, he and the SCLC challenged housing segregation and slum conditions, inequitable facilities, and funding for public schools in the African American community, and economic deprivation. The playbook of direct-action protests and marching ultimately sparked a backlash against King; many previously supportive white Americans felt that marching through all-white communities was unduly provocative. Daley, who had ignored the deplorable housing conditions on the South and West Sides, sent building inspectors to enforce violations and undercut King's argument. Furthermore, many African American leaders rejected King's entry into Chicago and lent credibility to Daley's claims that the city was already working to address the issues King was raising before he arrived in the city. Ultimately, King was able to receive an agreement between the city, real estate interest, and the SCLC, but it was unenforceable and hollow, which only served to further disillusionment within the African American community.[31]

---

[31] For the history of the Chicago Freedom Movement, please consult Martin L. Deppe, *Operation Breadbasket: An Untold Story of Civil Rights in Chicago, 1966-1971* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2017); Mary Lou Finley, Bernard LaFayette, Jr., James R. Ralph, and Pam Smith, editors, *The Chicago Freedom Movement: Martin Luther King Jr. and Civil Rights Activism in the North* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015); David J. Garrow, *Chicago 1966: Open Housing Marches, Summit Negotiations, and Operation Breadbasket* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1989); Robert B. McKersie, *A Decisive Decade: An Insider's View of the Chicago Civil Rights Movement During the 1960s* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013); James R. Ralph, *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

After King and the SCLC moved on from Chicago, the struggle did not. The perceived ineffectiveness of the Chicago Freedom Movement did, however, force organizations to continue in the struggle to shift strategies. Two principal strategies emerged: the first was a strategy of militant activism best personified by the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party; the second was a strategy of economic pressure personified by the Reverend Jesse Jackson's Operation Breadbasket, and its predecessor Rainbow/PUSH. It is certainly true that the fact that the BPPI was on the receiving end of a coordinated effort of violent suppression played a significant role in the thrust of activism turning away from radicalism to the gradualism of Operation Breadbasket and later Rainbow/PUSH. However, it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge that many in Chicago's African American community were more comfortable with the *kind* of economic activism that the Rainbow/PUSH, the Woodlawn Organization, and other community groups continued to engage in towards the end of the 1960s.[32]

Insurance, when it concerns human beings, is a peculiar industry for it requires a business to determine the value of a human being's life. Gathering information on a person and determining the likelihood of their death or injury requires significant financial means and complicated actuarial methods; this was even more so the case in a historical moment before electronic calculators and computers. While imperfect, it is a science that strives to be grounded in facts and data. Yet for African Americans, the specter of racism makes the insurance business an even more fraught field of commerce since for no other reason than the color of their skin

[32] David L. Chappell, *Waking from the Dream: The Struggle for Civil Rights in the Shadow of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Random House, 2014); Deppe, *Operation Breadbasket*; McKersie, *A Decisive Decade*; Williams, *From the Bullet to the Ballot*.

African Americans have found themselves either paying more for insurance or denied coverage entirely. Yet despite this, African Americans have historically carried insurance at higher rates than their white counterparts making insurance an important site of aspiration.[33]

To explore this in-depth, I will focus on the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company which was at one point in the middle of the twentieth century was the largest African American owned business of any type in the Northern United States. Frank Gillespie arrived in Chicago in 1900 determined to make something of himself. Born in rural Arkansas in 1887, Gillespie studied the violin at the Boston Conservatory before an accident cut his music career short. Once in Chicago, Gillespie began and career in the insurance industry before incorporating Liberty Life Insurance Company on June 3, 1919. Earl B. Dickerson became general counsel and director of Liberty Life in December 1920, agreeing to work for free to help the fledgling enterprise get off the ground. The Illinois Department of Insurance required that Liberty Life deposit $105,000 two years after its founding, by June 3, 1921, to capitalize the company, and eighteen months later the company still needed $46,000. Despite the company's precarious financial position, Dickerson had to talk Gillespie out of illegally using the proceeds for the stock sale to purchase the political headquarters of De Priest and instead rent office space from the Roosevelt State Bank building of 3501 Grand Avenue.[34]

The 1920s saw Liberty Life's fortunes improve slowly, yet steadily. By 1924, the firm had purchased the building it was leasing office space in from Roosevelt State Bank for $250,000.

---

[33] "Supreme Life: The History of a Negro Life Insurance Company, 1919-1962," *The Business History Review* 43, no. 1 (1969), 1-20.

[34] Robert J. Blakely, *Earl B. Dickerson: A Voice for Freedom and Equality* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 168.

Dickerson's cunning also saved the firm from a takeover attempt by Jesse Binga, which proved fateful as had that takeover been allowed to occur, Liberty Life would not have survived when Binga State Bank failed in 1930.[35]

Liberty Life merged with Supreme Life and Casualty Company of Columbus, Ohio, and Northeastern Life Insurance Company of Newark, New Jersey on June 5, 1929. Dickerson personally traveled to meet with the regulatory bodies for insurance companies in each of the three states to get the merger approved. The new Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company grew exponentially as a result of the merger. Whereas Liberty Life had $832,000 in assets, the new company had more than $1.4 million. The value of the life insurance policies in force (active) increased from $10.4 million to more than $16.6 million. But it was in the realm of industrial insurance, what is now referred to as supplemental insurance, where the increase was most dramatic, increasing from nearly $2 million to more than $7.3 million.[36]

Despite the merger, the new Supreme Liberty was not in a significantly better financial position than Liberty Life had been before the merger. As the great depression intensified, several insurance firms, both mainstream and African American, failed. As a result, state regulators at the department of insurance examined every firm in the state to ascertain their fiscal soundness and reassessed their assets. After its examination, the value of Supreme Life's real estate holdings was reduced from $743,000 to $380,000. Because of its outsized exposure to

[35] Ibid., pg. 169.

[36] Ibid., 171.

the real estate market compared to other insurance firms, Supreme Liberty was at risk of being declared insolvent and forced to liquidate.[37]

Dickerson devised the policy, which simply put turned the liabilities that were the policies in force into assets. Under the scheme, Supreme Life would ask policyholders to take out loans against either half or all of the value of the equity in their policy. Then, rather than get the money themselves, policyholders would give the money back to Supreme Liberty (up to $500) and the company was responsible for satisfying the loan.[38]

Because Supreme Liberty survived the Depression, it was able to serve a vital role in the development of another seminal company in the history of African American Chicago: the Johnson Publishing Company. John H. Johnson migrated from Arkansas to Chicago and attended Wendell Phillips High School. After graduation, Johnson served as a campaign aid to Dickerson's successful city council race in 1939. Soon after that, Johnson dropped out of the University of Chicago and became the personal assistant to Supreme Liberty's president, Harry Pace. Using his job at Supreme Liberty and his connections with these two prominent African American leaders, Johnson acquired the skills necessary for him to start his own business and publish his first publication, *Negro Digest*, in 1942. While Johnson's success cannot be attributed solely to Supreme Liberty, there is no question that the road to success would have been more arduous without the opportunities and resources that his attachments to the firm afforded him.[39]

---

[37] Ibid., 172.

[38] Ibid., 173.

[39] Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 132-137.

How Supreme Liberty was able to survive the Depression will be the focus of the first chapter of my dissertation. Scholars have overlooked the importance of the policy lien, both as a dubious financial innovation that could not have been executed without the skill and expertise of Dickerson (the policy lien would be forbidden by Illinois regulators in 1937), as well as the racial appeal necessary to get policyholders to agree to do it in the first place. Asking their exclusively African American cliental to risk the very instruments they invested their security into was a herculean effort with no guarantee of success. The how and why they were willing to do this is a story that needs to be told.

My second chapter will turn to the history of the south side's Parkway Community House, specifically the role it played in helping African Americans successfully meet the challenges of life on the home front during World War II. The story of the Parkway symbolizes the initiative and ingenuity that existed in the African American community in Chicago during the middle of the twentieth century. By placing the Parkway in its spatial, cultural, and socio-political contexts, I seek to understand the center's impact and influence on those it served. What transpired at Parkway was more than providing social services and lively intellectual, political, and artistic programing; Parkway represented a culture of aspiration. Despite the many obstacles in front of them, aspiration was a powerful force in the lives of many African Americans.

What Reverend Harold Kingsley, the pastor of The Church of the Good Shepherd, and his black congregation desired to do was meet the need for recreational space for residents of the immediate surrounding area. They aspired to make a difference, and their ingenuity was awe-inspiring, yet they soon realized that a gym could not, alone, adequately address the needs of the community. Exploring the shift from what Kingsley and his congregation originally envisioned

when they began planning for The Good Shepherd Community Center in January of 1937 and what Parkway ultimately became illuminates the depths of the challenges that awaited African American migrants and the ends any one institution would have to go to in order to make any substantial difference.

Horace Cayton, a University of Chicago-trained sociologist, would become the center's director in 1939. Soon, Kingsley and Cayton clashed over the direction and scope of the center, and the board, originally convened by Kingsley, sided with Cayton and dissolved the center's formal connection with the church. Ultimately, Parkway would embody Cayton's vision and not the initial vision of Kingsley and his congregants. The dispute was emblematic of a larger rupture between those who still saw this project as a church recreational program and those, like Cayton, who believed that the center should be committed to the total transformation of Chicago's Black Belt. Cayton's settlement house was no longer what Kingsley and his congregation originally envisioned.

After the church and the center formally separated, The Good Shepherd Community Center became Parkway Community House. Parkway came into its own as the nation moved closer to entering World War II. Without the war, it is unlikely that Parkway would have blossomed into the cultural and community institution it became. Parkway contributed to the war effort by providing childcare for women who had been previously in the home and then suddenly called into the workforce as millions of men enlisted in the armed forces. The Chicago Board of Education managed the program, and the federal government subsidized it. Buying into the idea of "Double-V," representing victory in the battle against fascism abroad and victory against racism at home, Cayton and the staff at Parkway committed themselves to equip

African Americans in the United States to demonstrate their patriotism. Through these efforts, Parkway was on the front line of the home front.

Parkway Community House focused on public theater performances and discussions on pertinent social issues of the day as a vehicle to achieve its cultural objectives. With the help of writer and poet Langston Hughes, Parkway was able to establish a small but strong theater repository on the South Side named the Skyloft Players. Additionally, Parkway would host open conversations on the publication of scholarly works related to its work, oftentimes inviting the authors of these works to speak, throughout the early years of the center, formalizing these efforts with the establishment of "The People's Forum" in 1945.

This social and cultural history seeks to understand what it meant for African Americans to aspire during the period known as the "Long" Civil Rights Movement. I am particularly interested in the role of related, but distinct, notions of culture in the development of this institution. At Parkway, culture functioned, perhaps paradoxically, as both a propagator of new ideals and a reflection of the community's preexisting values. In both cases, culture served as an important means to cultivate ideal citizens. On the one hand, culture appeared as an almost ritualized set of practices, or programs, intended to instill and reinforce particular ideals. But on the other hand, cultural productions such as fine arts and letters, what might be called "high culture," functioned as a kind of propaganda, recruited to shape perceptions of Parkway's ideological and institutional rigor.

An analysis of the culture at work in the creation of Parkway and perpetuated through its existence reveals a particularly inert brand of aspiration. Aspiration in this context was a belief that the African Americans living in Chicago, many of whom were migrants from the south,

could successfully adjust and ultimately thrive in the urban environment, overcoming and dismantling the barriers of racism, if given the right knowledge and tools.

My third chapter turns to the aftermath of the Second World War. World War II changed both the complexion and mentality of Chicago's black community. In stating this, I do mean to assert that the war was a causal factor in some of these changes. The explosion of war-related industries jump-started the in-migration of African Americans into the city but had slowed during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Furthermore, active participation in the war effort at home and abroad resulted in expanded economic opportunities and increased political consciousness, fostering a greater assertiveness among African Americans in their quest for equality. The increase in Chicago's African American population caused the already overcrowded "black belt" on the city's South Side to burst at the seams. There was a shortage of housing available to everyone in Chicago during and after the Second World War, but the city's racial segregation regime made a bad situation untenable for African Americans. The housing in Chicago's black section--consisting disproportionately of rentals and not homes for purchase--was run-down and overcrowded.

Both during and after the war, men and women like Dempsey J. Travis achieved within the race and for the race, oftentimes outside of the gaze of the broader society until their achievement becomes so meteoric that it simply cannot be ignored. Travis was the only son of Great Migration participants to Chicago who experienced first-hand the daily indignities only to become a successful businessman and civil rights, advocate. In the last decades of his life, Travis won many awards and accolades for his life's work, but long before that he had already earned the respect and admiration of African Americans on the South Side of Chicago for successfully helping those who were able to locate what few homes available for purchase and securing

mortgages for them to do so. Travis' success was intricately connected to the success of other African Americans.

Does one African American's success preclude the successes of other African Americans? On the one hand, the financial success of Travis' business enterprise rested on his ability to successfully secure mortgages and homes for his African American clients. There was a dynamic of linked fate at work. On the other hand, what did the election of Barack Obama as the country's first African American president do to help the fortunes of African Americans? Or, on a more local level, the election of Harold Washington as Chicago's African Americans mayor? These questions are more difficult to answer, but they do provide an important window into the tension that exists between the individual and the collective in African American life: what does it mean when the success of a single, transcendent African American is only tenuously attached to the collective progress of the entire group, and may even be marshaled as evidence of the deficiency and failure of the larger group?

What are the ways in which aspiration is articulated both inside and outside of the race? Homeownership is about as middle class an aspiration as some can have, but the contours of African American homeownership are unique. To own a home is to be insulated from the violent variations of Chicago's racist rental market, as well as to be able to provide housing and shelter to extended kinship networks when the need arose without the specter of a landlord putting you and your family out. More importantly, I would like to offer an alternative reading of homeownership, one where residents take ownership of their residences to create homes for themselves and their kin regardless of their financial ownership of the house or apartment. African Americans took pride in their homes, whether or not they owned them, and were determined to create safe and decent places to live.

For the increasing numbers of African Americans now in the financial position to buy a home, there simply were no houses to buy within the confines of Chicago's established, yet constantly expanding Black Belt. This meant that if aspiring African American homeowners wanted to purchase houses, they would have no other choice but to do so in predominately white neighborhoods. When this occurred, white residents responded either aggressively, through violence and intimidation, or passively, by selling their homes and moving away. That story has been well documented, but what hasn't been as thoroughly told is the perspective, motivations, and responses of those African Americans who sought to become home buyers.

After the conclusion of the war, the number one issue facing Chicago was housing. The city, like most of the nation's urban communities, was overcrowded with aging housing stock. Servicemen coming home from the war had earned the right to live in homes and start families, and policymakers at both the state and federal levels committed themselves to making this happen. One factor complicated these efforts more than any other—racial discrimination.

As Chicago attempted to address its housing shortages, city officials met open hostility if their efforts ran counter to the racial status quo on residential segregation. African Americans who attempted to move into all-white neighborhoods and government-funded housing projects were the victims of acts of violence and racial terrorism that often forced them to relocate. The codification of residential segregation in the city would have a profound impact on its history.

By looking at the various organizations that sought to assist both renters in their efforts to secure decent housing and potential homeowners in their attempts to purchase properties, I hope to shift the historical lens from the racism of white landlords, homeowners, real estate brokers, and policymakers to the men and women who fought to secure access to their own homes. Many sought the help of civil rights and community organizations, which documented

cases of racial discrimination. Lawyers took cases on behalf of homeowners who believed they had been denied the opportunity to purchase a home or had encountered coordinated efforts on the part of white neighbors to force them out. Potential buyers shared their stories with magazines and other periodicals. By casting a wide net in the records of various civic and civil rights organizations, court records and public records, newspapers, and magazines, I am confident that this particular story can be told.

Chapter four will focus on the juxtaposition between the peace and prosperity of American society in the decade with the reality of urban life for African Americans in 1950s Chicago. Few societies in the history of the world have been more prosperous than the United States during the 1950s. Advertisements from the nation's corporations encouraged Americans from every walk of life to consume more and more goods. The act of buying everything one could became a type of patriotic duty; and good American brought goods made in the United States to support the economy. Yet, among African Americans, economic mobility, much less stability, was tenuous during the decades.

African Americans were being bombarded with messages encouraging them to consume, and many of them did. Yet for those who could not participate in the consumerism of the moment risked even further alienation from the American mainstream. John H. Johnson founded Johnson Publishing Company in 1942 and he began *Negro Digest* the same year. Johnson's grounding in Chicago, and the connections he developed working in Supreme Liberty, was instrumental in his success; he came of age in an environment where African American businesses committed themselves not only to make profits, but to serve as a positive force in the civic, economic, and cultural life of the community. Johnson was a part of this

cultural milieu, seeking out advice from cosmetics entrepreneur S. B. Fuller, and participating in the Negro Chamber of Commerce in the city.[40]

With *Ebony*, Johnson sought to create a magazine similar to *Life*, which seldom featured African Americans on its pages. But Johnson would have to do what no other African American magazine had done before to finance his venture: sell advertisements to major corporations who up to that point in time had refused to advertise in African American publications. First, Johnson waited until he could claim a circulation of four hundred thousand readers per month before he sought out major advertisers. Once he could prove that there was a market for this type of periodical among readers, Johnson had to convince advertisers that the African American market was a viable one, meaning that if advertisers purchased ads in *Ebony*, those ads would translate into customers who brought those products.[41]

To help him achieve this end, Johnson Publishing produced a promotional film titled, *The Secret of Selling the Negro*. The purpose of the film was to debunk myths about African American consumer habits and as a result, encourage corporations to advertise in *Ebony* to reach them. Johnson's interest in African American consumerism was self-serving. To attract marketing dollars from major corporations and advertising firms, Johnson needed to convince them that African Americans were a viable market and then actualize that market by converting them into customers. But this personal motivation aside, Johnson genuinely believed that

---

[40] Jason P. Chambers, "A Master Strategist: John H. Johnson and the Development of Chicago as a Center for Black Business Enterprise," in Robert Weems, Jr. and Jason P. Chambers (eds.) *Building the Black Metropolis: African American Entrepreneurship in Chicago* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press).

[41] Ibid.

showing African Americans enjoying the things that life in the United States offered was an integral component of the project of actualizing racial progress: "In a world of despair, we wanted to give hope. In a world of negative black images, we wanted to provide positive Black images. In a world that said Blacks could do few things, we wanted to say that they could do everything. We believed in 1945 that Black Americans needed positive images to fulfill their potential. We believed then—and we believe now—that you have to change images before you can change acts and institutions."[42]

My fifth and final chapter will focus on an alternative vision to the consumerism personified in American culture and propagated to and by many African Americans during the 1950s. Black nationalist thought argues that although a few African Americans have risen to ever-increasing heights, the reality is that the majority of them remain in degradation and subordination. Success, for those who achieve it, is too integrationist or assimilationist. Many believe that "race men," such as Travis, were in short supply as they successfully separate themselves from the masses of their fellow African Americans. The majority of African Americans are denied access to the means to lift themselves up and locked out of respectable, middle-class society. So, what options are available for them and their aspirations? It is believed that their fate is actualized together, through collective struggle. The Nation of Islam was one organization that worked during the 1950s to link personal piety with group uplift as a result of the inability to successfully integrate into the broader society.

How do we deal with the tension between the individual versus the collective in African American life? How does performative success elevate the race as a whole? African Americans

[42] Ibid.

who are understood to have transcended race to the extent that they have achieved beyond race. These are celebrities, entertainers, athletes, and politicians whose successes are often celebrated by broader society as indicative of the potential for achievement for anyone, regardless of race. Their accomplishments often serve as both spoken and unspoken indictments of African Americans who fail to live up to external standards of success when measured against the broader society. The indictment sounds something as follows: if Barack Obama can become president, then surely you can go to college, earn a degree, get a job than matures into a career, buy a home, and raise a family. While most people understand these markers to be objectively good ones, they imply that if someone fails to do any of these things, the failure is their own, not society's. It both ignores structural factors that prevent everyone from actualizing their full potential and ignores the potential for other barometers of achievement among African Americans.

Founded by Elijah Muhammad in 1931, by the 1950s the Nation of Islam had become one of the leading African American civic and religious organizations in the United States. The NOI during the 1950s presents a unique and paradoxical case study to explore the tensions between the individual and the collective as it pertains to measuring success and advancement among African Americans. Many of the African Americans drawn to the NOI were considered to be of a lower class, and they came into the organization due to their self-conceptualization of themselves as being marginalized outside of the mainstream American society, leaving them denigrated by both white and middle-class African Americans. Their desire to elevate themselves beyond their current station in life was met with resistance from those whom they believe wanted to keep them in their place, i.e., white society. The NOI offered a program that allowed

them to lift themselves up without having to enter into that society, which up until that point had shown nothing but hostility to them.[43]

I am fortunate that the archival repositories I will use are located here in Chicago. Yet and still, I plan to cast a wide net when it comes to exploring potential archives. A major source of archival collections will be the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, housed in the Woodson Regional branch of the Chicago Public Library. Additional archives are housed at Chicago Public Library's Harold Washington branch, the Chicago History Museum, as well as the University of Chicago, and the University of Illinois at Chicago special collections libraries.

Newspapers and periodicals allow me to access the cultural milieu of Chicago during the twentieth century. I am especially excited that the period my dissertation covers coincides with an explosion of published periodicals in Chicago, including the founding of the *Chicago Sun* in 1941 and the establishment of Johnson Publishing Corporation in 1942, an African American owned media company that would become renowned with the publication of the popular *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines. Also, several small newspapers were published during this time, giving us a rich body of primary source materials.[44]

---

[43] Claude Andrew Clegg III, *An Original Man: The Life & Times of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

[44] *Chicago Bee* – Microfilm, Chicago History Museum, 1938-1946 (incomplete) http://www.chsmedia.org:8081/ipac20/ipac.jsp?session=15B35Y626J827.38857&profile=public&source=~!horizon&view=subscriptionsummary&uri=full=3100046~!74128~!2&ri=1&aspect=subtab112&menu=search&ipp=20&spp=20&staffonly=&term=Chicago+Bee+&index=.GW&uindex=&aspect=subtab112&menu=search&ri=1 (Accessed November 12, 2018); *Chicago*

The production and consumption of cultural goods offer another site of aspiration. Capitalism, the economic order of the United States, affords African Americans the opportunity to assert themselves into American life. Not only this, but the capitalist consumption that organized life by being both producers and consumers of cultural goods reaffirmed their unique racial and ethnic identities. Thus, the American—capitalistic participation and consumption—can strengthen the African, or their unique racial and ethnic identity. The work of African Americans to open up markets and marketplaces for participation in the economic order of American society has been ridiculed and derided as delusional. Yet, the lack of full participation in America's economy and the continued racial disparities in nearly every economic indicator bears out that the economic sphere remains an important one in which African Americans measure progress.

As with any study about this place and moment in time, an important question comes to the forefront: Is there anything else left to say about American Americans in Chicago during the twentieth century? There is, rightly, a high bar to begin a research project of this magnitude, but I believe that my unique approach justifies it. The durability of the tension between racial restriction and American possibilities for African Americans is what animates this project. In

---

Defender – Online, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 1933-1968 https://www.proquest.com/products-services/histnews-bn.html (Accessed November 12, 2018); *Chicago Daily News* – Microfilm, Chicago Public Library, Harold Washington branch, 1933-1968 https://www.chipublib.org/chicago-newspapers-on-microfilm/ (Accessed November 12, 2018); *Chicago Daily Times* – Microfilm, Chicago Public Library, Harold Washington branch, 1933-1948 https://www.chipublib.org/chicago-newspapers-on-microfilm/ (Accessed November 12, 2018); *Chicago Sun* – Microfilm, Chicago Public Library, Harold Washington branch, 1941-1948 https://www.chipublib.org/chicago-newspapers-on-microfilm/ (Accessed November 12, 2018).

1944, a survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center found that eighty-five percent of African Americans did not believe that the United States provided equal opportunities for them. Seventy-two years later, Pew Research Center found that eighty-five percent of African Americans believed the United States still had more to do to give them equal rights with whites. Of the eighty-five percent, Pew found that half of those believed that the United States will eventually make the necessary changes to achieve equality and half did not. Although not exactly analogous, these statistics illuminate an important phenomenon—that both cynicism and hope, restriction and possibility define the African American experience. This is the new ground this project will forge.[45]

[45] "Do Negroes Have Equal Economic Opportunities? Why?," National Opinion Research Center, 1944 http://www.norc.org/PDFs/publications/NORCRpt_22.pdf (Accessed September 1, 2018); "On Views of Race and Inequality, Blacks and Whites Are Worlds Apart," Pew Research Center, June 27, 2016 http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2016/06/ST_2016.06.27_Race-Inequality-Final.pdf (Accessed September 1, 2018)

CHAPTER 1

HOW SUPREME LIBERTY LIFE INSURANCE SURVIVED THE DEPRESSION

For the first chapter of my dissertation, I will focus on the history of the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company during the Great Depression. Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company merits scholarly attention because of its seminal role in the life of Chicago's African American community during the twentieth century, as well as the role of insurance companies more broadly in providing valuable financial infrastructure to a group of people deprived of access inside the border society. Insurance, by its very nature, demonstrates a concern for individuals other than oneself. To delay present financial gratification to ensure financial resources for your family in case of your death, or to ensure a steady stream of income into your household in the event of your inability to work, is indicative of a desire for security. That African Americans were more likely to carry insurance than similarly economically situated whites show a cultural dimension as well. Insurance must be sold, it does not sell itself, and African Americans demonstrated an increased likelihood to buy insurance in large measure due to the realities of racism and economic subordination in the United States.[1]

Supreme Liberty provided more than insurance policies to populations desperate for a degree of financial security. The company afforded African Americans rare opportunities for steady, white-collar employment and a sense of racial pride that came from being a part of something that was committed to your people. It also provided financial resources for the

[1] Robert C. Puth, "Supreme Life: The History of a Negro Life Insurance Company, 1919-1962," *The Business History Review* 43, no. 1 (1969), 1-20.

broader community since Supreme Liberty became one of the few places African Americans could receive a mortgage or financial capital for starting a business. The firm underwrote mortgages at a rate disproportionate to their size and assets, at great financial risk. While as with any business, the bottom-line reigns supreme, the over reliance of real estate as an asset is the direct result of the lack of other mortgage underwriting institutions serving African Americans during the twentieth century. If money was the only concern of Supreme Life, there is no question that the company would have invested significantly more of its assets into other financial instruments; instead, a sense of racially duty compelled the firm to underwrite more mortgages than pure economics would have allowed for.[2]

This overexposure nearly bankrupted the company during the Great Depression, when the value of the homes Supreme Liberty has underwritten decreased significantly. To make the company appear solvent, at least on paper, the company's general council Earl B. Dickerson devised a plan to convert the liabilities that were the policies in force into assets. Under the scheme, Supreme Life would ask policy holders to take out loans against either half or all of the value of the equity in their policy. Then, rather that actually any of the money themselves (since no actual money changed hands), policy holders would "give" the money back to Supreme Liberty (up to $500). In the event that the insurance policy needed to be redeemed, the company would theoretically have to satisfy the loan by paying itself as both borrower and lender; the policy holder would get nothing. However, before that would happen Supreme Liberty would raise the capital necessary to satisfy the loan (on paper), remove the lien, and return the policy back to the holder Scholars have overlooked the importance as the policy lien, both as a dubious

[2] Ibid., 7.

financial innovation that could not have been executed without the skill and expertise of Dickerson (the policy lien would be forbidden in Illinois regulators in 1937), as well as the racial appeal necessary to get policy holders to agree to do it in the first place. Asking their exclusively African American cliental to risk the very instruments they invested their security into was a herculean effort with no guarantee of success. Why they were willing to do this is a story that needs to be told.[3]

The history of African American insurance companies can be traced back to the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. Recently emancipated slaves realized very quickly that freedom did not necessarily mean economic opportunity. Those fortunate enough to be emancipated in a timely manner were often literally turned out from plantations with nothing but the clothes on their back, placing them in an extremely precarious economic position. Many times, their economic vulnerability forced them to return to the very plantations they had been emancipated from in order to work as tenant farmers. Commonly referred to as sharecropping, this agricultural labor arrangement dominated the southern economy throughout the late 19th and early 20th century.[4]

Despite the meager wages many of them earned, newly-emancipated African Americans set up collective strategies to provide themselves economic security. Soon, they began

---

[3] Puth, "Supreme Life," 11; Robert J. Blakely, *Earl B. Dickerson: A Voice for Freedom and Equality* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 173.

[4] Here, I am defining an African American insurance company as one that is both owned and operated by African Americans, and although open to all, serves an almost exclusively-African American clientele. M. S. Stuart, *An Economic Detour: A History of Insurance in the Lives of American Negroes* (New York: McGrath Publishing Company, 1969), 1-6.

establishing mutual aid, relief, and burial associations, entities that would be the predecessors to the modern insurance companies. In the early stages of the industry, insurance companies took the form of first burial associations, then fraternal and mutual aid societies. The organizations were small and lacked the sophisticated actuary tables that more established insurance firms had. These firms also lacked the financial reserves required of modern insurance providers and their only source of revenue was more often than not the money they could generate from the donations of their members. Furthermore, the lack of governmental oversight made these policies risky; there was no guarantee that the policy issuer would make good on your claim.[5]

During this time, when people joined these organizations or societies, they wouldn't pay any money up front; rather, they would guarantee that if a call was made on the association, they would contribute their portion to help either provide relief and aid for someone who was injured and unable to work, or to cover burial expenses. However, this soon proved to be difficult as it was not uncommon for people to fail to pay when the call was made. Eventually, mutual aid, relief and burial associations developed what we know as the membership model, where every month members would pay dues the entitled them to aid if they ever made a claim. While this approach did help to limit some of the financial instability, it was still difficult to get people to understand the value of insurance and the cost of providing it due to the complicated economics making an insurance company profitable.[6]

In more professional concerns, insurance rates have been determined by actuary tables that considered all the various factors of your life. These tables helped insurance companies

---

[5] Stuart, *An Economic Detour*, 7-9.

[6] Ibid., 14.

determine how much it cost to insure someone by calculating a person's risk of injury or death, charging them a premium rate in accordance with these and other factors. Originally, mutual aid, relief and burial associations and organizations simply did not have those complex and complicated means to determine rates, so every member paid the same membership rate and if something were to happen to them their claim would be satisfied. The inability to properly calculate risk left them vulnerable to economic downturn, resulting in members reneging on their promises to pay, leading to many of them only lasting for a few years to a decade before going under.[7]

Eventually, it because clear that the only viable approach that would be for insurance companies to survive would be for them to become legal reserve companies, the model that insurance companies are based on to this very today. In order to be a legal reserve company, the business must meet state-required capital requirements by raising a certain amount of money to be held in reserve at all times, as well as regularly have the value of its assets audited regularly to ensure that the company can meet its obligations and pay the value of the insurance policies it had in force if necessary.[8]

The insurance market always proved a difficult one for African American consumers because of how racial bias caused many companies to either refuse to insure African American entirely or to do so on an unequitable basis. The New York-based Metropolitan Life Insurance Company completed several studies on the mortality rates of African Americans. Their

---

[7] Ibid., 35-36.

[8] W. J. Trent, Jr., *Development of Negro Life Insurance Enterprises* (master's thesis, University of Philadelphia, 1932), 39-42.

determination that African Americans posed a greater insurance risk that white Americans had significant implications for African American's access to insurance coverage.[9]

Prudential Insurance, based in Newark, New Jersey, was the innovators of the three-cents-a-week industrial insurance policy. This policy was wildly popular in the urban north with recent immigrants. Essentially, the premise of these policies was that for only three-cents-a-week you and/or your family could be guaranteed wages in the event of injury, death at work. The ability to secure wages for oneself and their family was something that was popular not only with white immigrants, but also with African Americans who began signing up in droves.[10]

In 1881, the Prudential Life Insurance Company began to practice of providing African American policyholders two-thirds the benefit value of policies held by whites. When several states outlawed this practice, Prudential and many other insurance companies responded by either ending the solicitation of African Americans to become policyholders or refusing to insure African Americans altogether. In Prudential's case, while they expressed a willingness to insure African Americans on a case-by-case basis, the company instructed its agents not to solicit African Americans as potential customers and refused to pay their agents' commissions on any policy sold to an African American.[11]

Prudential responded to the surge of African Americans signing-up for the three-cents-a-week policies by claiming that it was more expensive to insure African Americans than white

---

[9] Megan J. Wolff, "The Myth of the Actuary: Life Insurance and Frederick L. Hoffman's *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro*," *Public Health Reports* 121, no. 1 (2006), 87.

[10] Ibid., 88.

[11] Ibid.

policy holders. As a result, Prudential decided to cut the benefits of African American policy holders in half, meaning that if an African Americans had a policy that was guaranteed to pay one hundred dollars in the event of injury or death that policy would only pay fifty dollars. African Americans protested what they saw as an arbitrary and racially biased move, arguing that Prudential should not be able to renege on an already-executed insurance policy by cutting its value in half. Their protests were successful and soon nine states had laws on the book outlawing the devaluing of insurance policies for no other reason than the color of the policyholders' skin.[12]

In response, Prudential, publicly claiming that they had a legitimate claim to cut these benefits, commissioned Fredrick Hoffman to study African Americans and produce a statistical justification for reducing the insurance benefit to them. Hoffman, who was a German immigrant, claimed to be an unbiased observer; a non-American who did not have any stake in racial issues. Hoffman ignored that he had married into a prominent southern family and had spent all his time in the United States in the Jim Crow south.[13]

Largely using the 1890 Census, Hoffman wrote *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro*, the central thesis of which was that African Americans are far more disposed to disease, violence, and death than their white counterparts, and thus insuring them at all was a risk that any legitimate insurance company should avoid, but if they did it only made sense that you would charge them more. At the time, many African Americans, including W. E. B. DuBois,

---

[12] Ibid.

[13] Wolff, "The Myth of the Actuary," 89-90; Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 36-39.

pointed out the speciousness of Hoffman's arguments and his statistical sloppiness. Hoffman did not use any statistical controls in his research: he did not control for the environment; he did not control for the type of employment; he did not control for income; he did not control for education. He simply took the African American and the white mortality rate and exposed the disparity, arguing that racial discrimination was justified by statistical reality.[14]

Despite this elaborate argument, the reality was that the racism of the time dictated the practices and behaviors of insurance companies like Prudential because many white policyholders did not want to buy insurance from companies that also insured African Americans. Many whites believed that by serving them and African Americans, insurance companies were claiming that their lives were valued equally, something that Prudential's white customer base refused to accept. And it was that pressure that led to their decision to cut the value of insurance policies held by African Americans. Prudential was unsuccessful in their effort when the laws were not changed, and because of that Prudential stopped insuring African Americans at all. It was the refusal of white insurance companies to offer industrial insurance policies to African Americans that resulted in the rapid growth of African American companies to service this growing market, companies such as Supreme Liberty.[15]

Frank Gillespie arrived in Chicago in 1900 determined to make something of himself. Born in rural Arkansas in 1887, Gillespie studied the violin at the Boston Conservatory before

---

[14] Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 62-72; George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper, 1971), 249-252.

[15] Wolff, "The Myth of the Actuary," 91.

an accident cut his music career short. Once in Chicago, Gillespie began a career in the insurance industry before incorporating Liberty Life Insurance Company on June 3, 1919. The original Liberty Life Insurance Company was the first African American-owned insurance company founded in the north. There were insurance companies founded in the south, that came out of those mutual aid, relief, and burial societies mentioned earlier, but Liberty Life was also the first founded as an actuary-based, legal reserve insurance company from its inception.[16]

Gillespie and his partners were able to raise half a million dollars to incorporate Liberty Life in the state of Illinois, a remarkable financial feat that speaks to their business acumen. Gillespie had worked for several white insurance companies, including all of the few that were willing to offer insurance policies to African Americans, even at the highly inflated premiums. It was during this time that Gillespie learned the art and science of issuing insurance and was able to start an African American insurance company.[17]

Gillespie was not alone in founding the company, and the story of Supreme Liberty cannot be told without Earl B. Dickerson. Dickinson was a graduate of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, a member of Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, and the first African American graduate of the University of Chicago Law School. After graduating from law school, he held several prominent positions with the City of Chicago and the State of Illinois. During the Great Depression, Dickerson was an Assistant Attorney General in Illinois, and his connections within that office would have huge implications for how Supreme Liberty was able to weather the financial downturn. He would later go on to serve on the Chicago City Council for one term

[16] Stuart, *An Economic Detour*, 72.

[17] Ibid., 73-74.

before leaving elective politics but was considered a civic and business leader for his entire adult life. Dickerson spent a significant amount of time in Springfield, and his simultaneously holding both positions allowed him to represent Supreme Liberty's interests in the state's capital.[18]

Earl B. Dickerson became general counsel and director of Liberty Life in December 1920, agreeing to work for free to help the fledgling enterprise get off the ground. The Illinois Department of Insurance required that Liberty Life deposit $105,000 two years after its founding, by June 3, 1921, to capitalize the company, and eighteen months later the company still needed $46,000. Despite the company's precarious financial position, Dickerson had to talk Gillespie out of illegally using the proceeds for the stock sale to purchase the political headquarters of De Priest and instead rent office space from the Roosevelt State Bank building of 3501 Grand Avenue to save money. The 1920s saw Liberty Life's fortunes improve slowly, yet steadily. By 1924, the firm had purchased the building it was leasing office space in from Roosevelt State Bank for $250,000. Dickerson's cunning also saved the firm from a takeover attempt by Jesse Binga, which proved fateful as had that takeover been allowed to occur, Liberty Life would not have survived when Binga State Bank failed in 1930.[19]

Liberty Life merged with Supreme Life and Casualty Company of Columbus, Ohio and Northeastern Life Insurance Company of Newark, New Jersey on June 5, 1929. The combined

[18] Robert J. Blakely, *Earl B. Dickerson: A Voice for Freedom and Equality* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 168.

[19] Ibid., 168-169.

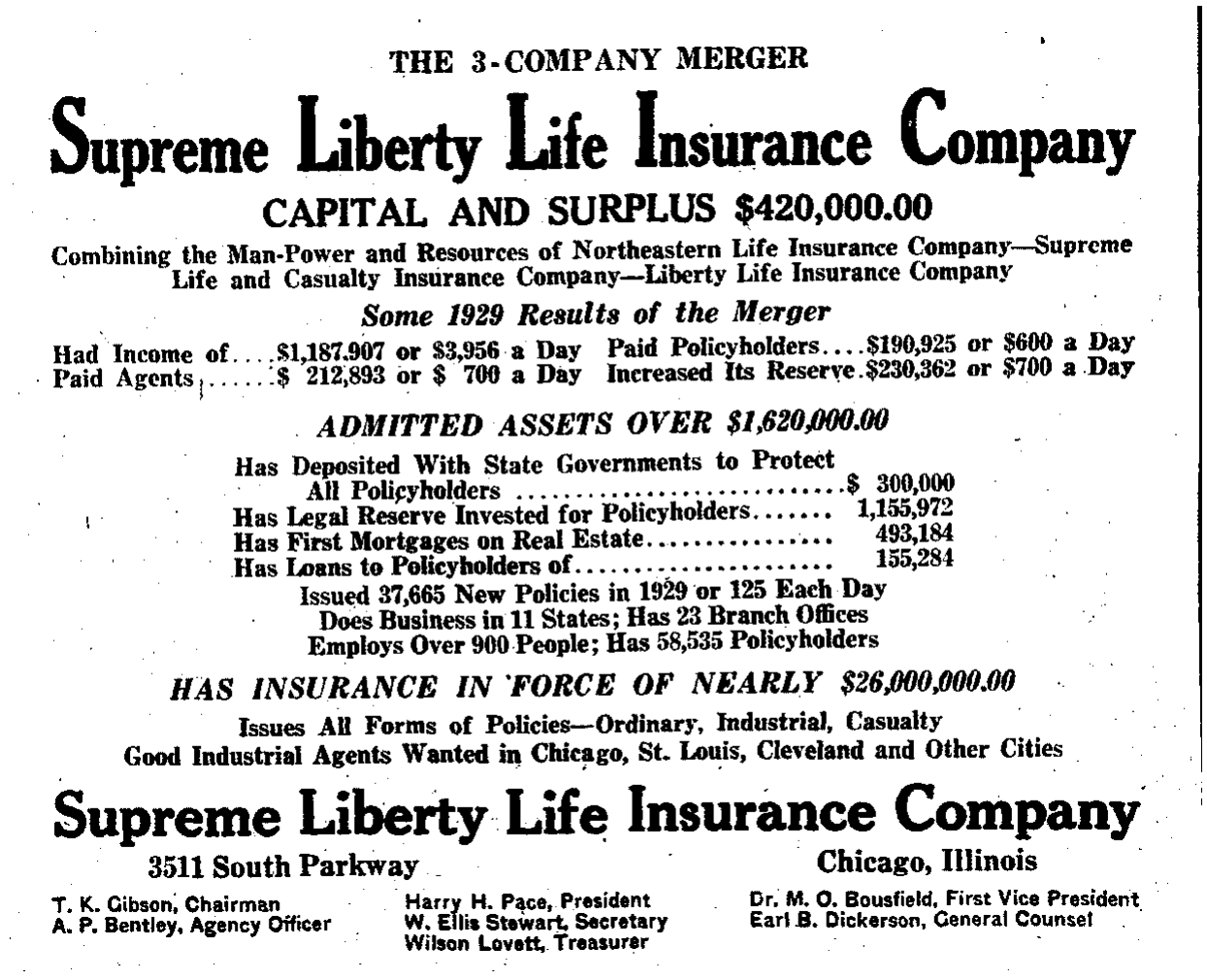


Figure 1: Advertisement for the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company, 1930. *Chicago Defender*, May 3, 1930, 16.

company, renamed the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company, was the fourth-largest African American-owned insurance company in the country. Whereas Liberty Life had $832,000 in assets, the new company had more than $1.4 million. The value of the life insurance policies in force (active) increased from $10.4 million to more than $16.6 million. But it was in the realm of industrial insurance, what is now referred to as supplemental insurance, where the increase was most dramatic, increasing from $2 million to more than $7.3 million. Furthermore, because the three other largest were all based in the south, Supreme Liberty was also by far the largest African American-owned insurance company in the north. And with their headquarters in

Chicago and offices in Ohio, New York, and New Jersey, they also have an expansive regional network throughout the industrial north. Supreme Liberty is a Chicago-based national financial company that becomes one of the largest financial services companies in the entire United States. [20]

Dickerson personally traveled to meet with the regulatory bodies for insurance companies in each of the three states to get the merger approved. Despite the merger and the symbolic victory of becoming the largest African American business in the north, the new Supreme Liberty was not in a significantly better financial position than Liberty Life had been prior to the merger. Exasperating the issues facing the company was the economic collapse that Chicago and the country were experiencing at the onset of the Great Depression.[21]

The depression caused a unique economic catastrophe in Chicago. Soon, the issue of class was on the forefront on everyone's mind as the financial collapse meant that antagonism between the haves and the have-nots was rapidly increasing. The scale of unemployment unleashed by the Great Depression in Chicago proved difficult to quantify, but it was clear that the city had never experienced anything like this. Communist organizations had renewed success attracting both African Americans and whites into their ranks, despite the increased harassment they experienced at the hands of law enforcement.[22]

---

[20] Ibid., 171.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Christopher Robert Reed, *The Depression Comes to the South Side: Protest and Politics in the Black Metropolis, 1930–1933*. Blacks in the Diaspora. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 9; Dominic A. Pacyga, *Chicago: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 250-251.

Historian Dominic Pacyga summarized the depth of the economic suffering in Chicago at the onset of the Great Depression:

> Close to 60 percent of the unemployed men and women in the state lived in Chicago. Between October 1 and October 25, 1930, 22,609 people made applications at free employment bureaus set up by the state government; of these, 12,426 came from Chicago. Less than 25 percent of Chicago's applicants found jobs, compared with two-thirds of downstate applicants who received work. The city set up ten homeless shelters for unemployed men. Payrolls in the city shrank by 25 percent from 1927 to 1933. Only half of the people employed in manufacturing in 1927 still had a job in 1933. In 1931, Chicago's overall unemployment rate stood at 30 percent, much higher than the national rate, which would hit 25 percent in 1932–33, the worst years of the Depression. African Americans suffered disproportionately, and by 1932, 40–50 percent of Chicago's black workers had no job.[23]

The economic calamity that befell Chicago was unprecedented, yet it was also uneven for Chicagoans based on myriad factors.

While the depression did cause real damage to the financial prospects of a significant amount of the African American community, the reality was that marginal and insecure employment was common well before. There was a real difference in how the depression affected individuals across races and classes. On some level, those most impacted by the depression were those who had their sense of financial security shattered. For those who had claimed a modicum of success via professional and semi-professional positions, the loss of employment and steady income had a deep psychological impact on those who thought they had achieved financial freedom.[24]

---

[23] Pacyga, *Chicago*, 252-253.

[24] Reed, *The Depression Comes to the South Side*, 10-11.

No two men had their fortunes fall more drastically than Jessie Binga and Anthony Overton. Binga and his Binga State Bank, and Overton and his Douglass National Bank were the two financial pillars of Chicago's African American community in the years preceding the Great Depression. The Depression stretched the financial resources of Binga's bank and state auditors demanded that he raise more capital to have the required liquidity. Despite being a member of the Chicago Clearing House Association, an organization responsible for providing such liquidity to banks, the association refused to do so in large measure due to the race of Binga and his customers.[25]

There was concern about how much Supreme had been impacted by the failures of several prominent banks on the south side, including Binga State Bank. So much concern, in fact, that the board of directors of Supreme Liberty took out an advertisement in the *Defender* reaffirming its financial status: "The company is not only solvent and able to meet every demand that can be made on it at any time but is in addition in a more highly liquid condition than are many banks during this period."[26] While the company did have deposits in the banks, the amounts were small relative to the amounts of money the company had spread around the various banks throughout the country. The advertisement even attempted to assuage any concerns related to its real estate holding, noting that although Supreme Liberty had

[25] Ibid., 18-19.

[26] Supreme Liberty Life Ins. Co. Not Affected By Bank Failures," *Chicago Defender*, October 25, 1930, 3.

underwritten $386,146.99 in mortgages to that date its headquarters was worth $300,000 alone and would be paid off in February 1931.[27]

For many in Chicago, the failure of banks foretold the failure of other major financial institutions in the African American community, and of chief concern was the potential collapse of insurance companies. An article in *The Pittsburgh Courier* from May 1931 expressed the significance of African American insurance companies, particularly in the realm of real estate loans. According to the article, the $1,856,483 in home purchasing financing represented "a very definite contribution on the part of our companies to the economic well-being of our group, particularly when it is taken into consideration that many of the avenues which heretofore have been open to the Negro for such loans are now closed, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to finance and refinance our real property."[28] The article went on to note that the demand for insurance companies would only increase as more people looking to purchase homes would find fewer and fewer avenues to access mortgages to do so.[29]

The article concluded with a racialized appeal for African Americans to support their own insurance companies, noting that more African Americans supported one white owned insurance company, holding $60,000,000 worth of policies with the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, than at all the African American-owned insurance companies combined with $13,150,509:

---

[27] Ibid.

[28] Charles A. Shaw, "FACTS ON NEGRO INSURANCE BUSINESS REVEALED: SHAW MAKES STUDY OF RACE," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 2, 1931, 5.

[29] Ibid.

> It might be further stated in passing that this situation is a rather severe indictment of our racial group, reflecting as it does the peculiar psychology of the group toward legitimate business institutions which must, under the law, meet every requirement as to capital, reserves and management as is imposed upon the companies operated by the white race. At the same time, I might state in perfect frankness that I fear it also reflects rather unfavorably upon the management and agency forces of our own companies that a more intensive and persistent co-operation campaign is not waged against the existing condition, with a view to getting to holding a larger proportion of the business that is going to other companies.[30]

Purchasing insurance from an African American insurance company was a sign of commitment to the race, and these companies had an obligation to seek out their own as customers and impress upon them the importance of insuring themselves and their families.

An advertisement from a few years later in *The Pittsburgh Courier* would continue on this theme, telling African Americans to stop using the services of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company because of their policy of not hiring African Americans. "There is much talk today about various methods of increasing the employment of Negroes and stabilizing our economic foundation. What better and more effective and immediate way is there than TAKING OUR BUSINESS and GIVING IT TO OUR OWN. Some say, we will do this without being told. Poverty will make us do it."[31] Cooperative economics would be vital to maintain these important financial institutions within the African American community.

Insurance companies like Supreme Liberty are major financial concerns; they have to earn revenue through investment income because the revenue from the premiums they charge

---

[30] Charles A. Shaw, "FACTS ON NEGRO INSURANCE BUSINESS REVEALED: SHAW MAKES STUDY OF RACE," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 2, 1931, 5.

[31] "GET OUT OF THE METROPOLITAN LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY!" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 15, 1934, 10.

their customers are not enough to support their financial obligations. To finance its operations, Supreme Liberty was disproportionately invested in real estate because it was one of the only financial institutions that African Americans could get mortgages. While there were some African American banks in Chicago, they could only underwrite so many mortgages, and not enough to meet demand.[32]

There simply was not the volume of capital necessary to provide mortgages to all the African Americans seeking to buy homes, so Supreme Liberty stepped into the gap, going above and beyond to provide access and opportunities for African Americans. In addition to being one of the mortgage underwriters for Chicago's African American community, they were disproportionately invested in providing business loans as well. African Americans knew that if you wanted to start a business, Supreme Liberty was one of the few places you could get a business loan. Typically, insurance companies did not lend to businesses at the scale the Supreme Liberty did, but in the African American community, similarly to mortgages, there simply were not enough places willing to finance business loans. Consequently, Supreme Liberty found themselves financing mortgages and business loans disproportionately, having to reconcile the business necessity of being concerned with their bottom line while simultaneously thinking about their community and trying to be of service to them.[33]

As the great depression intensified, several insurance firms, both mainstream and African American, failed. As a result, state regulators examined every firm in the state to ascertain their fiscal soundness and reassessed their assets. After its examination, the value of Supreme Life's

[32] Puth, "Supreme Life," 7.

[33] Ibid., 9.

real estate holdings was reduced from $743,000 to $380,000. Because of its outsized exposure to the real estate market compared to other insurance firms, Supreme Liberty was at risk of being declared insolvent and forced to liquidate. Additionally, several policy holders lapsed on their premiums due to their own financial hardships, further reducing the cash reserves of the company.[34]

To make Supreme Liberty solvent again, at least on paper, Dickerson used the policy lien. The policy lean allows the insurance company to borrow the value of the equity in an insurance policy from the holder, but no money changes hands. It is an accounting maneuver that instantly turns a liability into an asset. Hypothetically, if an individual has a policy worth five hundred dollars, then that policy is a liability for the insurance policy. However, if a person signs a policy lien, then they are agreeing to lend the money back to the insurance company in the event that a claim is made. As a result, what was once a liability is now an asset for accounting purposes.[35]

[34] Blakely, *Earl B. Dickerson*, 172; Reed, *The Depression Comes to the South Side*, 23.

[35] Puth, "Supreme Life," 11; Reed, *The Depression Comes to the South Side*, 23.

Figure 2: Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company headquarters, 1935. Chicago History Museum, ICHi-040125.

The policy lien was a very complicated and sophisticated financial tool that Dickerson used, albeit a dubious one. State insurance regulators believed that the move was illegal and rejected it, a decision that Dickerson challenged to the Illinois Supreme Court. As an assistant attorney general, Dickerson was able to use the Office of the Attorney General to argue the merits of the policy lien and win. It is difficult to imagine Dickerson being successful without his connections and role in the Attorney General's office.[36]

[36] Puth, "Supreme Life," 12; Reed, *The Depression Comes to the South Side*, 23.

Supreme Liberty was able to successfully convince its African Americans policy holders to risk their financial security to maintain the financial health of this company because of what Supreme Liberty represented to them—an African American business committed to them when others such as Prudential was not. Even for those African Americans who were able to purchase policies from white insurance companies, there were a great deal of indignities and injustices involved, such as not getting full value for your money. Furthermore, these policy holders would also be subject to racist treatment. At this time with an industrial insurance policy, the insurance agent would come to your house every week to collect your payment. White insurance agents had developed a reputation for discourteous treatment while guests in the homes of African American policy holders, including taking liberties with African American women who were single or whose husbands may have been at work. Finally, it was not beyond the realm of possibility that you when you would go to file your claim with a white insurance company that it would be arbitrarily denied.[37]

African American insurance companies were able to capitalize of the negative perceptions of white insurance companies because they had built a reputation as the exact opposite. In addition to the racial pride of seeing other African Americans in a suit and wearing a tie while collecting premiums and selling policies, companies such as Supreme Liberty also had a reputation of actually honoring the claims of its policy holders. People came to know that you could expect prompt payment from Supreme Liberty on any claim. This goodwill that was built

[37] Stuart, *An Economic Detour*, xxiii.

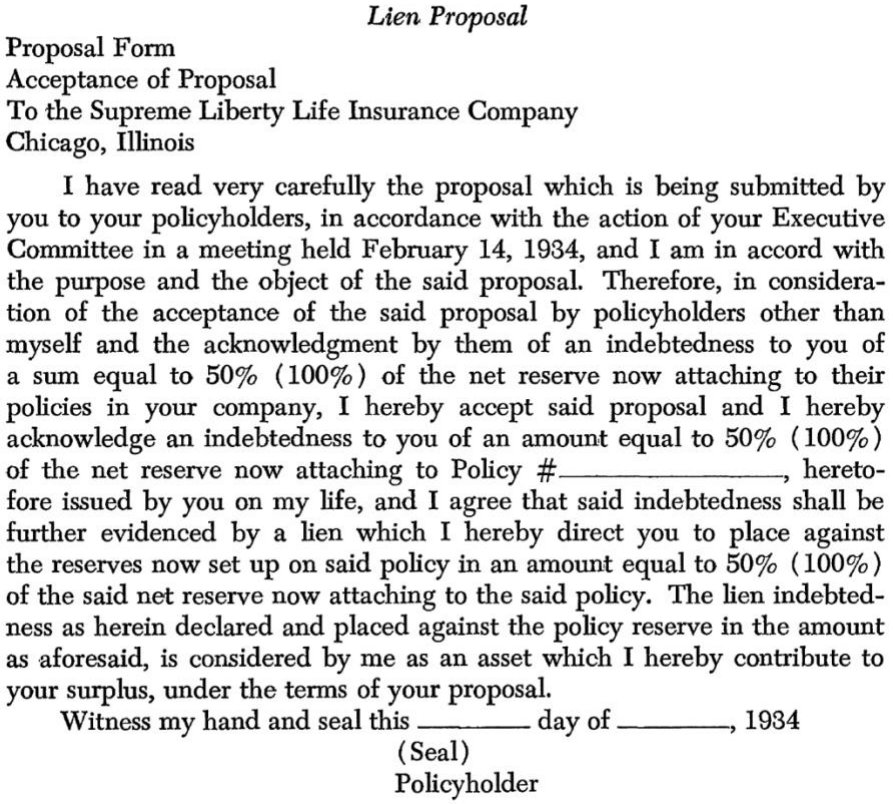
in the community through their business practices really encouraged Supreme Liberty's customers to come to the aid of the company in its time of need.[38]

There is little doubt that the fact that the Lien Proposal is written in legal terminology, and that no actual money changed hands contributed significantly to the number of policy holders willing to agree to this (see Figure 3). But what is also clear is that the community of policy holders railed to the aid of Supreme Liberty in its moment of need, and that fact that Supreme Liberty had been there in their moments of need, or that of their friends and loved ones, meant that they had a stake in ensuring the company's survival for its vital contributions to the African American community on the south side.

Dickerson and Supreme were able to manage the flow of claims in such a way as to remain solvent until the company's economic situation had improved. As a result, in 1932 "the company had a record-breaking year in the issuance of industrial policies, having issued during the year 68,437 new policies for a total of $13,584.592 of insurance. It issued 3,322 new ordinary policies for a total of $2,509,875 of insurance."[39] Although the economy continued to be in poor

[38] Puth, "Supreme Life," 3.

[39] "SUPREME LIBERTY LIFE MAKING STEADY GAINS," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 2, 1934, 4.



Lien Proposal

Proposal Form
Acceptance of Proposal
To the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company
Chicago, Illinois

I have read very carefully the proposal which is being submitted by you to your policyholders, in accordance with the action of your Executive Committee in a meeting held February 14, 1934, and I am in accord with the purpose and the object of the said proposal. Therefore, in consideration of the acceptance of the said proposal by policyholders other than myself and the acknowledgment by them of an indebtedness to you of a sum equal to 50% (100%) of the net reserve now attaching to their policies in your company, I hereby accept said proposal and I hereby acknowledge an indebtedness to you of an amount equal to 50% (100%) of the net reserve now attaching to Policy #_____, heretofore issued by you on my life, and I agree that said indebtedness shall be further evidenced by a lien which I hereby direct you to place against the reserves now set up on said policy in an amount equal to 50% (100%) of the said net reserve now attaching to the said policy. The lien indebtedness as herein declared and placed against the policy reserve in the amount as aforesaid, is considered by me as an asset which I hereby contribute to your surplus, under the terms of your proposal.

Witness my hand and seal this _____ day of _____, 1934

(Seal)
Policyholder

Figure 3: Policy Lien Form used by Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company, 1934. Reprinted from Robert C. Puth, "Supreme Life: The History of a Negro Life Insurance Company, 1919-1962," *The Business History Review* 43, no. 1 (1969), 11.

shape throughout the decade and a disproportionate number of policies lapsed as a resulted of nonpayment, Supreme Liberty "closed the year with an actual increase of 18,409 policies over last year, having 74,919 policyholders with outstanding insurance amounting to $33,011,341 in force on its books, an increase of over $1,500,000 for the year."[40]

Supreme Liberty and other African American insurance companies "employ thousands of colored men and women at dignified work. They could employ tens and scores of thousands

[40] Ibid.

of colored men and women if colored people would give them their business."[41] Furthermore, Supreme Liberty had met all of its obligations that year, building on its reputation for dealing with its customers fairly by not failing to pay when they were needed most even in instances when other insurance companies may have contested the claims.[42]

Because of the goodwill Supreme Liberty had built up among its customers, it was able to get enough of them sign the policy liens. As a result, the company was able to prove to state regulators that it was financially solvent. Eventually, Dickerson was able to balance Supreme Liberty's books and by 1936 they were able to satisfy all of the liens; they honored every single valid policy in force and none of their policy holders lost any of their money. This episode is a remarkable story about African American collective economic power in the depths of the Great Depression, and because Supreme Liberty survived the economic downturn it was able to play a vital role in two important moments in the history of African Americans.[43]

The first was the *Hansberry v. Lee* decision. The Hansberry family wanted to purchase a home in Chicago's Washington Park neighborhood, but the neighborhood was under racially restrictive covenants that prevented African Americans from purchasing homes. If a home had a restrictive covenant on it, a bank would refuse to underwrite a mortgage for a person from a restricted group to purchase that home. But Supreme Liberty was willing to provide the

---

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Robert Weems, Jr., "Racial Desegregation and Black Chicago Business: The Case Studies of the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company and the Chicago Metropolitan Assurance Company," in Robert Weems, Jr. and Jason P. Chambers (eds.) *Building the Black Metropolis: African American Entrepreneurship in Chicago* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 241.

mortgage for the Hansberry family to purchase their home, and it was Dickerson who helped craft the legal strategy and finance the legal appeals in the case to make sure that the Hansberry's were able to go through the process of purchasing their home. They are able to demonstrate that it was not their inability to get a mortgage that was preventing them from purchasing a home, but rather it was the restrictive covenant system. The Hansberry's won their case in front of the United States Supreme Court, which ruled that restrictive covenants were unenforceable in a court of law. The Hansberry's daughter, Lorraine, ultimately used this experience for the basis of her play, *A Raisin in the Sun*.[44]

In the other example, John H. Johnson, an ambitious, young African American teenager received his first job after graduating from DuSable High School in Chicago from Henry Pace, the president of Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company. Johnson was originally from Arkansas and migrated with his mother to Chicago. At DuSable, Johnson is classmates with Nat King Cole, Red Foxx and other important people who would go on to make significant contributions to African American life. Johnson sees himself and is seen by others as someone with a great deal of potential and he sets out to immerse himself at the one place he knows is the center of African American civic and cultural life in Chicago, Supreme Liberty.[45]

Johnson was essentially an errand boy for the company, doing anything and everything that needed to be done. He works his way up the in the company, and it was because of his connection to Supreme Liberty that he was able to build the network that would ultimately

---

[44] John H. Johnson with Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Succeeding Against the Odds: The Autobiography of a Great American Businessman* (New York: Warner Books, 1989), 97.

[45] Johnson, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 80-103.

undergird and finance Johnson Publishing Company. And it was Pace and Dickerson who provided him vital resources to publish the very first issue of his first publication, *Negro Digest*. So again, if Supreme Liberty does not survive the Great Depression, we can imagine a world where Johnson Publishing Company, and *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines, never come to fruition. These are just two examples of the seminal role that Supreme Liberty played in the civic and cultural life of African American's in Chicago, and its role in African American History more broadly.[46]

[46] Johnson, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 80-103.

CHAPTER 2

PARKWAY COMMUNITY HOUSE'S CULTURAL FRONT

For the second chapter of my dissertation, I will turn my attention to the Parkway Community House. The story of the Parkway Community House, hereafter Parkway, symbolizes the initiative and ingenuity that existed in the African-American community in Chicago during the middle of the twentieth century. By placing the Parkway in its spatial, cultural, and socio-political contexts, I seek to understand the center's impact and influence on those it served. What transpired at Parkway was more than providing social services and lively intellectual, political, and artistic programing; Parkway represented a culture of aspiration. Despite the many obstacles in front of them, aspiration was a powerful force in the lives of many African Americans.

This chapter seeks to answer what it meant for African Americans to aspire during the period known as the "Long" Civil Rights Movement. I am particularly interested in role of related, but distinct, notions of culture in the development of this institution. At Parkway, culture functioned, perhaps paradoxically, as both a propagator of new ideals and a reflection of the community's preexistent values. In both cases, culture served as an important means to cultivate ideal citizens. On the one hand, culture appeared as an almost ritualized set of practices, or programs, intended to instill and reinforce particular ideals. But on the other, cultural productions such as fine arts and letters, what might be called "high culture," functioned

as a kind of propaganda, recruited to shape perceptions of Parkway's ideological and institutional rigor.[1]

An analysis of the culture at work in the creation of Parkway and perpetuated through its existence reveals a particularly inert brand of aspiration. Aspiration in this context was a belief that the African Americans living in Chicago, many of whom were migrants from the south, could successfully adjust and ultimately thrive in the urban environment, overcoming and dismantling the barriers of racism, if given the right knowledge and tools. But this sense of aspiration was not the only response lifted in the face of such oppression. In fact, many counter-revolutionary voices came into public consciousness offering powerful critiques of America and radical prescriptions for its ills. However, many of these responses failed to persuade a majority of African Americans to join their side.

As a first step, it is important to delimit the mean of aspiration I use in the paper. It is possible to confuse aspiration with uplift, a term with a problematic reception emblematized in Kevin Gaines' important book, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*. In his monograph, Gaines asserts that racial uplift is the notion that the adherence to a strict code of personal conduct is the best method for collective advancement. But uplift is uncompassionate and insensitive to the realities of racial discrimination. Therefore, Gaines reads this period of African-American history as tragic, contending that by focusing on uplift instead of leveling a radical critique of America's racial order and on the institutional and

[1] Although there are vast sums written about the problem(s) of culture, the sense of culture I use in this thesis most closely follows William H. Sewell, Jr.'s approach in, "The Concept(s) of Culture," in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt eds., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

structural realities of racism, sexism, and classism, the leaders of the African-American community forfeited important opportunities to improve the material conditions of African Americans. Acknowledging Gaines' convincing argument, in this paper, I do not use aspiration as a mere synonym for uplift; they are different concepts. Uplift is focused class mores and racial obligation and duty, but aspiration, I will argue, is integral to the vision each person holds for his or her life.

During the second decade of the twentieth century, African Americans began leaving the south in greater numbers and moved to major urban centers in the northeast and industrial Midwest. Chicago, Illinois was one of the most popular destinations.[2] Multiple factors made Chicago an ideal location for African Americans looking for a new home. Increased consumer demand for manufactured goods created a robust job market, compelling Chicago's business leaders to turn to both established African American residents and newly arrived migrant workers to fill the void.[3] Chicago's African American establishment also sought to recruit African Americans to the city, sensing the potential for greater civic influence and political capital. Robert Abbott, editor of the iconic African American newspaper the *Chicago Defender* and a prominent leader in the city's African American community, began actively recruiting African

[2] Several books have been written about the importance of Chicago to the Great Migration, but one of the best treatments can be found in Allen H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967).

[3] Allen H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), 131-132.

Americans from the south to Chicago. By drawing comparisons to the Hebrews of the Old Testament, editorials in the *Defender* declared Chicago "The Promised Land."[4]

However, once many migrants arrived in Chicago they found the city to be inhospitable, with the racist allocation of resources and opportunities leaving them without many basic social services. What Reverend Harold Kingsley, the pastor of The Church of the Good Shepherd, and his black congregation desired to do was meet the need for a recreational space for residents of the immediate surrounding area. They aspired to make a difference, and their ingenuity was awe-inspiring, yet they soon realized that a gym could not, alone, adequately address the needs of the community. Exploring the shift from what Kingsley and his congregation originally envisioned when they began planning for The Good Shepherd Community Center in January of 1937 and what Parkway ultimately became illuminates the depths of the challenges that awaited African-American migrants and the ends any one institution would have to go to in order to make any substantial difference.

Horace Cayton, a University of Chicago-trained sociologist, would become the center's director in 1939. Soon, Kingsley and Cayton clashed over the direction and scope of the center and the board, originally convened by Kingsley, sided with Cayton and dissolved the center's formal connection with the church. Ultimately, Parkway would embody Cayton's vision and not the initial vision of Kingsley and his congregants. The dispute was emblematic of a larger rupture between those who still saw this project as a church recreational program and those, like Cayton, who believed that the center should be committed to the total transformation of

[4] Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (New York: Viking, 2010), 159.

Chicago's Black Belt. Cayton's settlement house was no longer what Kingsley and his congregation originally envisioned.

After the church and the center formally separated, The Good Shepherd Community Center became Parkway Community House. Parkway came into its own as the nation moved closer to entering World War II. Without the war, it is unlikely that Parkway would have blossomed into the cultural and community institution it became. Parkway contributed to the war effort by providing childcare for women who had been previously in the home and then suddenly called into the workforce as millions of men enlisted in the armed forces. The Chicago Board of Education managed the program, and the federal government subsidized it. Buying into the idea of "Double-V," representing victory in the battle against fascism abroad and victory against racism at home, Cayton and the staff at Parkway committed themselves to equipping blacks in the United States to demonstrate their patriotism. Through these efforts, Parkway was on the front-line of the home front.

Parkway Community House focused on public theater performances and discussions on pertinent social issues of the day as a vehicle to achieve its cultural objectives. With the help of writer and poet Langston Hughes, Parkway was able to establish a small but strong theater repository on the South Side named the Skyloft Players. Additionally, Parkway would host open conversations on the publication of scholarly works related to its work, often times inviting the authors of these works to speak, throughout the early years of the center, formalizing these efforts with the establishment of "The People's Forum" in 1945.

This project began when I stumbled across James Truslow Adams' 1931 book *The Epic of America*, a narrative history of the United States from the arrival of the first Europeans in North American to the early twentieth century. Adams is the originator of the phrase, "The American

Dream," which he employed to encapsulate the idea that the United States is "a land in which life should be richer, better and happier for all citizens of every rank, with opportunity keeping with his or her own ability."[5] I wonder what it meant for an African American in the 1930s to hear these ideas and not know this country, as racism placed profound limits on the range of possibilities available. Parkway Community House offers an important window into the paradox of African-American striving.

The story of Parkway is one of African American men and women somberly assessing the adverse conditions in their surrounding environment and believing in their capacity to change them for the better. Parkway Community House is an important example of the mixture of pragmatism and aspiration that came to characterize the African-American community of Chicago, and many other places around the country, prior to the Civil Rights Movement.

As thousands of African Americans began migrating to Chicago, the overwhelming majority of them were confined to the city's "Black Belt", which ran from the present-day South Loop, then a major manufacturing hub, southward to about 55th along State Street.[6] Although overt racial discrimination was nowhere near as prevalent in Chicago as it was in the south, the city did have a racialized code of conduct. In no area was this inequity more pronounced than in housing, where residential segregation drew nearly impenetrable boundaries as to where African Americans could live.

---

[5] Nathan G. Goodman, "The Pursuit of the American Ideal: James Truslow Adams Undertakes to Analyze Our Country," *The Baltimore Sun*, October 4, 1931.

[6] James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 123.

Due to employment discrimination, the majority of African Americans were poor, meaning that they barely had enough money to survive, much less invest in improving their environment. In many ways, then, the Black Belt was a ghetto replete with all of the associated social ills, including high rates of tuberculosis, infant mortality, crime and juvenile delinquency. Additionally, the housing supply in the area was inadequate in both quality and quantity. Despite this, rental rates were higher in the Black Belt that many other areas the city.[7]

Washington Park was an enclave of working- and middle-class African Americans, located in the Black Belt, with measurably less poverty, blight, and over-crowdedness than the surrounding neighborhoods. Jeffrey Helgeson provides the spatial context for the Good Shepherd Community Center by illuminated life in the Washington Park neighborhood where the center and church were both located. Stretching from Interstate 90-94 and Cottage Grove Avenue west-to-east, and 51st and 63rd Streets north-to-south, the neighborhood had dramatically transformed from exclusively white enclave to a haven for middle- and working-class African Americans during the first three decades on the twentieth century. Because of this, Washington Park was often on the front line of both racial and class conflict.[8]

Kingsley was a migrant himself. A native of Alabama who received his ordination from the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Kingsley came across to those around him as "more like a shrewd businessman than a clergyman." Having claimed to never have been "called' to

---

[7] St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1945, 1993 ed.), 198-205.

[8] Jeffrey Helgeson, "Striving in Black Chicago: Migration, Work, and the Politics of Neighborhood Change 1935-1965." (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Chicago, 2008), 141.

ministry in the divine sense, Kingsley insisted that African-American churches needed "the best possible leadership" due to their status as the largest, best-financed, and best organized institutions in the African-American community.[9]

Kingsley believed that the broader problems brought to the forefront as a consequence of the migration were as much spiritual and social as they were economic or political. Cultivating the spiritual and social was "primary and fundamental" to Kingsley, and he believed the African-American church had an important role to play in addressing these issues.[10] Many churches began to increase their outreach efforts to migrants, hoping to erase the distinctions between "newcomer" and "old timer." While some churches did this simply to increase the size of their congregations, and thus their weekly revenue from tithes and offerings, many committed to providing desperately needed social services to recent migrants.[11] Kingsley and his congregants saw a need for adequate recreational facilities in the neighborhood and set out to build a gymnasium adjacent to the church.

The Good Shepherd congregation began a robust fundraising campaign in order to raise the funds necessary to build their community center in January 1937. A luncheon was held to formally launch the campaign on April 12th. Two thousand mailers were sent to many of the

[9] Wallace D. Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915-1952* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 78-79.

[10] Ibid., 24-25.

[11] Ibid., 73-75.

most prominent citizens in both black and white Chicago.[12] By May of that same year they had raised more than $14,000, largely by soliciting donations from a wide range of sources. Beginning internally, 110 church members had donated approximately $1,700 to the committee and an additional $1,100 had been raised from the surrounding community. The bulk of the money had come from outside of congregation or neighborhood. Individuals and outside organizations from Greater Chicago had donated or pledged nearly $1,400, and another $5,000 had been given to the campaign by the Chicago Congregational Union, the predominantly white denomination that The Church of the Good Shepherd belonged to.[13]

By this point, the committee had also begun to establish the infrastructure to manage the campaign, setting up an office in the basement of The Church of the Good Shepherd and making banking arrangements at the Northern Trust Company. They also decided to divide the work of raising funds, establishing two separate parallel committees. The first, known as the "church" committee, was committed to raising funds from the church's congregation and residents of the surrounding community. The second, referred to as the "campaign" committee, focused its efforts on raising funds from broader Chicago.[14]

The campaign committee announced at the group's May meeting that it had received $200 from the Illinois Home Missionary Union. Additionally, it had applied for $15,000 from

---

[12] "Report from Meeting. May 17 1937," Bound book, *Minutes of Board of Directors, 1937-40*, Parkway Community House Records at the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois, 8.

[13] "Report from Meeting. May 17, 1937," Bound book, *Minutes of Board of Directors, 1937-40*, Parkway Community House Records at the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois, 13.

[14] Ibid., 9.

the Congregational Church Building Society, a building fund used to help churches build new building, and another $5,000 from the American Missionary Society, which was affiliated with the Congregational denomination. Furthermore, the Chicago Church Federation's Committee on Race Relations voted at its April meeting to sponsor the building of the center but had not pledged any money to the campaign. Additional interest had been measured from the Chicago Community Trust, the largest philanthropic umbrella organization in the city, as well as the Rosenwald Fund.[15]

Mr. Frank Loomis, who was the secretary of the Chicago Community Trust, had received one of the 2,000 mailers sent out for the campaign's launch luncheon. Loomis had been intrigued by the mailer and had asked to meet with the organizers of the campaign, as well as the Chicago Congregational Union's Committee on Negro Churches. However, Loomis had a series of questions about the center and its future management. Loomis wanted to know if the center would be managed by the church, who would be responsible for its funding in operations and if the center's programming would be based on the latest social science research and not a particular religious dogma.[16]

The CNC responded via letter, telling Loomis that, despite being managed by The Church of the Good Shepherd, the center would actually base its programming on the work of social science practitioners at the University of Chicago and those currently employed by the Works Progress Administration to ensure that only the latest advancements in social science

---

[15] Ibid., 11-12.

[16] "Committee on Negro Churches Meeting – May 18, 1937," Bound book, *Minutes of Board of Directors, 1937-40*, Parkway Community House Records at the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois, 15.

research would be employed to inform the center's work, not religion. The letter also told Loomis that they had created a projected annual budget of $5,720 for the center. The committee had budgeted $2,000 for the salary of one full-time director, $780 each for two part-time social workers, one dedicated to serving boys and another to servings girls. An additional $500 was allocated for a part-time clerical worker for office support in the budget, and $600 for one part-time janitor.[17]

The following September, Cayton addressed the campaign committee, warning them of the danger of becoming "only a church house." Cayton contended that if The Church of the Good Shepherd could not contribute to the welfare of the community, it would decline and ultimately become extinct. In order to save the church, its congregation had to step up to the plate and provide vital social services to the surrounding neighborhood residents. Furthermore, Cayton believed the church must take a proactive leadership role in integrating the center into a broader network of social work practitioners by convening a council of all of the social agencies serving the African-American community in Chicago. The Church of the Good Shepherd had the best chance of providing leadership "because of the intelligence and leadership of its people." The congregants of The Church of The Good Shepherd were just the type of people Cayton had in mind when he talked about the type of African Americans needed to help ensure the continued survival of the African-American community.[18]

---

[17] Ibid., 16.

[18] "Church of the Good Shepherd Campaign Committee. September 21, 1937," Bound book, *Minutes of Board of Directors, 1937-40*, Parkway Community House Records at the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois, 22.

At the October campaign committee meeting, it was announced that the Congregational Church Building Society had approved a $5,000 gift towards the building of The Good Shepherd Community Center on the condition that the Chicago Congregational Union provided a matching grant. Since the CCU was unable to provide the funds, it was decided instead to use $5,000 in general donations to combine with the $5,000 the CCU had already donated to come up with the $10,000 matching grant.[19] At the November meeting of the Committee of Negro Churches, the question of who would be responsible for managing the center came up again. A plan was approved that the board of directors would consists of 40 percent members of The Church of The Good Shepherd, 30 percent representatives from the Chicago Congregational Union, and 30 percent of general community members and leaders.[20]

The campaign to build The Good Shepherd Community Center was making remarkable progress in its first year. By January 1938, the campaign had raised nearly $30,000 dollars and had tapped into a wide-range of civic and corporate foundations to attract money needed to build this center. Businesses such as Packers, Pullman Company, Walgreens, The Steel

[19] "CAMPAIGN COMMITTEE – Church of the Good Shepherd Community Center. October 7, 1937," Bound book, *Minutes of Board of Directors, 1937-40*, Parkway Community House Records at the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois, 25.

[20] "COMMITTEE ON NEGRO CHURCHES November 3, 1937," Bound book, *Minutes of Board of Directors, 1937-40*, Parkway Community House Records at the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois, 27.

Company, the department store Goldblatts, and the Rosenwald Family Fund had all donated to the campaign.[21]

The campaign had also been really innovative, using a variety of concepts to raise money. One such event was a recital in July 1937 by tenor Charles Manney. Manney was the only black artist who performed as part of the Bertha Ott concert series for the season, and the first in several years. Manney was "a leader in organizations and movements to improve the educational and cultural life of Chicago's South Side" and was gracious enough to donate the proceeds of his performance to the Good Shepherd Community Center.[22] In March of 1938, they held benefit recital that was sponsored by the Celia Parker Wooley chapter of the Chicago Women's club where Miss Catherine Van Buren sung.[23]

Another fundraising tactic used by Good Shepherd was hosting benefit teas, where guest would come and listen to Kingsley and other leaders in the community speak on the importance of the center for the entire neighborhood. These benefit teas were often coordinated by and for women.[24] At these teas, someone working on getting the center built would give a synopsis of

---

[21] "'CHURCH OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD CAMPAIGN COMMITTEE' January 19th 1938," Bound book, *Minutes of Board of Directors, 1937-40*, Parkway Community House Records at the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois, 32.

[22] "Charles H. Manney Recital Aids Good Shepherd Center," *The Chicago Defender*, July 31, 1937.

[23] "'MINUTES OF THE CAMPAIGN COMMITTEE OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD COMMUNITY CENTER February 10, 1938," Bound book, *Minutes of Board of Directors, 1937-40*, Parkway Community House Records at the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois, 34.

[24] "Committee Plans Benefit Tea for Center," *The Chicago Defender*, March 4, 1939.

what they were trying to accomplish through the center and answer and questions guest may have. From the beginning, women were instrumental in the life of Parkway.

Next, the board turned its attention to finding someone who could get the center up and running. It was clear to the board that Cayton was the right man for the job. However, it was not clear that Cayton wanted the job. Cayton and the board were unable to agree on his salary and responsibilities, as Cayton wanted to be able to pursue his studies at The University of Chicago. He felt that the $3,000 a year salary was too low and that having to raise funds for the center would be too much of a demand on his time. Desperate for Cayton to take the job, the board provided him a secretary and allowed him to travel to Europe on a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship before starting as director in December 1939.[25]

Although Cayton had never worked in social work *per se*, he had both the pedigree and the vision for the center that the board wanted. Furthermore, Cayton had shown himself a capable manager as a project manager for the Works Progress Administration, directing several different programs simultaneously out of The Church of the Good Shepherds' basement.[26] One of the many projects Cayton managed during his time employed by the WPA was the Illinois Writers Project, which conducted much of the research that produced *The Negro in Illinois*, and contributed immeasurably to *Black Metropolis*. Researchers on the project conducted interviews

---

[25] Anne Meis Knupfer, *The Chicago Black Renaissance and Women's Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 37-38; "Cayton Named Director Of Good Shepherd Center," *The Chicago Defender*, Dec. 30, 1939.

[26] Richard S. Hobbs, *The Cayton Legacy: An African American Family* (Pullman: Washington States University Press, 2002), 109-111.

with the residents of this "high-type" neighborhood, as classified by Cayton. "High-type" meant middle- and working-class men and women who worked in white-collar positions. The residents of the Washington Park neighborhood often expressed anxiety about the impact of poor African Americans moving in and bringing along with them the social ills that plagued the areas immediately to the north.[27]

Cayton also defined the neighborhood as "transitional," meaning that African Americans residents from the more crowded and blighted areas of the South Side were moving into Washington Park seeking better living conditions. Cayton believed that the best course of action was "integrating the newcomers into the community area and imparting to them the community standards which have previously characterized the area."[28] Cayton saw the center as a means to put into practice the research he had been conducting for several years on the plight of black urban life, as well as the best and latest practices in the provision of social welfare services.

Cayton conceptualized the problems facing the African American community in Chicago's "Black Belt" as the manifestation of the intersection of racism and poverty, one exasperating the adverse consequences of the other. In 1940, African Americans were still prohibited through both *de facto* and *de jure* means from living in many localities in the United Sates, both north and south, and "in the communities where he can live he is segregated,

[27] Jeffrey Helgeson, "Striving in Black Chicago: Migration, Work, and the Politics of Neighborhood Change 1935-1965." (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Chicago, 2008), 141.

[28] Horace Cayton, "The Problem, Program, and Facilities of the Good Shepherd Community Center," Box 1, Folder 1939-1940, Parkway Community House Records at the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

persecuted, and suppressed."[29] Despite the continuity of racial restriction in both north and south, African Americans were engaging in a massive migration that saw them rapidly changing from a southern, rural people to a northern and urban people, as even those men and women who decided to remain south of the Mason-Dixon Line were moving out of the rural countryside into the region's bustling cities.

Employing E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States*, Cayton explained how African Americans occupied a wide-variety of class positions, yet due to the racial discrimination and residential segregation, African Americans across the entire spectrum of humanity lived in close proximity to one another.[30] Cayton created a program for the Good Shepherd Community Center out of the research he conducted during his three-and-a-half years directing several WPA programs out of the basement of the Good Shepherd Church:

> It is the belief of the persons connected with the Center that the institution can immediately work out solutions for the problems which has a deep-set root in the fabric of our society. It is their opinion, however, that in the case of each problem, the Good Shepherd Community Center can make some distinct contribution towards its solution.[31]

It is remarkable that given the scope of the problems articulated by Cayton and his staff they believed any program could possibly address these problems, yet they did.

The center committed itself to providing recreational activities and facilities, with the duel aims of keeping children occupied and promoting good health. An indoor recreation center that would provide young people with a space to relax and socialize while playing checkers,

---

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

chess, cards, ping pong, and even bowling. Outdoor activities such as tennis, horseshoes, and badminton would allow children the opportunity to get out of the confines of the center's physical buildings. Physical education classes such as aerobics, basketball, and volleyball would allow men and women to maintain good physical health.[32]

Seeking to stimulate not only the body but the mind as well, the center envisioned providing educational programming as well. The center hoped to have a Chicago Public Library branch housed within its walls, as well as study rooms for students of all ages. For adult learners, classes would be offered, "ranging from elementary subjects to advance work in economics, sociology, foreign language, typing and shorthand, speech, music, art, parent education, home economics, [and] community problems." The center would also provide other, more informal, learning opportunities like lecture series and "discussion groups to meet the need of more thinking in public affairs in an effort to awaken interest and more intelligent participation in political, economic and social issues." Classes on "music appreciation" and a record library would provide community members the opportunity both to listen and to learn. Additionally, the center hoped to provide workshops on theater and stagecraft, with the hopes of cultivating "all of the 'Little Theater' movements on the South Side." Both professionals and amateurs would be able to participate.[33]

Another important aspect of the center's program was to provide access to various community resources that were lacking on Chicago's South Side. Beginning with an examination office, the ultimate goal was to convert one of the Orphanage's buildings into a full-service

---

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

health clinic working to address the major health issues affecting the area's residents, such as tuberculosis, venereal diseases, and birth control. Also, the center would house a community dining room, which would serve two purposes. The first was to allow community members to hold large dinners at a reasonable price, something that the various small restaurants in the surrounding area could not do. The second was to provide training for service workers who could translate the skills they acquired into full-time employment.[34]

Perhaps no resource the center could provide to members of the community was more valuable than its space. Several African-American organizations would come to use the center for their meetings and events. Women's groups in particular, such as Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta sororities, the Douglas League of Women Voters, the Metropolitan Council of Negro Women, and the DuSable Senior Girl's Clubs all made use of the center's space.[35]

Cayton and his staff believed that all of the problems and programs listed above were constantly evolving, and he wanted to continue his study of black life in Chicago by housing his research at the center. To this end, the center would house a research institute "for the study of the Negro in urban centers," which would collect data and publish reports on various issues facing the black community. The center's broader goal was to become the repository for information about black life and to serve as a touch point for its clients to access the non-black Chicago. For example, employers could ask for qualified job seekers and the center would send

[34] Ibid.

[35] Knupfer, *The Chicago Black Renaissance and Women's Activism*, 42, 46.

them an already pre-screened applicant, as well as a referral desk for clients in need of various services.[36]

Cayton's expansive vision was possible because the Good Shepherd Community Center purchased the abandoned Chicago Orphan Asylum, located on 51st and South Parkway Avenue in October 1940. The announcement in *The Chicago Defender* made clear that they still intended to build the gymnasium adjacent to The Church of the Good Shepherd at 57th and Prairie, and that the two buildings would be used together.[37] However, the $22,000 needed to purchase the asylum depleted the campaign coffers, meaning that significantly more funds would need to be raised to build the gymnasium adjacent to the church.

In its new location, the center no longer met the needs of the church. The moving of the church away from the center was emblematic of the continued drift further and further away from the original plan proposed by Kingsley over the preceding two years. The relationship between Kingsley, still determined to build a gymnasium for the youth in his congregation and the surrounding neighborhood next to his church, and Cayton, who was in full swing trying to get the center opened in its new location, began to strain.

During the 1930s, Chicago was the site of major political struggles as militant industrial unions demanded greater concessions from their employers. Simultaneously, African- American radicals began organizing politically and employing cultural to meet their ends. On the left, organizations like the National Negro Congress, founded in Chicago in 1936, began extolling

---

[36] Horace Cayton, "The Problem, Program, and Facilities of the Good Shepherd Community Center."

[37] "Good Shepherd Buys Site for $500,000 Community Center," *The Chicago Defender*, October 12, 1940.

the virtues of Marxist ideology to African American working-class men and women. Working alongside the NNC were artists and writers who deployed their talents to fight for a radical political agenda on what was known as the Cultural Front. Wary of the increasing influence of radicals in Chicago's African-American community, the mainstream civic, business, and religious leaders of the period founded the Council of Negro Organizations, drawing ideological battle lines through the community.[38]

Cayton, through his friendships with many African-American writers, artists, and activists working in Chicago during the 1930s and 1940s found himself immersed in the dominant center of African-American leftist thought of the mid-twentieth century. Given the diverse ideologies that permeated the cultural milieu of 1930s and 1940s Chicago, drawing distinct boundaries between them all is no small task. Furthermore, it is difficult to place Parkway into one ideological camp—while the major thrust of Parkway's cultural program was ideologically centrist, the openness of the house's staff and certain programmatic and economic necessities allowed for the expression of more radical opinions within its walls.

Cayton, like those to his ideological Left, saw culture as an important site for his broader work of transforming African-American life on the South Side of Chicago. Although he rejected Marxists solutions to the problem of racism in the United States, he allowed those men and

[38] Bill V. Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935-46* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 28.

Figure 4: Parkway Community House, circa 1940. Chicago History Museum, ICHi-018369.

women who were more sympathetic to this line of thought access to Parkway and provided them with the opportunity to share their ideas with the broader community.[39]

Cayton was willing to use his connections to Chicago's Black Left in order to solicit donations for the center. Cayton met Richard Wright while working as a research assistant to sociologist Louis Wirth in 1934. Wright, who always fancied himself as an amateur scholar, had

[39] Ibid., 37.

a budding interest in social science research and wanted to speak to Wirth. Cayton greeted him and although they did not speak again until 1940, when they did the two became fast friends.[40] The two often traveled together and to visit one another, and when Cayton became director of the Parkway, Wright was one of the very first artists he brought into the center, allowing him to use the center's guest apartment whenever he was in Chicago.[41]

Wright often took Cayton up on his hospitality, becoming sort of a fixture of the center in its early life. Cayton offered vital advice to Wright as he worked on *12 Million Black Voices*, providing him access to the massive files he had accumulated during his days working for the WPA, and arranging for a driver to take Wright around to take photographs for his work.[42] Ultimately, due as much to the popularity of Wright's *Native Son* as to their close friendship, Cayton had Wright write the introduction to his and St. Clair Drake's seminal sociological tome *Black Metropolis*.

Wright also wrote the text for a promotional brochure for the center in 1941.[43] Describing what was taking place on Chicago's South Side as a drama, Wright identified a mass of black people losing the struggle to successfully navigate their new urban landscape after

---

[40] Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 81; Richard S. Hobbs, *The Cayton Legacy: An African American Family* (Pullman: Washington States University Press, 2002), 121-122.

[41] Hobbs, *The Cayton Legacy*, 119.

[42] Ibid., 122-123.

[43] The title of the brochure, "The Negro and Parkway Community House," seems odd given that the center's name was not changed until 1942. My understanding is that the brochure was reprinted after 1941 and given the new name, per the agreement with The Church of the Good Shepherd.

migrating north, with the toll this struggle was taking on them was being hidden by conspiring "newspapers, magazines, textbooks, churches, advertisements, and radios…."[44] Unlike ethnic European immigrants, who were allowed "to participate fully and organically in what we so proudly term the 'American Way of Life,'" African American migrants had been denied the same opportunity with disastrous results.[45]

African Americans had failed to properly adjust to urban life, not because of any fault on their part, but "because the odds against him were overwhelming and his mental folk equipment proved something more of a detriment than a blessing. The expression of this failure is something that every American must be able to realize and interpret when he sees it."[46] Residential segregation, overcrowding, juvenile delinquency, broken families, crime, poverty and disease were the material consequences of this failure, and "The Parkway Community House is the first institution equipped with scientific knowledge of the urban situation among Negroes to attempt to control, probe, and disseminate facts as to the processes, meanings, causes and effects of urbanization. Its policies and activities should merit your most urgent attention and support."[47]

---

[44] Richard Wright, "The Negro and Parkway Community House," 1941, brochure, Box 15, Folder 4, Horace Cayton Papers at the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection at the Carter G. Woodson Library, Chicago, Illinois.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

Wright's willingness to advocate on behalf of Parkway reveals how many left-leaning artists and activists could support the house's work. Cayton's comfort with formally associating Wright with Parkway shows his comfort with those who espoused leftist ideology. Left-leaning artists, writers, and union organizers were given this space at the same time Parkway was espousing a very particular cultural politics through its official programs. In addition to the aforementioned efforts to support the war effort, Cayton saw culture as being of vital importance to improving the condition of African Americans in Chicago. Through cultural enrichment programs, the Parkway would seek to instill the values it believed its clients needed to embody in order to successfully negotiate the perils of urban life.

The disagreements between the church and the center's leadership about the direction and management of the center continued grow over the next year. A 1942 report prepared for the board said that the center's programmatic scope had grown too rapidly and drifted away from its initial focus. This was placing too much of a strain on the center's staffing resources, and the report suggested that the nursery school be closed. Additionally, members of the board representing the church had complained about the hiring of non-African American social workers, stating their belief that one of the center's main objectives was to provide jobs for residents of the surrounding African-American community. Other members of the board, however, suggested that although the preference was for African-American employees, the

center was having too much of a problem finding qualified African Americans interested in social work.[48]

Kingsley had formally reached out to members of the board and complained about the program of the center and its administration. He lodged three particular complains. The first was his belief that serving alcohol at the center's social functions was inappropriate. The second was that "liberal" groups, many of whom with ties to the Communist Party or other subversive elements, where being allowed to use the center's space, attracting attention from law enforcement. The final complaint was about the misallocation of resources to other programs at the potential expense of the nursery school. Closing the nursery school, he believed, would be a devastating blow to the many community members who relied on it for proper childcare.[49]

In response to these concerns, Cayton said that he felt Kingsley did not have the same conception of his duties as director of the center as he did. He asked the board to give him a vote of confidence in his management and direction of the center. The board granted his request, casting their votes for him and rejecting many of the critiques Kingsley offered.[50] The board's decision to support the direction Cayton was taking the center served as the final blow

---

[48] "Minutes. Executive Committee Meeting. Good Shepherd Community Center. February 6, 1942," Box 1, Folder 1942-1943, Parkway Community House Records at the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

to the union of the church and the center. The very next month after the vote, in March 1942, it was decided that the church and the center should formally end the relationship.[51]

The dissolution of the relationship between the church and the center also meant the removal of all of the CCU representatives from the center's board. However, CCU Associate Director Neil E. Hanson wanted it "understood that such action in no way indicates a lack of continuing interest in the Good Shepherd Center of the part of the CCU."[52] Sidney Brown, secretary of the board, outlined the three points of resolution between the two entities. First, the center would have to surrender all funds that had been donated for the building of the gymnasium adjacent to The Church of the Good Shepherd. The second, members of the board of directors representing the church would have to resign from the board and the church could have no further input in the direction of the center. Finally, the center would be required to relinquish the Good Shepherd name, to make it clear that the church and the center were no longer affiliated.[53]

This is how the Good Shepherd Community Center became the Parkway Community House in name. But, how Parkway Community House became the lively and bustling hub for

---

[51] "'Request of The Church of the Good Shepherd as it Would Effect the Constitution,' March 19, 1942 Board Minutes," Box 1, Folder 1942-1943, Parkway Community House Records at the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

[52] Letter from CCU Associate Director Neil E. Hanson to Horace Cayton. June 3, 1942. Box 1, Folder 1942-1943, Parkway Community House Records at the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

[53] "'Request of The Church of the Good Shepherd as it Would Effect the Constitution,' March, 19, 1942 Board Minutes," Box 1, Folder 1942-1943, Parkway Community House Records at the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

wartime life on the South Side is another story. The center changed its name just as the nation mobilized on the home front was picking up steam and it is in the context of the war that Parkway would come into its own. Parkway's identity was fashioned through its decision to whole-heartedly embrace the war effort, committed to doing more than its share to ensure victory.

Although only two years removed from its grand opening, by 1942 Parkway had grown mightily "in point of influence and scope." When Parkway opened its doors, 70 percent of the residents living nearby were dependent on the federal government to subsidize their existence. The result was poverty on a massive scale coupled with juvenile delinquency, deplorable schools, dilapidated housing, inadequate health facilities, and an unacceptably high infant mortality rate. The war mobilization had ushered the majority of the neighborhood's residents back into the workforce, but a steady paycheck had not eliminated all of the area's social ills.[54]

The chief problem identified by the Parkway was the removal of mothers from their homes so they could fill the labor void left by all of the men deployed in the war. Many children were without adult supervision during the day because their mothers were away working. Referred to as "Latch String Kids," for the keys they wore around their necks on a string that would allow them to enter into their homes when they became hungry, they roamed the streets when not attending school. For adolescent children, Parkway "established a series of clubs,

[54] "Yes this is - Parkway Community House!" 1942, booklet, Box 15, Folder 6, Horace Cayton Papers at the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection at the Carter G. Woodson Library, Chicago, Illinois.

music classes, art classes, children's groups, and educational courses." More than 150 children showed up every weekday between 3:00 pm and 6:00 pm to participate in the House's free recreational activities.[55]

The issue of providing nursery services for younger children was significantly more complicated. Initially, officials in the federal government did not want women with young children to enter the workforce at all. Paul McNutt, director of the War Manpower Commission, wrote in 1942, "the first responsibility of women with young children in war as in peace is to give suitable care in their own homes to their children."[56] A contemporaneously written article in the *Social Science Review* argued that the United States should "consider the cost before we encourage women with children under fourteen to take on full-time jobs. Let us be sure that we have done everything possible to make intelligent and effective use of our total man-power and women-power resources, including the use of handicapped and minority groups."[57] Mothers of young children should only be encouraged to enter the workforce as a last resort.

By the second half of 1942, nearly everyone else besides women with young children had already entered the workforce. Left with no other source of labor, the government began to encourage these women to take on jobs, but only at minimal disruption to their family lives. Policy makers encouraged employers to only assign mothers of young children to part-time

---

[55] Ibid.

[56] Howard Dratch, "The Politics of Child Care in the 1940s," *Science & Society*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Summer, 1974), 171.

[57] Hazel A. Fredericksen, "The Program for Day Care of Children of Employed Mothers," *Social Science Review*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Jun., 1943), 162.

work and to avoid scheduling them for evening or graveyard shifts. It was also imperative that employers maintain a consistent schedule for working mothers, as sudden changes in their work hours could put them in the difficult position of having to make new childcare arrangements on short notice. In addition to providing guidance to employers on how to manage working mothers, the federal government was willing to foot the bill for childcare as well. Congress passed the Community Facilities Act, colloquially known as the Lanham Act, which authorized war funding to be spent on maintaining public works in the United States and defined childcare as such.[58]

Administratively, the childcare program was the direct successor of the Work Progress Administration's childcare program of the New Deal. The War Public Service Bureau of the Federal Works Agency formally took the program in April 1943. The FWA gave local agencies the authority to distribute the federal funds. In Chicago, the public school board managed the program. The board applied to the on behalf of each childcare site. The FWA then decided on how much financing each location would receive, giving priority to already established nursery school programs located and requiring that the sites be located in what it considered "war-impacted" areas.[59]

This made Parkway an ideal candidate for Lanham Act funds since the center had been running a WPA nursery school since its inception. In fact, in February of 1942, the nursery school was so popular that many, including Cayton himself, believed it was placing too much of

---

[58] Dratch, "The Politics of Child Care in the 1940s," pg. 168; Fredericksen, "The Program for Day Care of Children of Employed Mothers," 162-163.

[59] Dratch, "The Politics of Child Care in the 1940s," 176.

a strain on the center's resources and staff. It was suggested that the nursery school be closed down so that "emphasis [could] be placed upon a group work program with the hope that the center might play some part in the city-wide project to set up day nurseries as a defense measure program."[60] This suggestion was never voted on, as the majority of board members believed providing child-care services to be an essential part of the center's mission. The center continued to provide a full-day nursery school until government funds became available for children not yet of school age. Every day from 7:00 am to 6:00 pm, nearly sixty children, whose mothers worked full-time, attended the school.[61]

By supporting the efforts of African-American women to enter the workforce and other efforts to participate in the war effort, Parkway aligned itself with the dominant consensus among the American people that the sacrifices asked of women were valuable and demanded full support. The War Manpower Commission, through its Rosie the Riveter campaign, encouraged women to leave the traditional temporarily for the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps and the various other women's auxiliaries of the different service branches, or the workforce, or to simply volunteer in war-related programs. This message was geared to all women, without regard to race, as 350,000 women joined the military, and millions more entered the workforce.[62] Yet, for African-American women, the opening up of more opportunities to them either in

---

[60] "Minutes. Executive Committee Meeting. Good Shepherd Community Center. February 6, 1942," Box 1, Folder 1942-1943, Parkway Community House Records at the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

[61] "Yes this is - Parkway Community House!"

[62] David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 776.

uniform or in the workforce was a much more radical transformation than for their white counterparts.

The majority of white women working prior to the war worked in clerical positions, often as typist or secretaries. As defense industries began expanding, they adhered to traditional gendered hiring practices, which meant that white women entering the workforce worked in very similar occupations to the ones they always had, albeit in new industries. African-American women, however, worked primarily as domestic inside the homes of white employers or as maids in hotels and other service industries prior to the war.[63] Thus, the transformation of the role of African American women in the American economic was starker. Since the war effort did not require more domestics, occupations that had been closed to African-American women opened, and Parkway saw preparing these women to take advantage of these new opportunities as its responsibility.

Parkway also demonstrated its commitment to the war effort by educating its adult clients on the duties and responsibilities of being citizens of a nation at war. The "Victory Forum" taught adults all of the particulars of the war's new domestic regime. As a matter of national security, the federal government had instituted "restrictions, rationing, and regimentation" onto American life, and Parkway worked to help its clients to understand these changes.[64] These changes were far-reaching, taking place on a scale previously unimaginable.

---

[63] Ibid., 777.

[64] "Yes this is - Parkway Community House!"

Writing contemporaneously, Harvard economist Paul M. Sweezy noted the dramatic impact war had on the civilian economy:

> At best the civilian economy must be severely crippled and thrown out of gear. Strategic materials are denied it, young and skilled workers are drained off into the armed forces and the armament industries. Not only its powers of production but also its resiliency, its powers of adaptation, are severely restricted. And to make matters worse it is just at this juncture that the demands upon the civilian economy, expressed in terms of money spending, are raised to new heights because of the greatly increased incomes of those working in the war industries.[65]

This increased demand, without the limiting of consumption, would cause shortages in materials needed in the war effort.

Within a year of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the federal government had instituted thirteen rationing programs, which were managed on the local level by War Price and Rationing Boards, with 5,600 of these boards operating throughout the country. The federal government placed limits on the number of motor oil, automobiles, bicycles, tires, rubber, shoes, stoves, coffee, sugar, and even typewriters. During the war government officials added processed foods and meats, fats, oils and cheese to its list of rationed commodities. Although considered "the stepchild of the war effort" in the eyes of policy makers leery of upsetting the American public and who did not see how not being able to buy as much cheese as they wanted was helping the boys on the front, rationing was a major component of wartime domestic policy

[65] Paul M. Sweezy, "Rationing and the War Economy," *Science & Society*, Vol. 7, No. 1. Institute on the Problems of the War (Winter, 1943), 65.

and its was the responsibility of good citizens to do their part through limiting their consumption.[66]

Many of the residents of Chicago's Black Belt were southern migrants who lacked a proper birth certificate, which was required for employment in the defense industry. This was no small task, considering many of the migrants hailed from the rural sharecropping communities and small towns, and the racial logic of the "Jim Crow" regime often prevented the creation of any official records of black babies' births. The staff of Parkway went to great length to secure more than one thousand birth certificates, helping men and women fill out complicated forms and conducting interviews to get a sense of where they were born in order to file a request with the state of their birth.[67]

In addition to supporting the men and women who would be staying in the United States during the war, Parkway also worked to prepare those young men who wanted to go fight to qualify for enlistment. Throughout the course of the war, hundreds of thousands of men were disqualified due to illiteracy and classified as 4F. To aid those desiring to enlist, Parkway offered an Army Literacy Training Course to teach those men who were unable to read and write. As was habit, Parkway saw a need and stepped up to meet it, helping hundreds of men learn to read and write throughout the course of the war. This effort was one of many undertaken by Parkway with the explicit purpose of helping young African American men enlist in the Armed Forces,

---

[66] Paul M. O'Leary, "Wartime Rationing and Governmental Organization," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 39, No. 6 (Dec., 1945), 1089-1090.

[67] "Yes this is - Parkway Community House!"

which also included renting out space on the first floor of the house for an U.S. Selective Service office.[68]

The Selective Service in its modern reiteration began in 1917, when the decision of the United States to enter the First World War necessitated conscripting more than one million men into the Army. Congress passed a second Selective Service act in 1940 and, despite the fact the United States was not at war with any country at the time, men from the ages of 21-36 were required to begin registering for a potential draft.[69] The idea was that able-bodied men would register and be classified based on their fitness for war and, should the United States find itself at war, could draft these men into active military service. In practice, the administrating of the program proved to be significantly more complicated.

The program, technically an independent federal agency, was decentralized. The federal agency had, since 1936, been training officers in the National Guard of the various states, ranging from three to twenty in number depending on the population of the state, for the job of building the selective service system should the need arise. Once the law was passed, these officers worked to establish Civilian Review Boards, at least one in each county in the United States, who would review the draftees and determine their fitness for military service. The law required that each board have "three or more members who are citizens and residents of the county, are not members of the armed forces, and are appointed by the President from recommendations made by the governors of the states, who rely on local officials for

---

[68] Ibid.

[69] Elias Huzar, "Selective Service Policy 1940-1942," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (May, 1942), 203-204.

suggestions." Under this structure, local boards wielded a high level of discretion in determining who would be drafted into military service.[70]

This discretion meant significant variance in which men were rejected for enlistment or offered deferments, and for what reasons. While Congress never considered abolishing the local boards, there was a desire to see "more uniformity among them."[71] This was especially true when race was a factor. Despite the fact that racial discrimination was prohibited in the Selective Service law, African-Americans continued to have a more difficult time enlisting than their white counterparts for the duration of the war. [72]

Despite this reality, and the well-documented maltreatment of African American servicemen in World War I (a reality that would continue in the Second World War), many African-American men dutifully joined the armed forces voluntarily and fought. This was not happenstance, but the result of an African-American leadership that encouraged military participation in uniformity. The logic behind this became known as the "Double-V" campaign for victory against fascism abroad and racism at home.

Edgar Rouzeau, writing in *The Pittsburg Courier* in February 1942, first articulated the ethos of the "Double-V" campaign. Rouzeau, who was the editor and manager of the paper's New York City bureau, argued that despite the racism African Americans continued to experience in the United States, they too had something to fight for. The war, as he saw it, was

---

[70] Ibid., 202.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid., 212.

between two competing ideologies: the Fascism and National Socialism of the Axis powers and "the lily-white" democracy of the Allies, save for the "luke-warm enigma" of Russian communism. Given these options, Rouzeau contends that African Americans had a stake in the outcome of the war.[73]

But there was something more at stake. Whereas white Americans who fought were fighting simply for victory, African Americans were fighting "not merely for the salvation of America, not merely to secure the same degree of democracy for Black Americans that white Americans have long enjoyed, but to establish precedent for a world-wide principle of free association among men of all races, creeds and colors. That's the black man's stake."[74] In defending this stake, African Americans would prove their loyalty to the United States and their capacity for citizenship.

Rouzeau contends that the fate of the United States and African Americans' struggle for equality are interwoven and that through active participation in the country's fight abroad, African Americans would be able to lay claim to the equality they sought. "The suffering and privation may be great, but the rewards loom even greater," Rouzeau wrote. "They are well worth any amount of blood we may be asked to spill, any amount of tears and sweat we may be asked to shed. If we are not equal to the sacrifice, we might as well rest our pens, padlock the classrooms and return to our old slave-masters. We will not have been worthy of democracy."[75]

---

[73] Edgar T. Rouzeau. "'Black America Wars on Double Front For High Stakes'--Rouzeau," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 7, 1942.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid.

This ideal was the guiding principle of Parkway during the way years and fundamentally shaped not only the programming the center provided but was deeply embedded in its culture.

Poet and writer Langston Hughes, who, like Cayton was not a communist but had an infinity for the critiques of America's social, economic, and political order coming from the Left, wrote and produced several plays which were performed by Parkway's Skyloft Players theater repository. Cayton and Hughes met in 1932 in Cayton's hometown of Seattle and had hit it off. In November 1941, at the suggestion of fellow poet Arna Bontemps, Hughes decided to move to Chicago and Cayton offered him free lodging at Parkway. Grateful for the gesture, Hughes looked for a way to return the favor. Ultimately, Hughes decided on helping Parkway by helping them establish a theater repository and gifting them with a new play.[76]

As Hughes was settling into his new life in Chicago, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, sending the nation to war. Hughes, like many, saw the nation's entry into World War II as an opportunity to forcefully challenge racial segregation at home. In early 1942, he wrote "Pearl Harbor put Jim Crow on the run. /That Crow can't fight for Democracy/And be the same old Crow he used to be—" in his poem "Jim Crow's Last Stand."[77] Through theater, Cayton and Hughes aligned Parkway with messages and themes that supported the nation's war effort and propagated the values of patriotism, civic duty, and the responsibilities of citizenship.

---

[76] Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume II: 1941-1967, I Dream a World*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2002), 32-33.

[77] Ibid., 36.

The first play was titled, *The Sun Do Move*. The lead character of the play is Rock, a slave who is sold away to another plantation as his wife, Mary, is giving birth to their son, Little Rock. Rock escapes from his new plantation after a failed attempt, down in the Mississippi Delta and returns upstate to retrieve his wife and son, only to discover they have been given as a wedding gift to a couple in Memphis. Undeterred, he goes and rescues his wife, but is devastated to learn Little Rock died after being sold and separated from Mary. This setback aside, Rock and Mary escape north to freedom.[78]

The music within the play is also important. Rock often sings spirituals through his travails, wailing such lines as "When I'm Gone, When I'm Gone, When I'm Gone, Lord, when I'm gone—Somebody's goin' miss me When I'm gone!" and "Take ma hammer—huh! Give it to Jonah—huh! Say I'm gone—huh! Say I'm Gone!", as he plots his escape from slavery. At the end of the play, a triumphant and free Rock sings *The Battle Him of the Republic,* and the play ends with the entire cast singing *The Star-Spangled Banner*. Hope for the future and patriotism are inextricably linked in this moment.[79]

Also, given the context of a nation at war, the message contained in the conclusion of the play, where Rock enlists in the Union Army, was clear. Rock and his family were already free, meaning that by joining the army he was not directly fighting for his freedom, even though it is obvious that he, as a runaway slave, would have a vested interest in the total abolition of slavery. This subtle twist is precisely the point; the fight is an indirect one. Although not a perfect analog, both Rock and African-American men in the 1940s had to prove themselves

---

[78] Langston Hughes, *The Sun Do Move*.

[79] Ibid.

worthy of the freedom they sought by earning it on the battlefield, laying down their lives if necessary.

When the play debuted on Friday, April 24, 1942, it was a smashing success. Edwin Embree, president of the Rosenwald Foundation was in attendance and thoroughly enjoyed the show, which would run through May to sold-out performances.[80] By putting on this particular play at this particular historical moment, Parkway was firmly aligning itself with the overwhelming majority of Americans of all races who fully supported the war effort and using theater as a cultural vehicle to encourage others to do the same.

Education, much like theater, was an important method used by Parkway to propagate cultural values among its clients. In addition to ideas about the rights and responsibilities of African Americans, the second guiding principle of the center was a firm commitment to the belief that the latest advancements in social science research could be deployed to address a substantive social problem. Through its educational programs, Parkway sought to distill this research into actionable knowledge for the community it served.

Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy* was rich with vital information, yet so dense that "perhaps only a student of social science [would] hope to" understand it. Parkway, through its *The People's Forum* series, hoped to break down the book into digestible pieces for the masses. This way they would be able to "understand the discoveries" in the book and apply them towards producing "the good results of a better family,

[80] Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 43.

Figure 5: Parkway Community House Forum, 1942. Photograph by Gordon Coster. The LIFE Magazine Collection, 1119.2005.

church, school, government, nation, or world organization."[81] These objectives clearly aligned with those of the Parkway.

The Carnegie Corporation, the philanthropic legacy of industrial tycoon Andrew Carnegie, wanted to find someone who could be an unbiased observer of race relations in the United States, i.e., a foreigner, whose scholarly credentials were unassailable. They found the

[81] "The People's Forum: Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*," 1945, booklet, Box 15, Folder 18, Horace Cayton Papers at the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection at the Carter G. Woodson Library, Chicago, Illinois.

perfect person in Myrdal, a social economist at the University of Stockholm and a leading public policy advisor to the Swedish government. The booklet noted that Myrdal was no, "ivy tower intellectual," having held public office in the Swedish government.[82]

The center published a booklet that was a hybrid between a workbook and a commentary and sold copies for ten cents. The booklet contained an overview of *An American Dilemma* and the logic behind "*People's Forum* using it as a launching pad for community conversation. Also inside the booklet was fifteen-week reading schedule, which corresponded with a lecture series. Every Thursday from September 13th to December 20th, *The People's Forum* hosted a lecture and invited at least one guest speaker to further explain the topics at hand. Detailed descriptions of the subjects to be discussed were included in the booklet as well.[83]

The booklet described *An American Dilemma*, at 1,483 pages, as "the most complete report of the Negro in American society that has ever been given." The result of seven years of research and collaboration with many of the country's leading scholars on race relations (including Cayton himself and his scholarly mentor, University of Chicago Sociologist Robert Park), the book provided "more… and better organized knowledge" of the condition of African Americans in the United States that "was a first step to intelligent action."[84] More than simply read the book, Parkway hoped the lecture series would compel those who participated to take bold steps to address the many problems adversely affecting African Americans.

---

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Ibid.

In many ways, *The People's Forum* represented both a continuation and the natural evolution of the Parkway's programming as it sought to craft a post-war identity. Parkway would continue to provide some of the services it had since its inception, but after the war, the center would be forced to discontinue or reduce programs tied directly to the war effort. The federal government stopped providing Lanham Act funds to nursery schools at the end of 1945. It would be a constant struggle for the center to fund its nursery school, although it was able to keep a smaller version of it open. The end of the war began the slow decline in the number of people coming in and out of Parkway. The federal government terminated its leases on office space in the center, reducing foot traffic and placing further strain on the center's already tight budget.[85]

The decline of Parkway coincided with the personal decline of Cayton. Over the course of the war, Cayton became increasingly disillusioned with the work of the center, believing that it failed to produce a substantial dividend for the effort he and his staff had put into it. During the nine years he directed Parkway, Cayton had lost both of his parents and his sister, and experienced two failed marriages. Suffering from depression, he had become increasingly dependent on alcohol and prescription drugs. Spending more time away from Parkway, Cayton delved into the psychology of race, spending hours under hypnosis to explore the impact of

[85] Knupfer, *The Chicago Black Renaissance and Women's Activism*, 47-48.

racism on his, and by extension the African-American, psyche until resigning as director in 1948.[86]

Ultimately, Parkway did not end the racism that plagued life in the Black Belt during the 1930s and 1940s. But Parkway was a success. Parkway was successful because it revealed that, despite the conditions placed in front of them, African Americans work tenaciously to ensure their progress. At this moment, with the non-indictments of the white police officers responsible for the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Gardner, millions of Americans find themselves questioning how much racial progress African Americans and other racial minorities in this country have actually made. At this moment, the rallying cries of "Black Lives Matter" and "I Can't Breathe" represent a deep-seated belief that the dehumanization of people of color will never end in the United States. Whereas some become nihilistic about their own future and the prospects for racial equality in the United States, the majority will continue along their current paths, believing that their destination will redeem their journey.

Parkway still exists, in another location and with a different mission.[87] But, Parkway is indicative of the salience of aspiration in the African-American experience. The impact of Parkway on the thousands of men, women, and children who used its services during its first years of operation can never be adequately measured. What can be measured is the enormous amount of hard work and commitment necessary to make Parkway what it became. African-American men and women employed a culture of aspiration to change their communities and

[86] Hobbs, *The Cayton Legacy*, 140-146.

[87] Parkway Community House is now located at 500 East 67th Street, Chicago, IL 60637.

their lives for the better. They were committed to working hard to open up new opportunities for their neighbors and themselves.

CHAPTER 3

THE STRUGGLE FOR HOME IN AFRICAN AMERICAN CHICAGO

In this, the third chapter of my dissertation, I will tell the story of the quest to gain access to homeownership by focusing on prospective African American home buyers and their allies who sought to overcome the forces at work against them. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, events and circumstances converged to make housing the most contested front of the struggle for racial equality in the United States. The story of residential discrimination is most often told by enumerating the forces of racism, but it is my hope that we can better understand this story if we shift the focus to aspiring African American homeowners themselves. For the increasing numbers of African Americans now in the financial position to buy a home, there simply were no houses to buy within the confines of Chicago's established Black Belt. This meant that if aspiring African American homeowners wanted to purchase homes, they would have no other choice but to do so in predominately white neighborhoods. When this occurred, white residents responded either aggressively, through violence and intimidation, or passively, by selling their homes and moving away. That story has been well documented, but what hasn't been as thoroughly told is the perspective, motivations, and responses of those African Americans who sought to become homeowners.

Here, I will provide historical context for the struggle for homeownership that occurred after World War II by exploring the migration of African Americans into Chicago beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century and the systemic overcrowding of the city's Black Belt that followed. I will also look at early African American homeowners' efforts to buy homes and the challenges they encountered as they came face-to-face with Chicago's racially segregated

housing market. Next, I will look at the federal government's efforts to revitalize the housing industry during the Great Depression. Through the creation of several agencies, the government sought to encourage private companies to build homes and private banks to finance their purchase, yet through their subsidization efforts federal policymakers actually created the modern private home market.

Next, I will shift the focus to the housing crisis that was exacerbated by World War II. In addition to the continued in-migration of African Americans into Chicago's Black Belt, which caused the area to burst at the seams, the servicemen who returned to the city were determined to procure homes for themselves and their families. Their sacrifices during the war left them determined to exercise their full rights as citizens. Finally, I will focus on the interracial coalition of men and women who worked to promote the idea that African American and white homeowners could live in the same communities peacefully. The Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference worked to manage the integration of their neighborhood, promoting many of the ideals that would come to define the logic of integration throughout the course of the twentieth century. White would accept a small number of the "right" types of African Americans as neighboring homeowners, and African Americans in return would make sure that they were the "right" type of neighbors. Furthermore, when it came to the slum clearance policies undertaken towards the end of the 1950s, African American homeowners comported themselves in ways very similar to their white counterparts, at the expense of those who did not own their own homes.

During the second decade of the twentieth century, with the racial climate in the South rapidly deteriorating, African Americans left the region and moved to major urban centers in the Northeast and industrial Midwest. One of their most popular destinations was Chicago, Illinois.[1] Multiple factors made Chicago an ideal location for African Americans looking for a new home. One major factor was the United States' entry into the Frist World War and the anti-immigration sentiment that followed. In May 1921, Congress passed The Quota Act of 1921, placing hard numerical restrictions on the number of immigrants. Hit especially hard were Southern and Eastern European immigrants. Prior to 1921, more than 600,000 immigrants from these regions entered the country annually, compared to 150,000 after the law took effect.[2] Given increased consumer demand for manufactured goods and the end of the European immigrant labor supply, Chicago's business leaders decided to turn to both established African American residents and newly arrived migrant workers to fill the void.[3]

Chicago's African-American establishment also sought to recruit African Americans to the city, sensing the potential for greater civic influence and political capital. Robert Abbott, editor of the iconic African-American newspaper *The Chicago Defender* and a prominent leader in the city's African-American community, began actively recruiting African Americans from the South to Chicago. By drawing comparisons to the Hebrews of the Old Testament, editorials in

---

[1] Several books have been written about the importance of Chicago to the Great Migration, but one of the best treatments can be found in Allen H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967).

[2] Michael LeMay and Elliot R. Barkan, eds., *U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Laws and Issues* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 135.

[3] Spear, *Black Chicago*, 131-132.

The Defender declared Chicago "The Promised Land."[4] In the twenty years that followed, Chicago's demographics became decidedly more diverse, with the proportion of African Americans in the population at large increasing from 2 percent in 1910 to 6 percent in 1930.[5]

Recently arrived African Americans encountered Chicago's residential segregation regime, where real estate brokers, white homeowners, and local officials colluded to keep them in their place. As early as 1900, real estate agents maintained a strict policy of only selling homes to African American buyers in certain neighborhoods and exploiting the refusal of many white Chicagoans to live on the same block as African Americans for handsome profits. That year, a real estate speculator hired an African American man to merely walk down Vernon Avenue, located in the Washington Park neighborhood on the South Side. The sight of an African American in the all-white neighborhood caused a mass exodus of white families and soon entire blocks were occupied by African American families. Despite commonly-held notions that the presence of African Americans in a given community would result in that community's inevitable demise, Vernon Avenue became one of Chicago's small professional and middle-class African American enclaves, consisting of well-maintained homes.[6]

Prior to the Great Migration, several African Americans lived outside the defined Black Belt, most likely due to the desire of their employers to have them in close proximity or as the

---

[4] Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (New York: Viking, 2010), 159.

[5] Ibid., 157.

[6] Margaret Garb, "Drawing the 'Color Line': Race and Real Estate in Early Twentieth-Century Chicago," *Journal of Urban History* 32, no. 5 (July 2006), 773-774.

result of small group of African Americans taking over a single block. It was not uncommon for the presence of African Americans in a neighborhood to result in violence, such as bombing of homes recently purchased by African Americans, and mob attacks on men and women as they were moving into their new homes. By 1925, the mob violence that accompanied the arrival of African Americans into white neighborhoods had given way to restrictive covenants as the main method used to prevent integration. These instruments spread throughout Chicago quickly, and by 1930, approximately three-fourths of all residential property in Chicago was bound by a restrictive covenant.[7]

The areas that experienced residential succession, i.e., transitioned from white to African American, became over-crowded and run-down.[8] The sight of rundown homes and apartment buildings exasperated notions that African Americans made poor neighbors who did not take proper care of their residences, but the reality was much more complex than the perception. Given the absence of housing available to African Americans outside of the Black Belt, there was high demand for homes even if they were in the most deplorable conditions. Landlords could ignore the complaints of their African American tenants and still collect rents; if the renters abandoned their apartments, there was always another tenant available to move in quickly.[9]

---

[7] St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, Revised ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 176-184.

[8] A good explanation of this phenomenon is *Block by Block: Neighborhoods and Public Policy on Chicago's West Side*, by Amanda I. Seligman (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[9] Garb, "Drawing the 'Color Line'," 776.

Furthermore, financial pressures often forced property owners to take in borders in order to make their ends meet. For those with the financial means to purchase homes, their only option was to purchase "on contract," a system in which real estate brokers required large down payments for African American home buyers and could repossess the property for one late payment. As a result, the cost of financing a home purchase via the contract system was significantly higher than a bank-backed mortgage. It was not uncommon for homeowners to become landlords to mitigate the impact of high monthly payments and to provide housing for those who could not secure it in the Black Belt's tight housing market.[10]

The collapse of the American economy that occurred after the Stock Market crash in October 1929 exasperated the already dismal housing situation in Chicago, as the construction industry rapidly deteriorated. Officials in both the Hoover and Roosevelt administrations worked to jumpstart the nation's construction industry, deciding that stimulating demand for new homes was the best course of action to put men in the construction industry back to work, as well as to replenish the country's decaying housing stock. In the span of two years, the government decidedly intervened in the housing industry, creating the Federal Home Loan Bank (FHLB) in 1932, the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) in 1933, and passing the National Housing Act (NHA), which created the Federal Housing Authority among other agencies, in 1934. Together, these entities worked to jump-start private industry by subsidizing and guaranteeing mortgages for home buyers and investment capital for home builders.[11]

---

[10] Garb, "Drawing the 'Color Line'," 778-779.

[11] David M. P. Freud, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 99.

But these government agencies did not distribute their resources evenly. The HOLC, the FHA, and other entities used appraisal procedures and lending practices that issued letter grades for determining the soundness of a mortgage for government insurance. On a scale of A to D, the agency graded entire areas based on their perceived quality, and mortgages were unavailable for homes in neighborhoods and communities that received a letter grade of D.[12] The result of this practice was to create a strong disincentive for home builders and banks to build and finance houses in areas where buyers would be unable to secure government-backed mortgages to purchase them, a reality that would have disastrous consequences for African Americans.

Similar to nearly all New Deal programs, the men (and to a lesser extent women) running the array of governmental entities charged with stimulating the country's housing industry adhered to the prevailing racial mores of the time, meaning that policies supporting residential segregation prevailed. The federal government legitimated the racist anxieties of white homeowners by codifying the belief that the presence of African Americans in a neighborhood would decimate home values. White homeowners began deploying non-racial rationales for their support of racial discrimination; by refusing to live next to African Americans, whites were not being irrational bigots, but simply exercising their rights as property holders and protecting the value of their homes.[13]

The NAACP fought the FHA's policy of only insuring mortgages for African American home buyers if the property was located in a predominately African American community. Roy

[12] Freund, *Colored Property*, 114.

[13] Ibid., 118.

Wilkins, assistant secretary of the NAACP, wrote a letter to FHA director Stewart McDonald accusing the agency of creating "Jim Crow" districts. Throughout the decade, agency officials consistently dismissed concerns about racism. It could not dictate the lending policies of private financial institutions and ultimately they, and not the FHA, were responsible for issuing mortgages. The underwriting procedures of the FHA were only based on market conditions and not race, so the logic went.[14]

Initially, the FHA hid its policy of not insuring the mortgages of African Americans attempting to buy homes in predominately-white communities from the public. However, the NAACP got its hands on a copy of the FHA's Underwriters' Manual which not only prevented African Americans from securing guaranteed mortgages in neighborhoods with up to 30 percent African American residents but also prevented white homebuyers from doing the same in African American communities. Furthermore, the FHA would not insure any mortgages in neighborhoods that were already racially integrated since the agency considered these neighborhoods unstable. The problem, as the NAACP saw it, was that given the lack of suitable homes to purchase in predominately African American neighborhoods, there would be few opportunities for an African American family to purchase a home. Thurgood Marshall, director of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, sent a strongly worded letter demanding that Section 233, the specific clause in question, be removed from the Underwriters' Manual.[15]

---

[14] "ACCUSE FHA OF JIM CROW HOME CONSTRUCTION PROGRAM," *The Chicago Defender*, Oct. 22, 1938, pg. 2; Freund, *Colored Property*, 173.

[15] "EXPOSES 'COLOR LAW' IN FEDERAL HOUSING PLAN," *The Chicago Defender*, Dec. 31, 1938, 1.

In the minds of federal policymakers, neither they nor white homeowners were discriminating against African Americans or anyone else. Rather, any racial disparities that existed were the result of a free housing market, and federal housing policy was simply a "function" of "impersonal market forces." The irony of this false paradigm was that the "private" free housing market was only functioning as a direct result of the government subsidizing it. As the HOLC, the FHA, and the various other federal housing agencies continued to expand, evolve, and enlarge the scope of their financing operations, mortgages that were not federally-guaranteed nearly disappeared from the housing industry. As a result, the federal government made racial discrimination the official policy of the housing industry.[16]

African Americans who wanted to purchase a home during the lean years of the Great Depression, or had already purchased them, had a very difficult time keeping them. Those who were still employed had to work very long hours to keep them out of foreclosure. Stories of taking in additional borders, or of having multiple adult members of an extended family living in a single home and contributing to the payments were common during this period. The absence of available housing to purchase continued throughout the 1930s.[17]

As the nation entered the 1940s, the housing situation continued to be dire despite the federal government's efforts. For no single group of Americans was the housing situation more dreadful than for Chicago's African American residents. In their seminal study, *Black Metropolis*,

---

[16] Freund, *Colored Property*, 119.

[17] Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 663.

St. Clare Drake and Horace Cayton explored African American life in Chicago. The Black Belt was a colony that, although not expanding geographically, was taking in thousands of new residents every year. The authors believed that it was the refusal of whites to live next to African Americans was seen as the primary reason for the persistence of the Black Belt. Whites who occupied the lowest tier of society also lived in undesirable areas, but they could move up the socioeconomic ladder and move into more desirable areas. African Americans, for the most part, could not do the same because their very presence was perceived as denigrating whatever area they occupied.[18]

As the authors saw it, it was the denial of African Americans to a free and open housing market and the inability of the Black Belt to expand fast enough to accommodate the influx of new migrants that had created a population density of 90,000 people per square mile, compared to 20,000 people per square mile in the most heavily-populated areas. Although there was a consensus that additional housing for African Americans needed to be built, many whites believed that this could be done without challenging residential segregation. The deplorable housing conditions in the Black Belt became the justification for white residents in the surrounding communities to support restrictive covenants. While the "superficial observer" may have believed that an area was blighted because of the disregard African Americans had for their homes, Drake and Cayton knew that the inverse was true: that African Americans are concentrated in areas that are already believed to be slums.[19]

---

[18] Ibid., 174-175.

[19] Ibid., 204-207.

At the end of the previous decade, *The Chicago Defender* asked the question "Is The South Side Doomed?" To even pose the question, the paper noted, was "to infer that a serious menace to the health, happiness and prosperity" of the area's 250,000 residents existed. The menace in question was the racial housing regime of restrictive covenants, coupled with the refusal of the city's bank to provide loans to the community and of the city's insurance companies to offer the financial protection of their services. To be denied these resources was to be denied the opportunity to build wealth for yourself, your family, and your community. Despite these dire conditions, the paper boldly asserted that the South Side was not doomed, and that community was determined to "fight for its own, conscious that democracy is not dead in America."[20] As the city's African American community was preparing to wage war against deprivation, the country was preparing to enter into a war of its own.

As the nation began mobilizing for its possible entry into the Second World War, many African Americans were concerned that racism would keep them out of equitable participation in the war effort. Despite the fact that African Americans had proven their loyalty and patriotism through their faithful service to the United States in every one of its armed conflicts, many African Americans were shocked to find "racial discriminations attached to the defense program." Racism was a hindrance to the war effort and all discrimination in the war effort needed to be eradicated for the United States to be victorious. [21]

---

[20] "IS THE SOUTH SIDE DOOMED?", *The Chicago Defender*, Oct. 21, 1939, 14.

[21] "DEMOCRACY IN NATIONAL DEFENSE," *The Chicago Defender*, Apr. 19, 1941, 14.

During this time, African Americans began meditating on what participating in the fighting would mean for them and their desire to defeat Jim Crow at home. Despite the well-documented maltreatment of African American servicemen in World War I, many African-American men dutifully joined the armed forces voluntarily and fought. This was not happenstance, but the result of an African-American leadership that encouraged military participation in uniformity. The logic behind this became known as the "Double-V" campaign for victory against fascism abroad and racism at home.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Edgar Rouzeau, writing in *The Pittsburg Courier* in February 1942, first articulated the ethos of the "Double-V" campaign. The war, as he saw it, was between two competing ideologies: The Fascism and National Socialism of the Axis powers and the democracy of the Allies, albeit a racist democracy at the moment.[22] Given these options, Rouzeau contends that African Americans did have a stake in the United States winning the war. Whereas white Americans who fought were fighting simply for victory, African Americans were fighting "not merely for the salvation of America, not merely to secure the same degree of democracy for Black Americans that white Americans have long enjoyed, but to establish a precedent for a world-wide principle of free association among men of all races, creeds, and colors."[23]

The fate of the United States and African Americans' struggle for equality was interwoven, and Rouzeau believed that through active participation in the country's fight

---

[22] "'Black America Wars on Double Front for High Stakes'--Rouzeau," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Feb. 7, 1942.

[23] Ibid.

abroad, African Americans would be able to lay claim to the equality they sought. "The suffering and privation may be great, but the rewards loom even greater," Rouzeau wrote. "They are well worth any amount of blood we may be asked to spill, any amount of tears and sweat we may be asked to shed. If we are not equal to the sacrifice, we might as well rest our pens, padlock the classrooms and return to our old slave masters. We will not have been worthy of democracy."[24]

The African American community did not blindly support the war effort, but rather it sought to strike a balance between constantly affirming the stated principles for which the Allies were fighting for—freedom and democracy—and highlighting the valor of African Americans in service to those ideals, on the one hand, while connecting white supremacy in the United States to the Nazi ideology on the other. By connecting these two, African Americans made explicit their belief that both were antithetical to the cause for which the United States claimed it was fighting. This balance was written by Ralph Ellison in his left-leaning periodical *Negro Quarterly*, arguing that African Americans had to participate in the war effort, but had to do so critically.[25]

The problem for many African Americans with Ellison's "Critical Participation" was that it was not critical enough. To hide many of the substantive critiques of African American participation in the war effort, the left-leaning, Chicago-based periodical *Negro Story* embedded them in fictional short stories. These stories provided a safe space for substantive critique of the war effort. The periodical did not last the duration of the war, and the critiques it offered, though persistent, lost the battle for the hearts and minds of the African American community.

---

[24] Ibid.

[25] Jansen B. Werner, "Black America's Double War: Ralph Ellison and 'Critical Participation' During World War II," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 18, no. 3 (2015), 442-445.

Ultimately, the logic of the "Double-V" campaign won out, as the mainstream African American press and civil rights organizations saw the war as too good of an opportunity to advance their cause to pass up. Faithful participation in the war effort would be the best means to ensure racial equality afterward.[26]

African American soldiers, to a certain extent, were radicalized by their participation in WWII, fighting for freedom in a segregated military. Being forced to train on segregated military bases in the south and being denied access to the same recreational facilities as their fellow white soldiers made these men determined to end discrimination in the United States. This is not to suggest that these soldiers did not already understand the injustice that racism was, or that they had no consciousness about challenging it. Rather, their participation in the war effort gave them a powerful weapon in their fight against white supremacy.[27]

Despite these difficulties, the participation of African American servicemen in the war effort "influenced the structure of their aspirations in a way that contributed to their unwillingness to accept the prewar structure of racial dominance that characterized the nation." The authors point to a paradox of military service; that it aroused individual ambitions "at the

---

[26] Bill Mullen, "Popular Fronts: Negro Story Magazine and the African American Literary Response to World War II," *African American Review* 30, no. 1 (Spring, 1996), 8-9.

[27] Caroline Rolland-Diamond, "'A Double Victory?' Revisiting the Black Struggle for Equality During World War Two," *Revue française d'études américaines* 2013/3 (No 137), 95; Kimberly L. Phillips, "War! What Is It Good For?: Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from World War II to Iraq," (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 48-50.

expense of more diffused ambitions focused upon blacks considered as a group."[28] There was optimism among African American servicemen that they would be better off after having served in the war than they were before joining the fight. Many of them, especially those from the Jim Crow south, expected to be living in a different region of the country after being discharged. This, coupled with a belief that military service would open up greater employment opportunities, led these men to be expectant of greater economic opportunities.[29]

The African American servicemen deployed overseas were not the only ones cast in the press as heroes. African American newspapers depicted the men and women mobilized on the home front as patriots helping the nation's war effort, opening up opportunities for many of them in several previously unavailable occupations, such as defense and public sector work, opportunities that did not exist prior to the war. African Americans who served during World War II were much more likely to work as professionals and in the public sector at greater numbers than the generation prior. "Military service taught many black individuals how they might succeed in American Society, and this lesson entailed a certain distancing from the community," and its more group-centered goals.[30]

Civil rights organizations fought to open up increased employment opportunities for American Americans on the home front as a means of empowering them to become fully-actualized economic citizens, rather than engage in some of the more leftist critiques that

---

[28] John Modell, Marc Goulden, and Sigurdur Magnusson, "WWII in the Lives of Black Americans: Some Findings and Interpretations," *The Journal of American History* 76, no. 3 (December 1989), 838.

[29] Ibid., 842.

[30] Ibid., 839-848.; Rolland-Diamond, "'A Double Victory?'," 100.

claimed America's racist and capitalist systems of domination would never create sufficient resources for all citizens. Many scholars see this as part of a shift on the part of these organizations from challenging oppression more broadly to a particular focus on issues that were the unique class-based concerns of a select group of African Americans, i.e., the middle and upper classes.[31]

But home ownership became conceptualized as a personal act that served to uplift the entire race and many people who moved into public housing saw it as a steppingstone to purchasing a home someday. The issue did not fall out off the radar of the African American press and civil rights organizations. In fact, the mobilization of the nation led to significant population increases in the nation's industrial centers. *The Chicago Defender* noted in 1943 that "every organization with the least interest in Negro welfare, every 'expert' on race relations, has pointed a finger at 'inadequate housing' as one of the causes of the growing racial tensions in America." The chief cause of the lack of housing for African Americans in Chicago, according to the paper, was the National Housing Agency, the parent organization of the Federal Housing Agency.[32]

In June 1944, Robert Lucas wrote a letter to the *Defender* concerning class distinctions among African Americans. Lucas was a recently new homeowner and was one of the few African Americans able to procure an FHA-insured home. Despite his rise up the socio-

---

[31] Two scholars who make this argument compellingly are Preston H. Smith in *Racial Democracy and the Black Metropolis: Housing Policy in Postwar Chicago* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), and Paul L. Street in *Racial Oppression in the Global Metropolis: A Living Black Chicago History* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

[32] "Race Relations Setup in U.S. Housing Agency Still Remains a Question," *The Chicago Defender*, Sep. 18, 1943, 5; Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 660.

economic ladder as a result of his recent purchase, he still saw a need for unity among the entire African American community. "I know several families living in Ida B. Wells home who were given a new lease on life when they moved in and are doing very well now. They plan to own their own home someday too. And after all, as each member of the race advances it helps us all. None of us can go much higher than the lowest in the group…." Lucas saw the struggle for decent housing as a singular effort, where the entire race would need to work to ensure that every citizen, whether they intended to rent or to buy, was able to do so.[33]

The sacrifices asked of African Americans by the federal government during World War II created a determination on the part of that generation to destroy any barrier to racial equality. During the war, African American soldiers suffered persistent racial abuses, forced to use segregated facilities, called racial epithets, and derided as too cowardly for combat, a belief that is proven patently false. Furthermore, African American servicemen were particularly emboldened by what they saw as the inherent contradiction in serving in the segregated Armed Forces to battle Nazi fascism and returned to the United States and "articulated concepts of freedom that linked their sacrifices on the battlefield to their demands for full and immediate citizenship."[34] The very first front on which these men would articulate their demands was in their quest to secure homes for themselves and their families.

The issue that civil rights organizations was grappling with as the war was drawing to a close was not an ideological one—there was universal agreement about the evils of racism and

---

[33] "WHAT THE PEOPLE SAY: Ponders Class Distinction in Negro Race," *The Chicago Defender*, June 24, 1944, 12.

[34] Phillips, "War! What Is It Good For?" 66-67.

how it reproduced various forms of oppression—but a matter of strategy: what was the best course of action to defeat Jim Crow? Civil Rights organizations and the African American Press decided to "Make Jim Crow a Criminal," embarking on a legal strategy that sought to strike down all of the statutes that constituted *de jure* racism.[35]

After the war, the federal government continued and expanded its pre-war prerogative of increasing homeownership as a means of dealing with the nation's housing shortage one of its main policy prerogatives and presented it as the hard-won spoils of the men (and to a lesser extent, women) who sacrificed so valiantly during the conflict. As the war drew to a close and servicemen began returning home, however, new housing units could not keep up with the exploding demand.

These Americans, having survived the Great Depression and defeated Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, were now ready to enjoy the spoils of their victories. In her article, "Nightmares of Elm Street: Demobilizing in Chicago, 1945-1953," Laura McEnaney explores the struggle of recently returned servicemen to find decent places to live. These "citizen-soldiers" had become "citizen survivors" who now demanded that the government reciprocate their sacrifices by continuing the wartime price controls on rents and ensuring the landlords maintained the overall quality of the apartment buildings they owned. Although McEnaney is focusing primarily on renters and their interactions with landlords and federal officials, the

[35] "Make Jim Crow a Criminal," *The Chicago Defender*, July 1, 1944, 12.

article lays out important issues pertaining to the housing situation in Chicago immediately following the war.[36]

The chief program instituted by the federal government was the Emergency Price Control Act, which was signed into law in January 1942. Price ceilings were placed on nearly every consumer product but disappeared after the war. The only exception was the price controls on rent, which were designed to keep housing prices affordable. Critics of price controls claimed that the program contributed to the housing shortage by discouraging new construction in the city. Developers turned their attention to the suburbs of Chicago, a process that was facilitated by federal investments and ultimately left many African Americans behind.[37]

For African Americans, price controls did little to address the racism in the real estate market or build new housing in the Black Belt. There were some African Americans who claimed that the ceiling on rents was actually making the housing crisis worse. Since residential segregation limited the housing options for African Americans to the Black Belt, demand was significantly inflated. When Paul A. Porter, deputy OPA administrator in charge of rents, spoke in Chicago in September 1942, African American civic leaders insisted that the agency needed to take the racial disparity in the housing market into account when setting rent controls. The

---

[36] Laura McEnaney, "Nightmares on Elm Street: Demobilizing in Chicago, 1945-1953," *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006), 1265-1268.

[37] Ibid., 1272-1279.

added pressure on real estate market was fueling notions about African Americans as bad stewards of their residences, creating a vicious cycle of discrimination.[38]

The National Association of Real Estate Boards conducted research into the housing market as it pertained to African Americans. The association's report concluded that building quality housing for African Americans could be "a sound business operation" and that "the Negro family that wants good housing is usually a good economic risk." The statement "exploded a number of long accepted generalities" about African Americans as stewards of the properties they occupied. It was clear that African Americans did not intentionally abuse they properties, but rather that a confluence of socio-economic factors caused the condition of their homes to deteriorate. Furthermore, it was noted that few African Americans were able to buy homes in pristine condition, and nearly none were able to buy new one. In the rare instance when they were able to buy a newly constructed home, African Americans maintained those properties just as well as their white counterparts.[39]

The Defender saw Chicago businessman Newton Farr as "the man who tightens the Black Belt." In a February 1945 press conference, Farr articulated his rationale for maintaining restrictive covenants. "Restrictive covenants are made to keep out undesirable people," Farr was quoted as saying. "Negroes are undesirable." Farr was a leader in the Real Estate industry, a former president of the National Real Estate Association, the Chicago Real Estate Board, and

---

[38] "CHICAGO NEGROES CHARGE OPA RENT CEILING IS UNFAIR," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 15, 1942, 9.

[39] "Real Estate Boards Find Negro Housing Good Risk," *The Chicago Defender*, November 18, 1944, 1.

the American Institute of Real Estate Appraisers. His firm commitment to restrictive covenants was due to the fact that white residents did not want to live next door to an "ordinary" African American. While he was not opposed to living next to "decent" African Americans, they were too few in number and there was no way of knowing one from the other.[40]

Restrictive covenants kept African Americans for buying homes in predominately white households throughout much of the city, but it was not a unanimous conclusion that these contractual arrangements among neighbors necessarily needed to be done away with in order to alleviate the dismal housing conditions in the Black Belt. John W. Galbreath, a former president of the National Association of Real Estate Boards wrote a column in the *Defender* as part of the newspaper's campaign to challenge the notion that African Americans were bad stewards of their dwellings. "Such facts as are in our hands," wrote Galbreath, "indicate that in general the Negro home buyer meets his payments faithfully. If his property is in good repair when he gets it, he takes care of it after he buys it." Galbreath's arguments were typical of those made by others in support of African Americans as potential homebuyers. What was striking about the column was that Galbreath never explicitly called for the end of restrictive covenants; rather he called for additional housing to be built in the already-existing African American sections of Chicago.[41]

---

[40] "Millionaire Plots Tighter Noose on "Black Ghetto'," *The Chicago Defender*, February 24, 1945, 9.

[41] "Realty Head Sees Good Negro Homes as Sound Business," *The Chicago Defender*, March 17, 1945, 1.

While many civic leaders continued to insist that the housing crisis in Chicago's African American community could be solved without integration, the NAACP continued its effort to strike down restrictive covenants in the city. Beginning in May 1945 the Chicago branch set a goal of raising $50,000 to finance their campaign against restrictive covenants. The plan was to engage in an "all-out drive" against the restrictive covenants. "It has been resolved to put an end to this vicious and un-American practice of barring Negroes from certain areas," the branch wrote in its newspaper.[42]

At the time the article appeared, the branch had raised $6,000 of the goal had already been raised to finance the legal fight. The NAACP was financing six separate cases challenging restrictive covenants. One case in particular involved a group of white homeowners in the Oakland neighborhood who had brought a suit against a white woman named Louise H. Sunborn who, despite having signed a restrictive covenant, sold her home to the Hendersons, an African American family. The home, located at 4037 South Drexel, was at the moment still occupied by the family as the NAACP was able to beat back the plaintiffs who continued to file motions for injunctions that would have forced the Hendersons to vacate their home. The ultimate goal of the campaign, as stated by the NAACP, was to open new residential areas for African Americans outside of the already-crowded Black Belt.[43]

---

[42] "$50,000.00 GOAL SET FOR BRANCH COVENANT FIGHT," *(Chicago NAACP) Branch Bulletin*, May 19, 1945. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, PAPERS OF THE NAACP. Part 5. The Campaign against Residential Segregation, 1914-1955, Reel 21 (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress), microfilm.

[43] "NAACP FIGHTS COVENANTS IN SIX CASES," *(Chicago NAACP) Branch Bulletin*, May 19, 1945, in Ibid.

The NAACP's efforts to strike down restrictive covenants was, in the words of *The Defender*, an attack on "the very core of rising race tension." The editorial writer blamed "respectable property owners, middle-class businessmen and great numbers of white 'liberals'" for the lack of adequate housing available to African Americans. The *Defender* keenly realized that the greatest obstacle to removing restrictive covenants would be those who felt that the covenants were not racist, but merely a "practical method of upholding their property values." Ending restrictive covenants would require disproving notions that the presence of African Americans in a community caused property values to decline, as well as challenging their legality in court.[44]

The *Defender* was willing to call-out the concern over illegal conversions as a smokescreen intended to exacerbate false notions about African Americans as bad neighbors and not to substantively deal with the issues of overcrowding. "The proposal for occupancy standards is out of place in the restrictive covenant fight," the editorial asserted. "It is because of the publicity given to the occupancy standards idea… that we at the Defender felt something should be done to call a halt before the idea became too widespread and led the entire restrictive covenant fight into a blind alley." For them, there was no issue of illegal conversion without African Americans being systematically denied decent places to live. Once discrimination was removed from the real estate market, there would be no need African Americans to crowd into substandard housing.[45]

---

[44] "BATTLE OF THE GHETTOS," *The Chicago Defender*, August 4, 1945, 12.

[45] "What The People Say: Robert C. Weaver Clarifies Stand on Housing," *The Chicago Defender*, December 22, 1945, 12.

As word of the NAACP's efforts spread throughout the community, the six cases that the NAACP was fighting exploded to nineteen cases by the following year. The branch produced a map of all of the cases it was pursuing in court. The diagram noted that between 22nd and 63rd Streets, and Cottage Grove and Wentworth Avenues, 300,000 African Americans lived, nearly 100,000 more than the housing stock of the area could comfortably hold. "In the name and in the defense of democracy, race restrictive covenants must be liquidated. The economic, social and spiritual costs are more than our country can afford."[46]

The long-term legal strategy of the NAACP, and the proponents of restrictive covenants, was to find the model case in order to establish a legal precedent, and the lawyers handling these cases for the NAACP were constantly communicating with Thurgood Marshall, director of the national NAACP's Legal Defense Fund. In a memorandum sent to Marshall in December 1946, it noted that the branch was now responsible for twenty-one cases. The lawyers who were arguing these cases in court were very innovative in their attempts to get the restrictive covenant cases dismissed, arguing that the lack of having all of signees of the restrictive covenant listed as plaintiffs in the case or the fact that an insufficient number of neighborhood residents had signed the restrictive covenant, as stipulated in the restrictive covenant itself, rendered the cases invalid.[47]

The cost of pursuing these cases was enormous, as the cases often dragged through the court system for months, sometimes even years. Loring B. Moore, the lawyer handling the cases

---

[46] "WHERE CHICAGO N.A.A.C.P. HELPS NEGROS FIGHT FOR LIVING SPACE," in PAPERS OF THE NAACP. Part 5.

[47] "Memorandum to Mr. Marshall from Mariam Wynn Perry. In re: Restrictive Covenants Cases in Chicago," December 16, 1946, in Ibid.

for the Chicago NAACP, wanted to be paid the standard business rate of his private practice for trying the cases. However, the branch could not afford to pay Moore that amount, putting them in a difficult position. Challenging restrictive covenants was essential to the branch's mission and the good publicity from taking on this work was desperately needed at the time. Fortunately, Marshall and the national NAACP agreed to take on the responsibility of covering the cost.[48]

Having argued twenty-one cases over three years, Moore noted that no temporary injunction had been issued requiring African Americans to leave their homes and many cases were "moot" because white property owners dropped their suits as the surrounding neighborhood rapidly changed from white to African American. In Washington Park, for example, when African Americans began buying property in the neighborhood, the white residents who sold the property claimed the restrictive covenant that covered the area was no longer valid. Ultimately, white property owners who believed their neighborhood was "going colored" could prove to be powerful allies in helping aspiring African American homebuyers purchase homes. Still, there were many white homeowners who continued their fight to see that restrictive covenants remained in place. Moore suggested in a letter to Marshall that the *Tovey v. Levy* case might be the ideal test case.[49]

As Moore was fighting the case, he commissioned the creation of a map showing just how much of Chicago' South Side was covered by these restrictive covenants, denying a decent place for many African Americans to live. As *Tovey* was proceeding, the NAACP was pursuing

---

[48] Loring B. Moore, letter to Thurgood Marshall, February 7, 1947, in Ibid.

[49] Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 185; Loring B. Moore, letter to Thurgood Marshall, February 7, 1947, in Ibid.

many other cases throughout the United States. Ultimately another case, *Shelley v. Kraemer*, would be argued before the Supreme Court, yet Moore and the Chicago NAACP continued to pursue *Tovey* and the others hoping that their outcomes could strengthen their argument.[50]

By the time the Illinois Supreme Court ruled on *Tovey*, the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled on *Shelley*. The Court effectively invalidated restrictive covenants, ruling that "state action" could not be used to enforce a private contract that denied an entire racial group the ability to engage in a real estate transaction. The Court did not rule that restrictive covenants were illegal *per se*, but rather that the government could not be compelled to enforce one, as to do so would be a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment rights of the prohibited racial group.[51]

Although he did not know it at the time, the *Shelley* decision would have a profound effect on the life of Dempsey J. Travis. Travis was born on the South Side of Chicago in 1920. Poorly educated in the city's segregated schools, Travis worked odd jobs as a young man, including trying his luck at concert promoting. Despite his lack of reading skills, Travis enlisted in the United States Army and served his country during World War II. After the war, Travis was able to take advantage of the G.I. Bill to attend Englewood Evening Junior College. Needing to improve his abysmal reading and writing abilities, Travis enrolled in a remedial English class. The professor of that class announced only one out of every two-hundred people who enrolled in this remedial class ever went on to earn an undergraduate degree, tantamount to telling his student that they were, essentially, wasting their time. Determined to prove his

---

[50] Ibid.

[51] Donald M. Cahen, "The Impact of *Shelley v. Kramer* on the State Action Concept," 44, no. 4 *California Law Review* (October 1956).

professor wrong, Travis finished his associate degree early and transferred to Roosevelt University.[52]

Riding to Roosevelt University in a car driven by Richard Hill, Jr., a prominent black lawyer and president of the Douglas National Bank, Travis and Hill's son Oscar were lectured on the importance of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, which held that racially restrictive covenants were unconstitutional. Hill spoke of how black Chicagoans finally would be able to live wherever they wanted, and how the several lawsuits he had brought on behalf of his clients against restrictive covenants were now moot. Inspired by this, Travis earned his real estate license and began helping African Americans achieve their dreams of owning homes.[53]

Despite these efforts, the housing stock of Chicago continued to be stretched beyond its capacity, as scene that played out across the United States. In order to combat this, Congress passed The Housing Act of 1949 to finance the construction of public housing projects across the United States. The same year the Housing Act of 1949 was passed, and a year after the *Shelley* decision, a group of African American and white homeowners in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood decided to be proactive in addressing the city's housing crisis. From the group's inception, they sought to manage the changes in the neighborhood's racial make-up, rather than allow racial acrimony to cause violence in their community.

---

[52] Dempsey J. Travis, *An Autobiography of Black Chicago* (Chicago: Urban Research Institute, 1981), 119-134.

[53] Ibid.

The Hyde Park Community Group began on November 8, 1949. The Reverend Leslie Pennington, a pastor of a Methodist church who served as the chairman of the group, and Tom Wright of the Chicago Commission on Human Relations decided to gather those neighborhood residents interested in discussing the changing racial composition in the neighborhood. About forty neighborhood residents attended the meeting, and there was a conversation between both African Americans and whites about the condition of the neighborhood. It was decided that the group should focus on welcoming new African American residents into Hyde Park, discourage white residents from moving away, and to ensure that property owners maintained the condition of the community. The group "spoke with frankness of the fears and problems" on both sides of the racial divide. It was also decided that the group would confine its activities to the Hyde Park area, bounded by 47th Street to the north and the Midway to the south, Cottage Grove to the west and Lake Michigan to the east.[54]

Many of those at that first meeting were affiliated with The University of Chicago. Alison Dunham, a law professor who would go on to serve as the University's General Council, was in attendance, as well as William Bradbury, a professor of Social Sciences. Jean P. Jordan, a member of the University's Student Government and NAACP chapter, was also present. The neighborhood's religious institutions were well-represented, with members of Methodist, Episcopal, Unitarian, and Baptist churches, The Society of Friends, and Rabbi Morton M.

[54] "GENERAL MEETING. HYDE PARK COMMUNITY GROUP. November 8, 1949," Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference. Records, [Box 8, Folder 5], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

Berman of Isaiah Israel Temple all present. African American businessman Oscar Brown, Sr. and his wife were also in attendance.[55]

To handle the logistics of getting the group up-and-running, a steering committee was formed. At the steering committee's first meeting on November 20th, it was decided that the group should remain officially neutral about the whether or not it supported African Americans moving into Hyde Park. Rather than being for or against anyone moving into the neighborhood, the group realized that the shift in population was a "fact" and that they needed to handle it "creatively." Instead, the group would focus its efforts on creating and maintaining a peacefully interracial community by overcoming the perception that property values decline when African Americans move into an area so that whites could be persuaded not to move away.[56]

At the Steering Committee's December meeting it was decided to divide the group into subcommittees: a Real Estate committee charged for looking at the sale of various properties; a Community Survey committee in charge of getting the demographics of the neighborhood; a Planning and Zoning committee to make sure that all buildings were maintained to the appropriate standards; and finally a Community Relations committee to ensure that any tensions that arose as a result of the demographic changes were addressed properly. At the body's next meeting in January 1950, they added two additional committees: The Community Service committee was created to connect residence with the proper resources to maintaining the

---

[55] "THOSE ATTENDING MEETING OF NOV. 8 WITH TOM WRIGHT," in Ibid.

[56] "MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE STEERING COMMITTEE. HYDE PARK COMMUNITY GROUP. November 20, 1949," Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference. Records, [Box 8, Folder 5], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

standard of living and the Community Organizations committee to build productive relationships with other like-minded groups.[57]

At that same January 1950 meeting, the name of the group was changed to the Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference to represent their expansion into the Kenwood neighborhood, which was immediately north of Hyde Park. In its early years, the HPKCC concerned itself with two issues. The first was making sure that buildings occupied by African Americans remain in good condition and that whites did not move out of their homes as a result of African Americans moving into the neighborhood. There was a building located at Hyde Park and Drexel that was becoming overcrowded. A six- or seven-room apartment was housing as many African American families as it had rooms, and as a result white residents were starting to move out.[58]

In April of that same year the committee was working tirelessly to ensure stop the process of neighborhood succession, as more and more African Americans were moving in, and whites were moving out as a result. The 5300 Drexel block had gone from being all-white to predominately African Americans within a few years. The problem, as the HPKCC saw it, was that as white homeowners decided to move as a result of African Americans moving onto their blocks, they were unable to find a white buyer for their homes. This process opened up greater

---

[57] "MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE STEERING COMMUNITY. December 21, 1949," in Ibid.; "MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE STEERING COMMITTEE (HYDE PARK-KENWOOD COMMUNITY GROUP). January 18, 1950," in Ibid.

[58] "MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE STEERING COMMITTEE. (HYDE PARK-KENWOOD COMMUNITY GROUP). January 18, 1950," in Ibid.; "MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE STEERING COMMITTEE. (HYDE PARK-KENWOOD COMMUNITY GROUP). February 7, 1950," in Ibid.

opportunities for African Americans to own a home but did not further the HPKCC's mission of creating an interracial community. Despite the best efforts of the committee, this process continued throughout the first years of the decade.[59]

It soon became clear that an all-volunteer organization could not tackle the complex problems the HPKCC was grappling with. The executive committee decided to professionalize the organization by creating a thirty-six-member Board of Directors and becoming a tax-exempt not-for-profit entity. Additionally, Julia Abrahamson, a career social worker who lived in the community, was hired to be the organization's first executive director. Abrahamson soon hired additional staff to move the HPKCC's work forward and to prepare the organization's first report to its newly constituted Board of Directors in January 1952.[60]

In that first report, Abrahamson noted that the organization now represented "1,500 community residents of all races and creeds [who had] been working over the past two years to try to keep Hyde Park-Kenwood a good community in the face of an acute housing shortage and a growing and changing population." The report heralded the work of both white and African American homeowners who had worked together in their common interest to maintain their homes and welcome new residents to do the same. The language used was particularly

[59] "MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE STEERING COMMITTEE. (HYDE PARK-KENWOOD COMMUNITY GROUP). February 7, 1950," in Ibid.; "MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE STEERING COMMITTEE. (HYDE PARK-KENWOOD COMMUNITY GROUP). April 17, 1950," in Ibid.

[60] "Timeline of the Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference," Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference. Records, [Box 7, Folder 4].

glowing in reference to recently arrived African American homeowners who, contrary to popular perception, had maintained and even improved their new homes.[61]

The HPKCC also had success in discouraging some white residents from moving out of the neighborhood. The organization successfully "conquered" a panic that resulted after an African American family moved onto a block by convincing the homeowners to take a "wait-and-see approach." Ultimately these white homeowners stayed when they realize their fears about the neighborhood declining as a result of African American residents moving into the neighborhood was unfounded. Even with these significant accomplishments, the overall tenor of the report was somber: "The problems we face are grave. We have made some progress in dealing with illegal conversions, overcrowding and deterioration, but we have not been able to stop them."[62]

One entity with the resources and the ability to be able to keep the neighborhood from falling into total disrepair was the University of Chicago. Chancellor Lawrence Kimpton, after years of passively watching the surrounding neighborhood change (for the worse in his opinion), decided that the University needed to take a much more active role in the civic life of Chicago. Kimpton, however, was concerned about the perception of the University as racist, due to its support of restrictive covenants during the 1930s, including providing financial support to

[61] "Report to the Board of Directors – January 15, 1952," in Ibid.

[62] Ibid.

protective associations. This, coupled with his lack of knowledge about urban planning or any political connections, led him to seek the help of a savvy political operative.[63]

In the fall of 1952, Kimpton asked Julian Levi to become the executive director South East Chicago Commission, which was the community redevelopment arm of the University, as it provided half of the SECC's startup money. Levi was an alumnus of the College and the Law School, as well as the older brother of Edward Levi, the dean of the Law School at the time. Within a year, Levi decided that the University must become the dominant player in determining the future of Hyde Park and the surrounding neighborhoods, using all of the financial and political resources available to it in order to shape the community in the image it wanted and to suit its own needs. The HPKCC decided to cooperate with the agenda of the University and SECC.[64]

It was the University's contention that by the second half of the 1950s that the Hyde Park neighborhood was succumbing to the blight that surrounded it. Philip M. Hauser, chair of the Sociology department at the University, testified before the city's Redevelopment Board that the area was blighted and that the urban renewal plan of the SECC was the best course of action to correct it. If the area was deemed to be blighted by the board, then the SECC would have the legal justification to use eminent domain to seize property and redevelop it. Hauser's assertions did not go unchallenged, as there were those who felt that race, and not blight, was the primary

---

[63] John W. Boyer, *The University of Chicago: A History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 343-347.

[64] Boyer, *The University of Chicago*, 348-350; "DRAFT OF REPORT BY THE COMMITTEE ON MAINTAINING AN INTERRACIAL COMMUNITY," Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference. Records, [Box 8, Folder 10].

concern of the University. The area was "on the upgrade, rather than slipping and toward improvement rather than decay," but this was the minority opinion.[65]

Community stakeholders were now calling to city, state, and federal officials to institute a program of Urban Renewal in the neighborhood. To facilitate any future redevelopment efforts in the area, the National Opinion Research Center conducted a comprehensive residential survey of Hyde Park, publishing its results in September 1956. The goal of the survey was to provide a statistical and factual basis for the pending urban renewal efforts and to provide the tools that would allow "good urban neighborhoods to deal constructively with the inevitable impacts of obsolescence and decay."[66]

NORC was not an independent actor but was housed at and financed by the University of Chicago. "Since the University of Chicago is one of the important institutions located in the Hyde Park-Kenwood area, it was fitting that University resources were, among other things, utilized for the conduct of the survey," the authors of the final report wrote in the forward. University students conducted nearly all of the interviews with Hyde Park residents and University faculty supervised them. Although it would be impossible to ascertain the latent biases of NORC's researchers, the survey's results would ultimately serve as an objective and

---

[65] "BLIGHT MOVES ON HYDE PARK AREA—HAUSER," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Nov. 8, 1956, S1.

[66] "THE HYDE PARK-KENWOOD URBAN RENEWAL SURVEY. Spring-Summer 1956" (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, September 1956) ix, accessed February 10, 2016, http://www.norc.org/PDFs/publications/NORCRpt_58.pdf.

scientific justification for the University's interventions into the urban renewal programs instituted in Hyde Park.[67]

The survey area consisted of the same boundaries as the HPKCC, bordered by 47th Street on the north and the Midway on the south, Lake Michigan to the East and Cottage Grove Avenue to the west. The area was then divided into three major types: "A", "B", and "C" on an inverted scale, meaning that "A" areas were considered severely blighted and the most in need for urban renewal and "C" areas were the best and only needed continuation of proper conversion efforts. For the most part, "A" areas consisted of mixed commercial and residential properties, whereas "C" areas were almost exclusively residential.[68]

The statistical evidence in the survey supported claims that the area was overcrowded. Nearly one-in-five, or 18.5 percent of the buildings in the survey area were considered blighted, yet only 162 of these buildings actually had a major structural defect. The buildings in the "A" area were over 50 percent dilapidated, whereas in "B" areas it was only 17.3 percent and only 8.3 percent in "C" areas. Furthermore, more than half of the blighted building were occupied by non-white residents, often consisting of non-residential buildings that had been converted into dwellings or single-family homes that had been divided into multiple units for multiple families.[69] Although 97 percent of all the buildings in Hyde Park were used for some sort of residential function, less than 10 percent of all homes in the Hyde Park-Kenwood area were

[67] Ibid., x.

[68] Ibid., xi-xii.

[69] Ibid., 20-29, 40.

one- or two-family dwellings. The prevalence of multi- unit housing buildings gave the area a unique composition compared with the rest of the city.[70]

This overcrowding had a racial component. Non-white residents were over-represented in the "A" and "B" areas, and under-represented in the "C" areas. Despite occupying 35.6 percent of the living units in the survey area, non-whites occupied 47.4 percent and 54.3 percent of the units in the "C" and "B" areas, respectively. This meant that if these areas were targeted for demolition in the name of urban renewal, African Americans would be disproportionately impacted.[71]

By 1956, Hyde Park-Kenwood contained an upper-middle-class enclave of African Americans. More than 1 out of 10 African Americans in the area own their own home, compared to 12.1 percent of whites.[72] The ratio of median incomes of non-white families to white families in the Hyde Park-Kenwood area was 82.6, meaning that the racial wealth gap had decreased since 1950 from 70 percent, according to that year's census.[73] Although lower on the social-economic scale in comparison to their white counterparts, "in terms of the Negro social structure, the Hyde Park-Kenwood Community is an upper-middle-class residential area."[74]

---

[70] Ibid., 33-34.

[71] Ibid., 46.

[72] Ibid., 83.

[73] Ibid., 107.

[74] Ibid., 118.

Hyde Park was home to men like Sidney Williams, the executive secretary of the Chicago Urban League. Williams lived with his wife and his two sons and was instrumental in facilitation "interracial understanding" in the neighborhood. Through his position with the Urban League, Williams was committed to helping recent African American migrants to Chicago adjust to the demands of life in the city. This work was sometimes problematic, based on perceptions about the inherent "folkways" of rural southerners. Despite this, the work the Urban League did to address substandard housing conditions and employment discrimination was producing tangible results. The University of Chicago-trained social worker was considered one of "the best representative[s] of the Negro community," and a credit to his community.[75]

African Americans who help professional, white-collar occupations--like their white counterparts--were concentrated in the "C" area, meaning that they were safe from negative impact of urban renewal.[76] The majority of whites living in Hyde Park work as professionals or in white-collar professions, 17.4 percent of them own their own businesses and 11.2 percent worked as skilled craftsmen. For the non-white residents, they worked as semi-skilled workers (29.0 percent), domestic help (18.8 percent), skilled craftsmen (12.7 percent), or in some sort of clerical capacity (12.2 percent). Although there was still a clear gap in occupational status among

[75] "Hyde Park Executive Assists Negro Community in Transition," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 18, 1954, N11.

[76] "THE HYDE PARK-KENWOOD URBAN RENEWAL SURVEY. Spring-Summer 1956," 118.

non-whites and whites, the African Americans who live in Hyde Park represents some highest earning in the city.[77]

Despite the largely upper-middle-class position of the African Americans now living in the area, there was still a perception among whites that Hyde Park-Kenwood was a community on the decline. Blackness, in the eyes of many, had an inherently denigrating effect and this perception could not be overcome despite the efforts of many to do so. Although the overwhelming majority of white and non-white residents enjoyed living in the Hyde Park, many whites did not like the racial mixture of the neighborhood. The NORC officials seemed genuinely surprised about the very vocal complaints by some whites, given that those living in the area represent the "'upper-class' of the Negro community in Chicago--those with the best education in the most white-collar occupations, and the largest incomes.'"[78]

The community was changing, not degenerating. It was becoming significantly more racially diverse. Whereas in 1940 the non-white population of Hyde Park and Kenwood was 4 percent; by 1956, the non-white population had risen to 36 percent. Although the population of the area only grew 4.4 percent over the course of intervening six years, the white population decreased 29.7 percent, whereas there was a 533.4 percent increase in the non-white population. Hyde Park-Kenwood was becoming too African American for some people's liking.[79]

---

[77] Ibid, 119.

[78] Ibid., 172.

[79] Ibid.; Boyer, *The University of Chicago*, 346.

But the dominant issue in the contention over the redevelopment plans was class. Many working-class Hyde Park residents felt that the University was conspiring to displace them from the neighborhood. Two-hundred Hyde Park residents registered their disapproval with the City Council, claiming that the plan was a "highbrow" attempt for wealth and well-connected developers to make money at taxpayer's expense. For African Americans, the concern was whether or not they would get a "fair deal" in the urban renewal program. In March 1958, James V. Cunningham, the executive director of the HPKCC, wrote an editorial in *The Chicago Defender* intended to ensure the African American community that they would not be unfairly targeted in the urban renewal fight. He pointed to the work African American and white homeowners had done to maintain their homes as proof "that none will be excluded because of race." Cunningham assured *The Defender*'s readers that these homeowners would continue to maintain a thriving interracial community, but those African American and white renters who lived in Hyde Park's old and rundown apartments would most likely be displaced. The HPKCC was committed to supporting open housing throughout the city but was also committed to redevelopment as a means to alleviate the overcrowding in their community. Ultimately, homeowners were safe, and it was renters who ultimately lost out.[80]

In June 2014, Ta-Nehisi Coates published an article in *The Atlantic* titled, "The Case for Reparations." While other scholars have staked their claims for racial redress on the Transatlantic Slave Trade or on the broken promises of Emancipation and Reconstruction,

[80] "Hyde Park Plan Hit at Hearing," *Daily Defender*, June 20, 1956, 3; James V. Cunningham, "Will Negroes Get Fair Deal in Hyde Park," *The Chicago Defender*, March 8, 1958, 9.

Coates staked his on the history of Chicago's predatory and racist housing market. African Americans were systematically denied access to the means and tools necessary to build wealth through homeownership, placing them at a material disadvantage that persists today. The searing pain of homes purchased and lost pierces through the heart of anyone who reads the article.[81]

What is most striking in reading the article is that in the face of such depravation, African American men and women did, and still do, aspire to own their own homes. History has not deterred them, and I believe that this is nothing short of a miracle. To this day, Hyde Park is a small island of racial diversity in a seemingly endless sea of residential segregation. Families of nearly every racial composition and combination imaginable live there. African Americans who can afford to do so buy homes there. The Hyde Park Community Conference still exists, though it no longer concerns itself with convincing white people not to move away. Now it simply encourages neighborhood residents to care for their property and their neighbors. Though issues of race and class still remain ever-present, now they seldom boil over.

[81] Ta-Nahisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June 2014 (accessed March 10, 2016) http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/.

CHAPTER 4

JOHNSON PUBLISHING COMPANY'S 'SECRET FOR SELLING THE NEGRO'

This chapter of the dissertation focuses on the attempts of African Americans to access the peace and prosperity of American society in the 1950s. The United States was the most prosperous country in the world at the time, and that prosperity was the result of the boom in post-war consumer culture. Advertisements from the nation's corporations encouraged Americans to consume more and more goods, so much in fact that the very act of buying became a type of patriotic duty. Good Americans brought American-made goods that allowed for the cyclical investment necessary for a thriving economy.

Like all Americans, African Americans found themselves bombarded with messages encouraging them to consume. But abstracted consumption alone held little appeal to African Americans. Why should African Americans participate in the consumer economy of the 1950s as a patriotic duty when they were denied the full complement of opportunities afforded to their white counterparts? The answer is complex: Engaging in the consumer economy of the 1950s afforded African Americans new opportunities to actualize citizenship on *positive* terms (emphasis mine). Whereas civil rights activism often required African Americans to articulate the denial of opportunity on *negative* terms, asserting their claims for citizenship and equality on their ability to participate in the larger consumer economy the same as white Americans provided them an opportunity for a strength-based appeal for inclusion into the American mainstream.[1]

[1] An interesting discussion of the influence of consumer culture and civil rights can be found in Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004).

John H. Johnson founded Johnson Publishing Company in 1942 and began *Negro Digest* the same year. The success of Johnson could not have occurred outside of the context of Chicago. Johnson was able to forge relationships with men as cosmetic entrepreneur S. B. Fuller and participated in the city's Negro Chamber of Commerce. Johnson credited Fuller as inspiration and motivation to fill a void in the African American consumer marketplace. Johnson took those ideas even further with the creation of his lifestyle, picture-based magazine *Ebony* in 1945. Johnson's publications filled a void in American visual culture by displaying positive images of African Americans on newsstands, but that alone was not enough to ensure that *Ebony* would be a successful economic concern. To become financially viable, Johnson would have to figure out how to compel major corporations to purchase large, color advertisements on the pages of *Ebony*. The fact that a significant number of African Americans subscribed to the magazine was not sufficient to attract major corporate advertisers. By the fifth year that *Ebony* existed the publication could claim a circulation of four-hundred thousand readers per month. Yet, Johnson still had to convince advertisers that the African American market was a viable one, meaning that if advertisers purchased advertisements in *Ebony* it would convert readers into customers who brought their products.[2]

[2] For information on the founding of Johnson Publishing Company and *Ebony* magazine, the following sources were consulted: John H. Johnson with Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Succeeding Against the Odds: The Autobiography of a Great American Businessman* (New York: Warner Books, 1989); Adam P. Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009); Jason P. Chambers, "A Master Strategist: John H. Johnson and the Development of Chicago as a Center for Black Business Enterprise," in Robert Weems, Jr. and Jason P. Chambers (eds.) *Building the Black Metropolis: African American Entrepreneurship in Chicago* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

To achieve this end, Johnson personally set out on a mission to convince corporate American that African Americans were viable consumers, spending the decade spreading his message of African American consumerism wherever he could. This mission will be the central focus of this chapter. The apex of his effort was to produce a promotional film titled, *The Secret of Selling the Negro*. The purpose of the film was to debunk myths about African American consumer habits and as a result, encourage corporations to advertise in *Ebony* to reach them. While it is self-evident that Johnson's interest in African American consumerism was self-serving, what has not yet been properly explored was the ways in which Johnson's success was predicated on the marriage between his personal motivations and the collective advancement of African Americans. To be a consumer in 1950s America was to be the idealized American, an opportunity that had been rarely afforded to African Americans. Just as supporting the war effort in the previous decade represented the appropriate vehicle to actualize citizenship in the previous decade, now Americans were being asked to consume to fuel the post-war economic boom.

But consumption for its own sake would prove unappealing to the majority of African Americans. Only the notion that engaging in the consumer economy would translate to equality beyond it would have the power to compel participation. The terms of citizenship now meant that in exchange for their participation in the consumer economy, African Americans could demand equal treatment not only in the consumer sphere, but throughout all of American society. This was not because of some naiveté on their part, but because the lines between the economic and political spheres had been eradicated; all citizens, regardless of race, asserted their citizenship power in the marketplace. There were and remain many critics of this logic, yet those critics often treated the logic as irrational and illogical while ignoring the social context in which

the logic was propagated. While there can be little doubt that the consumerism of the 1950s ultimately did not significantly improve the lot of the broader African American community, the actions of Johnson and *Ebony* during the decade did teach important lessons on the possibilities and limitations of various strategies to reconcile the limitations between American possibilities and racial restriction.

When Johnny Johnson migrated to Chicago from Arkansas City, Arkansas with his mother in 1933, he found himself engulfed in a sense of awe. Johnson, in his autobiography many years later, recalled riding the entire train trip with his face pressed against the window. As they approached the Illinois Central Railway Depot, he entered a world of possibilities; possibilities that he would sense with a remarkable sense of vigor. But it would be a slow and difficult adjustment; he was poorer than many of his peers, even as the country was amid the Great Depression and few people had much of anything. Johnson also lacked the refinements of urban life and had a deep southern accent that caused many of his peers to ridicule him.[3]

But Johnson was persistent and refused to be confined to his lot in life. Johnson enrolled in Wendell Philips High School, which had a student population larger than that of Arkansas City, determined to become somebody. He worked on building his self-confidence, reading self-help literature, and practicing his speaking in front of a mirror to shed his southern accent. Deprived much of a social life due to his lack of financial resources, Johnson worked to distinguish himself in school through extracurricular activities, serving as class president as an

[3] Johnson, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 58-65; Green, *Selling the Race*, 132; Chambers, "A Master Strategist," 122.

upperclassman. Soon, he found a passion in journalism, becoming the editor-in-chief of the school's newspaper. Because of his leadership and public speaking skills, Johnson was chosen as the class speaker for his graduation ceremony in 1939. During this time, Johnson was encouraged by a teacher to lose his actual name, Johnny, and adopt the name John Harold Johnson, believing that it was more fitting for a young man with a future as bright as his.[4]

Johnson earned a scholarship to the University of Chicago, but it did not cover the entire cost of attendance. Johnson would have to work to earn the rest of the money to attend and set out to find a job. During a ceremony for one of the many awards that he won as a graduating senior from various civic organizations, Johnson was able to meet Harry F. Pace, the president of the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company. Pace took a liking to Johnson and offered him a job with the company. At first, Pace did not actually have any work for Johnson to do, but Johnson soon realized that what Pace was offering him was an opportunity to learn how business, and by extension the real world, worked. By finding himself employed by Pace at Supreme, Johnson at the crossroads of the Black Metropolis. Nothing in Black Chicago got done without coming across the intersection of 35th and South Parkway. Supreme Liberty was the nucleolus of a network of businesses and organizations committed to serving African Americans and Johnson's time there was vital to him learning about the Black Consumer base located largely beyond the gaze of mainstream commercial enterprises.[5]

---

[4] Johnson, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 66-83; Green, *Selling the Race*, 133.

[5] Johnson, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 84-100; Green, *Selling the Race*, 134; Chambers, "A Master Strategist," 123.

Soon, Johnson was tasked with increasing amounts of responsibility, serving as a personal secretary and driver for Pace and then Earl B. Dickerson, the company's chief legal counsel, who would serve a term as an alderman (and take Johnson with him as his political secretary). The most impactful of the roles Johnson held at Supreme Life was that of editor of the company newspaper. Working closely with Pace, Johnson was tasked with compiling news articles that would be of significant interest to the African American professionals on the staff of Supreme. Johnson soon realized that there may be a market for a product like this outside of Supreme and set out to start a magazine.[6]

Johnson was able to rely on the support of Supreme to start his new business venture, Johnson Publishing Company, with the goal to take his digest format national. Johnson was given space in an old law office in the Supreme building for his magazine that had a different address so as to give it a sense of separation from the insurance company. Johnson was also given permission to use the company's mailing list to solicit pre-paid subscriptions of two dollars to support the venture. To afford postage, Johnson secured a $500 loan against his mother's brand-new furniture. The subscription drive proved successful, as Johnson was able to raise $6,000 for his publication.[7]

Despite this infusion of money, Johnson would have to run a tight financial ship. Attempts to attract investors had all failed as many people did not believe in the fiscal viability of the endeavor. Johnson reached out to Roy Wilkins, the then editor of the NAACP's *The Crisis* for advice, who told him not to waste his time or his money in something that would not turn a

---

[6] Johnson, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 96; Green, *Selling the Race*, 137.

[7] Johnson, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 113-119; Green, *Selling the Race*, 137-138.

profit. While many people were not as dismissive, no one was willing to put their money where their mouth was, save for his mother. To control cost, Johnson followed the example of the popular mainstream publication *Reader's Digest* and published inexpensive content from wire services and aggregated it into his publication, which he named *Negro Digest*. The publication would supplement this content with a few features written specifically for its pages.[8]

Johnson's instincts proved accurate, and *Negro Digest* was a hit on the newsstands. Because the magazine was relatively inexpensive to produce, it was a very profitable endeavor. Johnson invested in the magazine strategically, soliciting better writers and famous Americans to contribute to the publication so that it could not be too easily mimicked. This strategy reached its zenith with the publication of the regular column, "If I Were a Negro." Written by a prominent white American, the piece demonstrated the liberal racial attitudes of the author and the prospects of interracial cooperation and understanding. By putting themselves in the shoes of African Americans living through Jim Crow during World War II and its aftermath, these columns held up the potential for racial reconciliation. Most famously, First Lady Elenore Roosevelt wrote an "If I Were a Negro" column, sending sales of the magazine through the roof and making the publication a financial success.[9]

Yet despite the popularity of *Negro Digest*, the small size and black-and-white printing lacking any significant images meant that the magazine had a celling in terms of the revenue it could reasonably expect to earn. To grow his business and his fortune, Johnson would need a

---

[8] Johnson, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 120-123; Green, *Selling the Race*, 138-139; Chambers, "A Master Strategist," 125.

[9] Johnson, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 130-132; Green, *Selling the Race*, 139.

larger publication with room for full-page color advertisements that could be sold for top dollar. Johnson decided to create a publication, modeled on *Life* magazine, that would rely on photographs to draw in readers. Johnson also wanted to address the lack of positive African Americans images in visual culture. While African Americans were certainly a part of the country's visual aesthetic, these representations were often stereotypical and pejorative. Johnson's magazine, named *Ebony*, which means black, by Johnson's wife Eunice, would be the site for positive images of African Americans.[10]

When *Ebony* was first published in November 1945 the magazine's appearance on newsstands was a revelation for those who had never seen anything like it before. While the magazine failed to live up to the high standards for photographs and editorial content that Johnson had articulated prior to its publication, it was clear that he was certainly on to something due to the enormous popularity of the magazine with African American readers. Despite its popularity and record sales, Johnson quickly found himself in a catch-22. *Ebony* lacked the quality that Johnson wanted, especially the large, full-page color photography that he believed the magazine needed to be viable because he could not attract the advertising dollars of companies with large enough budgets to afford it.[11]

Johnson enlisted the readers of *Ebony* in making the magazine a successful venture by asking them to patronize the businesses that advertised in the magazine, while also reaching out

[10] Johnson, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 152-160.

[11] Johnson, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 172; Chambers, "A Master Strategist," 129.

Figure 6: The Editorial Staff of Ebony Magazine, circa 1945. Photography by Stephen Deutch. Chicago History Museum, ICHi-040405.

to those companies that did not advertise in *Ebony* and demand that they do so. This request was a quid-pro-quo: Johnson promised his readers that only the highest-quality products would be allowed to advertise in the magazine so long as they promised to patronize those companies willing to purchase them.[12]

[12] Chambers, "A Master Strategist," 129-130.

Johnson not only had to negotiate with his readers, but he also had to strike a delicate balance between products and businesses that had been a reliable source of revenue but could not afford the large, full-page color ads that Johnson needed to sale to make *Ebony* profitable and had the potential to alienate the large, corporate advertisers Johnson needed to be successful. Desperate advertising revenue, Johnson started multiple small businesses—cosmetics, clothing, book publishing, and even dietary supplements—largely to have them purchase advertisements in *Ebony* to keep the publication afloat in its early years.[13]

This strategy allowed Johnson to stay afloat during the first five years of its existence, but it did not make the magazine profitable. In fact, Johnson was barely keeping his head above water. It was clear to Johnson, and more importantly his creditors, that unless something drastic occurred the business would become insolvent. Entering the 1950s, Johnson had demographics on his side, believing that the growth in the African American population and its increased prosperity in the years after the war would provide the basis for his cultivation of the African American consumer market. Johnson also began a fruitful editorial relationship with the marketing industry publication *Advertising Age*. For the entire decade, the publication would cover the efforts of Johnson to solicit major corporate advertisers, and his broader mission of cultivating the African American consumer market.

Advertising Age covered an article in *Ebony* on the 1950 census that celebrated the fact that the African American population had grown by two-and-a-half million people during the 1940s, and that family income had increased nearly 300%, from $500 in 1940 to $1,400 in 1950. The article also noted that the birth rate among African Americans had increased, the mortality

[13] Johnson, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 178-182; Chambers, "A Master Strategist," 131.

rate had decreased, and that population growth among African Americans had outpaced whites. Additionally, the African American population in the north had grown 10% because of the second wave of the great migration, and more African Americans lived in cities regardless of what region of the country they lived in. Furthermore, their average educational levels had increased a full grade year, and now 34% of African Americans owned their own homes. These numbers "reflect the greatest progress of the colored America in any single decade" and would provide fertile ground for the Johnson's conquest.[14]

While Johnson was sharing his message about the growth of the African American consumer market on the one hand in *Advertising Age*, on the other hand he was working to prime African Americans as consumer citizens. The monthly "Photo-Editorial" that ran in *Ebony* would be the place where the publication would do this work. In the February 1950 edition, the editorial noted that the African American market was "a $12 billion prize baby."[15] Since more African Americans were working better jobs and earning more money than ever before, they had more to spend. Johnson was encouraging his readers to spend and make themselves consumers in an increasingly competitive marketplace. This competition went two ways: the first, Johnson wanted white businessmen competing for African American customers, and second, Johnson wanted African Americans to compete with white Americans in the global economy: "Successful competition with whites in such fields as fur-farming, bridge-building and

[14] "Census to Disclose Big Negro Gains, 'Ebony' Reports," *Advertising Age*, March 6, 1950, 55.

[15] "Ebony Photo-Editorial: BRAINS AND BUSINESS," *Ebony*, February 1950, 38.

mining proves that the Negro can further his own cause in the flight for first class citizenship by being first a citizen rather than a Negro citizen."[16]

Ebony wanted African Americans to be competitive in the booming American economy of the 1950s, but they wanted them to understand that the competition was a friendly one. African Americans' economic participation was a part of their responsibility as Americans who were committed to proving the superiority of American capitalism while simultaneously rejecting any attempts to divide Americans on the basis of race. *Ebony's* Photo-Editorial for October 1950 highlighted the fact that *The Daily Worker* and the Communists were attempting to leverage the racial discrimination that African Americans face to turn them against the United States in the Korean War. They were claiming that the Koreans, much like the Japanese during World War II, are people of color and as a result African Americans in the United States should stand in solidarity with the other oppressed peoples in the world. These attempts, *Ebony* contended, would not work: "But when they attempt to capitalize on racial differences to isolate Negroes from the main stream of American life, to detour our interests and thinking from the welfare of our country, Negroes cannot but resent their self-righteousness."[17] African Americans' fate was linked to the success of American democratic capitalism, and thew would "fight for our country and our democratic way of life—at the same time recognizing the wrongs in our democracy, battling to change those wrongs while well knowing that America with all its wrongs is still a better place to live anywhere else on earth." [18] According to *Ebony*, African

---

[16] Ibid.

[17] "Ebony Photo-Editorial: IS IT A WAR OF COLOR?" *Ebony*, October 1950, 38.

[18] Ibid.

Americans must cast their lot in for American capitalism and believe that through economic participation they would ultimately be able to eliminate racism from American Society.

An article in *Advertising Age* from August of that same year covered a survey published in *Ebony* that was a treasure-trove of invaluable information on African American consumer habits available to the broader public. Although Ebony readers had "considerable" higher incomes that the average African Americans, the survey was "indicative of the general buying habits and intentions of the market."[19] The article noted that despite the contention that African American buyers only considered costs when making purchases and always purchased the cheapest option, the study confirmed that this was not the case. In fact, African Americans resented being considered cheap and uncritical consumers when their relatively lower economic means meant that they had to be keenly aware of the quality of goods they purchased because they needed those goods to last. Furthermore, the association between African Americans and inferiority in the broader discourse meant that African Americans were determined to counteract that belief by demonstrating their concern for and attention to quality when making purchases. The article quotes William P. Grayson, the eastern advertising manager of *Ebony*: "Bout still the erroneous point of view persists in many quarters, despite the fact that prestige and quality—not cost—are the most important factors to stress when appealing to colored buyers…."[20] By focusing on quality," *Ebony* was focusing people to challenge their biases against African Americans.[21]

---

[19] "'Ebony' Survey Reveals Negro Buying Habits," *Advertising Age*, August 28, 1950, 16.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

Figure 7: Advertisement for Ebony, October 1950. Reprinted from *Advertising Age*, October 9, 1950, 5.

An advertisement for *Ebony* that ran in the October 9, 1950, issue of *Advertising Age* celebrated the fifth anniversary of the publication. It noted that *Ebony* was "a national publication of force and stature" that "accurately reports Negro life within the framework of American democracy."[22] The magazine's chief goal was to use photography to reflect "the brighter side of life" for the African American community and to mirror their "hopes, ideals and accomplishments."[23] The broader project of *Ebony was* to show the entire world that African Americans were largely unremarkable in that they were like other Americans. While they were proud of their unique racial identity, they were prouder of the fact that they were "average" Americans who loved their country and their families just like everyone else.[24]

For Johnson, African Americans had many vehicles to chronicle their dissatisfaction with the state of race relations in the United States, but what they lacked was a publication that chronicled their successes and contributions to the nation. These African Americans where citizens who when afforded the opportunity to do so made remarkable contributions to the country. That they were denied these opportunities far too often was certainly unfortunate, but that was changing as well; everyday progress was being made by all African Americans to change their station in the American polity, and *Ebony* had committed itself as being the chronicler of that progress.[25]

---

[22] Advertisement for *Ebony*, *Advertising Age*, October 9, 1950, 5.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

Because of the role *Ebony* played, it was "the most widely quoted and reprinted Negro publication in America." Not only was the magazine a hit with African Americans, having "the highest circulation in the 120-year history of Negro journalism," it was also the premier place for whites interested in learning about the African American community to do so. Furthermore, for advertisers interested in tapping into the $15 billion African American consumer market, *Ebony* was the definitive place to find willing and eager customers. This market was growing every day, and *Ebony* was the means to reach them and their pocketbooks. *Ebony* readers represented the very best of the African American community, with 28% of them earning more than $4,000 a year, 36.2% owning their own homes, 41% owning new cars, 22.3% owning TVs, 27% having gone to college.[26]

On the pages of *Ebony*, the publication celebrated its anniversary as a demonstration of the progress of the race as a whole. *Ebony's* success was predicated on the progress that African Americans had made in the five years since the magazine had existed; its formula was to simply and accurately chronicle "the story of the amazing advances of the Negro in every sphere of American life between the two wars."[27] African Americans had enough protest publications, "but EBONY also saw the need for a publication to chronicle in a positive, informative and entertaining way the remarkable story of Negro progress as solid citizens in all income levels."[28] In short, *Ebony's* success was African Americans' success, and the inverse was true as well.

---

[26] Ibid.

[27] "Ebony's Fifth Anniversary: Magazine's Success Story Reflects Tremendous Advances of Negroes in Past Five Years," *Ebony*, November 1950, 15.

[28] Ibid.

According to the "Photo-Editorial" in May 1951, the progress African Americans had been making had translated into less racialized violence in the United States. *Ebony* claimed that there had not been an African American killed in a race riot in five years. It is important to note that the publication was not claiming that no African American had been killed in an i*ndividual* act of racialized violence at all, but that there had not been an incident of *mass* racialized violence in five years (emphasis mine). The editors compared this phenomenon to that of the Red Summer of 1919 when a wave of race riots swept the United States, including Chicago, in the aftermath of World War I. Why had there not been a similar wave after World War II? *Ebony* was decisive in its rational that racial relations between African Americans and whites were better than as any time in the past, so much so that "when the history of our times is written, the saga of Negro breakthroughs in sports, science, business, politics, entertainment and the military will be a glorious chapter to testify to the strength of American democracy."[29]

America's racial climate had improved by leaps and bounds in the years after World War II. This was not to suggest that there was no more racism in the United States, but that a concerted, interracial effort had diminished the role of racism in American life:

> We still have lynchings, jobs-for-whites-only, poll taxes, lily-white restaurants and a multitude of other racial sins. Much battling remains before they are ended but more and more today the odds are in favor of freedom and justice…. That the odds have changed in our favor is a sign that there is still plenty of life left in U. S. democracy, that it is still the dynamic doctrine conceived by the fathers in this country in the Declaration of Independence with its forthright stand that 'all men are created equal.'[30]

---

[29] "Ebony Photo-Editorial: WHY NO RACE RIOTS?" *Ebony*, May 1951, 100.

[30] Ibid.

For the editors of *Ebony*, progress was not absolute and there was much work to be done. But, even with that work left undone, when the experiences of African Americans were weighed in the balance, for *Ebony* the evidence of progress outweighed the vestiges of limitation.

But the pace of this progress had left America vulnerable to criticisms that allowed its geopolitical enemies to compete for the hearts and minds of people around the world. In the struggle between American democratic ideals and the ideology of communistic Soviet Russia, the United States had not been as successful as it should have been, losing the battle for influence among the poor who "have succumbed to the promise of bread in exchange for freedom and have been enslaved by Communist dictatorship."[31] American was losing this battle, *Ebony* claimed, because it was had failed to actualize equal treatment for its African American citizens at home with sufficient speed. As a result, the United States was at risk of being defeated by the Soviet Union in the ideological struggle that could determine the future in the world in which they would live. This was "the real danger of the race problem," that the United States could "sacrifice a single possible ally on the altar of racial prejudice," and the only way to solve it was to rid the United States of the remaining racial prejudice that existed within the society as quickly as possible.[32]

Ebony highlighted the consequences of America's racial apartheid with a feature written by noted African American author Richard Wright titled, "The Shame of Chicago." Wright, who had lived in Chicago from 1927 to 1937 and had written his seminal novel *Native Son* based on the experiences, had returned to the city after twelve years of traveling the world and living in

---

[31] "Ebony Photo-Editorial: HOW TO STOP THE RUSSIANS," *Ebony*, November 1951, 106.

[32] Ibid.

New York and Paris among other places. Reflected upon his return, Wright described Chicago as having "an incredible ugliness…. Chicago looked dull and grey under a leaden September sky. The dirt, the garbage, orange peels. Empty cigarette packages, scraps of newspaper that littered the streets all but took my breath away."[33] He remarked on how crowded Chicago had come, with buildings that had been barely inhabited and inhabitable in the previous decade now bursting out at the seams with migrants from the south who had come to the city in search of employment and a better life during World War II. He also noted that there was, in the midst of this desolation, people who had achieved prosperity and success right in the midst of this dire situation; new businesses and hotels, luxury cars, and fine clothes were not an uncommon sight.[34]

What did Wright make of this? He saw these conditions as shameful, but he also understood that the reality was complex. Times appeared hard, but everyone was not experiencing it to the same degree if at all:

> The situation among white citizens of Chicago is bad, but it contains elements of hope; but the situation among the Negroes of the South Side is not too bad, but it is distinctly hopeless. Meaning this: Chicago whites still grudgingly withhold from the Negro the right to living space, full citizenship, job opportunities; but the Negro, within these hopeless limits, is making progress in his material standards of living, in education, in business, in culture and in health.[35]

In essence, Wright was saying that African American existence was liminal, firmly in the middle between possibility and restriction. Certainly, racism was a limiting factor in African American

---

[33] Richard Wright, "The Shame of Chicago," *Ebony*, December 1951, 26.

[34] Ibid., 27.

[35] Ibid., 32.

experience, but there was also progress being made limitation did not exclusively define the lives of African Americans, although it was constraining.

This constriction, *Ebony* claimed, was not an insurmountable barrier, but a badge of honor that added enhanced value to all African American achievements. Using a baseball reference the magazine claimed that an "accomplishment by a Negro means far more than any white American. It is always more dramatic when a ball player hits a homer with two strikes on him and every U.S. Negro who has attained fame in the U. S. started out with two strikes."[36] This success has occurred in all fields of human endeavor, but it is most impressive when applied to the field of business. The editorial points out that there is a difference between African American owned business, and a business that caters exclusively to African Americans. African Americans should support African American *owned* businesses, but only if those businesses deserve it; they should not support a business just based on the race of its proprietor, nor should they be afraid to call out those businesses who are of poor quality but attempt to use race to extort his fellow African Americans to buy from him. There is a difference between "a Negro who has displayed his ability in competition with the white world and a Negro who seeks to capitalize on racial restrictions to coin a quick dollar," the latter of which being guilty of prostituting racial pride and violating the spirit of a truly race-neutral capitalism that *Ebony* was striving for.[37]

Having primed his readers on their role as citizen consumers, Johnson continued his mission to cultivate a consumer market among African Americans, and to encourage businesses

---

[36] "Ebony Photo-Editorial: HUNGRY FOR HEROES," *Ebony,* January 1952, 78.

[37] Ibid.

to target African Americans, by writing an editorial in *Advertising Age* in March 1952. Titled, "Does Your Sales Force Know How to Sell the Negro Trade? Some Do's and Don'ts," Johnson asserted that the African American market of $15 billion was twice as large as Australia, Belgium, or Greece. Furthermore, Johnson noted that in the seventeen largest cities in the United States the African American community was "a city within a city," and cultivating consumers within this community was vital to commanding the market as a whole.[38] This cultivation, when done properly always paid off, but barriers in terms of racial unfamiliarity, discomfort, or even prejudice on the part of white salespeople often stifled this potential economic boom. The key, Johnson believed, was to build relationships with African American retailers and personnel in stores frequented by African Americans.[39]

For those wondering how to build these relationships, Johnson reminded the readers of his column that ultimately African Americans wanted "to be treated like everyone else—not better, not worse, not <u>differently</u>."[40] Johnson was making statement that was simultaneously benign and profound: African Americans did not require or want special treatment in order to do business, they just wanted to be treated like everyone else. As simple as it may sound in hindsight, the notion that African Americans should be treated like everyone else, in the Jim Crow society of the 1950s to treat someone the same regardless of their race represented a departure from traditional interracial interactions. To take it a step further and assert that "the Negro retailer is a normal, energetic business man who conducts business for exactly the same

---

[38] John H. Johnson, "Does Your Sales Force Know How to Sell the Negro Trade? Some Do's and Don'ts," *Advertising Age*, March 17, 1952, 73.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

reason as any other merchant—to make a profit and earn a living," and that "he doesn't want to be treated differently," and "he does not expect to be treated differently," was a revolutionary assertion at the time.[41]

That African Americans could potentially find equal treatment in the consumer marketplace represented a unique opportunity for a broader recognition of a fuller humanity. Johnson noted that the previous experiences had taught African Americans to be sensitive and on alert whenever race is brought into the picture as it pertains to conducting business because race has often been brought into the picture largely to demean and denigrate them. African Americans also know when someone is attempting to limit them, and more importantly their options and opportunities, base only on the color of their skin. While white salespeople may not think much of it, Johnson reminded his audience that, "the Negro has had a whole lifetime of recognizing when he is being 'talked down' to and he doesn't like it."[42] According to Johnson, the solution was clear: "Treat the Negro as an individual and you'll do business."[43]

Part of this individual treatment is to not assume what a customer would like to purchase without asking them their preferences first. Johnson noted that African Americans only purchased their preferred brands and that they would not be interested in purchasing other brands, especially those brands that they perceived as inferior to their preferred option. Additionally, customers are willing and eager to spend more because they understand that quality costs more and that buying more expensive items means that these items will last longer:

---

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

> It is most important, too, to remember that a Negro is luxury-conscious. To a Negro indulgence in luxury is a vindication of his belief in his ability to match the best of the white man. He expresses this desire in his purchase Cadillac automobiles, $200 suits, imported scotch at $9 a bottle or a pair of $20 Florsheim shoes.[44]

Johnson motivations here are not entirely clear. Certainly, claiming that African Americans prefer the best of the best could make them appear more like their white counterparts, yet all white consumers do not prefer luxury items themselves. Johnson, almost needed an element of plausibility to convince white advertising agents who would be skeptical, claimed that African Americans became "acquainted with expensive merchandise through working with wealthy white people—as butlers, valets, maids, housekeepers, etc."[45] Johnson ignores African Americans who do not work for whites who may desire luxury goods as well, proving that even as Johnson is attempting to effect change in the perception of African American consumer, he still must negotiate the limitations many have placed on them and their ability to want and have the very best that America has to offer.

Johnson concluded his column with a patriotic appeal, noting that "the American democratic system is being judged throughout the world."[46] Without explicitly saying so, Johnson was leveraging the propaganda being propagated by the Soviet Union about the treatment of African Americans in the United States. The persistence of racial discrimination in the country gave a geopolitical foe a talking point as the Cold War continued to heat up. Johnson argued that the business community had an important role in helping this nation

---

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid., 74.

improve the entire nation's standing simply by granting "the Negro recognition which unquestionably should be his under our economic system by treating him just like they do everyone else—to accord him the same attention they do their white consumers."[47] Opening up the consumer marketplace so that it was free of prejudice and all Americans were treated equally was in the interests of every patriotic American.

African Americans had to transform their thinking and leave old concepts behind as well. Despite the significant growth in incomes, many African Americans were still presenting themselves in the same downtrodden position that they always had. In the June 1952 "Photo-Editorial," *Ebony* noted that while African Americans "still has more than his share of slums, ghettos, ignorance and poverty […] during the past decade the American black man has been steadily climbing to a higher economic level, to a new-found social respectability."[48] Now, white companies were ready to see African American consumers as viable customers, a process that had eliminated many stereotypical and prejudiced ideas about African Americans. This change had also improved the perceptions of African Americans within the mainstream of American society as well, *Ebony* claimed, opening up new opportunities in various fields.[49]

The association between color and class was disappearing, and people could no longer assume the worst about an African American because of the color of his or her skin. While small in numbers, there were now African Americans in all fields of human endeavor, such as business, health, law, politics, construction, entertainment, and journalism. As a result of this

---

[47] Ibid.

[48] "Ebony Photo-Editorial: TIME TO STOP CRYING WOLF," *Ebony,* June 1952, 116.

[49] Ibid.

phenomenon, African Americans had achieved the highest standard of living they had ever known and was closer to full equality and integration into American society. Now, "a whole new world of Negro opportunity has emerged as a result of this discovery of the Negro's buying power" but African Americans could not be afraid to step into it.[50] The barriers had been removed, but some African Americans had taken to "crying wolf" about a problem that was slowly but steadily disappearing. According to *Ebony*, "the wolf is no longer at their door," but because they had been conditioned to complain for so long they were now unwilling to take advantage of the new opportunities opening up daily.[51]

Arguing that the wolf was no longer at the door for African Americans was a bold claim in 1952, but *Ebony* was not done with its crusade. In its sights was "both the upper class Negro who feels that he has, through education and personal industry, risen above the stigma attached to the average Negro, and the lower class Negro, who has no hope of improving his status either socially or economically, seem to despise the color that sets them so irrevocable apart from other men."[52] African Americans who did not see that progress was being made, sought to separate themselves from their community or refused to support those who were attempting to make a positive difference were guilty of self-hate. Instead of complaining "about those of his people who 'will not do' and begin backing up morally and financially those who are doing."[53] African Americans had achieved a great deal, and as a result had "a heritage rich in

---

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

[52] "Ebony Photo-Editorial: NEGROES WHO HATE NEGROES," *Ebony*, December 1952, 112.

[53] Ibid.

accomplishment, a future bright with hope and pregnant with greater opportunities," and it could not allow itself to be deterred or divided if the community was going to achieve its goal of equality.[54]

Equality was still yet to be achieved for African Americans. While there had been significant progress and there were moments of happiness, "The Negro is not happy. He is far from being satisfied with his lot in life. He has his glad moments, and he makes the most of them, but they are only moments. He can never experience normal happiness as long as he lives within the shadow of racial prejudice and discrimination."[55] *Ebony* clearly understood that it could not be seen as so positive about the conditions of African Americans that it appeared to be out of touch with the sensibilities of the broader community. So, it had to negotiate how it described the reality of African American life, one where progress was being made and more importantly progress could continue to be made. It was ok to acknowledge the persistence of racial discrimination, as long as that acknowledgement was coupled with the belief that ultimately the racism could and would ultimately be eliminated for American society, and that he would be "allowed to exercise the same rights of citizenship exercised by other native-born sons and given to naturalized persons from other countries. He wants to shoulder his share of the responsibilities that attend citizenship."[56]

African Americans are presented as aware of the progress, but unsatisfied with the speed of the progress. But that dissatisfaction could never be perceived as disillusionment, because

---

[54] Ibid.

[55] "Ebony Photo-Editorial: IS THE NEGRO HAPPY?" *Ebony*, December 1953, 132.

[56] "Ibid.

ultimately "things, racially, have been moving steadily forward for the Negro ever since Abe Lincoln made that pronouncement in 1863," and since the end of World War II "the tempo has been considerably increased."[57] Ultimately, according to *Ebony*, the country had turned away from racism and it was no longer acceptable in polite society. Every day, prominent white Americans were stating their opposition to racial segregation, and successes such as the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case ruling that declared segregation in public education unconstitutional all signaled an improvement in the country's racial climate. And soon, additional victories would be forthcoming.[58]

But *Ebony* knew that there were many within the African American community who dismissed the progress being made because it made the fearful of losing their positions of power and influence inside that community within the context of racial discrimination. They owned businesses that serviced an exclusively African American clientele that had few alternatives. As a result, Africa American consumers were a captive audience with limited options on where they could spend their hard-earned money. But that was slowly, but steadily, changing and that change meant that these businesspeople who had never had to compete for their customers before would now have to compete. They did not truly believe in their ability to compete with whites in an open economy, so they were fearful of the fact that once integration arrived, they would either provided the best products and services at the best price or they would go out of business. These people, *Ebony* claimed, were "self-segregationists" willing to hold the entire race back in order to keep their cushy positions within the confines of a segregated economy, but

---

[57] "Ebony Photo-Editorial: NEGRO DIEHARDS DIE HARD," *Ebony*, April 1954, 76.

[58] Ibid.

African Americans could and would not let these people stop the inevitable progress happening in the country.[59]

Ebony wanted its readers to understand that while racism still existed and that it caused significant issues, "the happy truth" was that racism was becoming less important every day especially in the world of business, so much so that it was "no longer paramount."[60] By focusing too much on racism and discrimination, African Americans were "hindering their advancement by gearing their thinking and living to an antiquated concept."[61] Opportunities exited to those willing to stand up and seize them. There was no longer a need to for any African American to see themselves as unable to go out and fashion a positive future for themselves and their families if that is what they truly wanted to do. The only thing left to do was to shake the negative mindset that race was an insurmountable barrier that was impossible to overcome. Too much had changed for the better for African Americans to continue to see themselves as victims of racism; it was time to realize that "The crutch of race, the excuse of color is no longer a valid one. It really never was." Now was the time to become full and equal citizen consumers.[62]

---

[59] Given his extensive criticisms of *Ebony*, the editorial ironically quotes sociologist E. Franklin Frazier critiques of those who have "vested interest in segregation," a claim that many leveled against the publication itself, in Ibid.

[60] "Ebony Photo-Editorial: COLOR IS NOT A CRUTCH," *Ebony*, June 1954, 84.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid.

Johnson announced in August 1954 that his company was developing a comprehensive program of "continuous research of the Negro market [….]"[63] In addition to a full-time staff to travel to country and to regularly produce market analysis on the African American consumer, they also announced the production of a film titled, "The Secret of Selling the Negro." Johnson produced "The Secret of Selling the Negro" with the explicit purpose of convincing major corporations to advertise in his magazines. The government, specifically the United States Department of Commerce, supported the film.[64]

The film begins with the narrator setting the scene: "I've got a story here that I think is big. Really Big. Because it is bound to have a terrific impact on business. I'm talking about a new market. A big new market. Millions upon millions of new prospects with 16 billion dollars to spend…. The surprising think is that it's a fresh market. Still full of opportunity. It grew up so fast, got so big in a hurry that few of us realized its scope. These days no one's likely to pass up opportunities to sell. Yet right here in our own backyard there's a big market. There's money waiting to be spent. The get the story of this market, to be able to tell you the secret of selling the Negro, we did a lot of digging. We talked to leading businessmen, customers and to salesmen. We went to Washington, D.C., we set up cameras in other key points around the nation. And out of this all emerged a story. A story of a new market."[65]

---

[63] "'Ebony' Unveils Movie, Continuing Research Program," *Advertising Age*, August 23, 1954, pg. 45.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Johnson Publishing Company, *The Secret of Selling the Negro*, directed by Wayne A. Langston (1954). MP4 file in the author's collection.

Next, the film depicts the "new Negro family." They have newfound prosperity, which in turn allows them to have additional income to participate in recreational consumption that was increasingly becoming the expectation of all Americans. The "new Negro family" lived identically to white families; they owned their own homes and made their mortgage payments "faithfully." Furthermore, they were savvy and sophisticated consumers, deeply attuned to the quality of products to ensure that their purchases lasted.[66]

Next, Secretary of Commerce Sinclair Weeks made a cameo in the film to lend his official credence to its overall them, which was that African Americans represented a viable consumer group in the United States. In fact, Weeks claimed that since 1939, African American income had increased faster than any other demographic group in the United States. This is but one of the many statistics presented without any context. Viewers also learn that fifty-one percent of African Americans own record players, sixty-four percent own a television, and that seventy-eight percent own a refrigerator. They also learn that *per capita* African Americans buy more cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and toiletries than other groups in the United States.[67]

African Americans are becoming increasingly urban, graduating from college, and moving into cities and growing their share of the consumer market. According to the film, the enrollment in Historically Black Colleges and Universities had increased by 2,500 percent since 1930. And the African American consumer market had increased eight nine percent in San Francisco, eight one percent in Chicago, fifty percent in Philadelphia, and forty-five percent in Houston. And, according to this film, all they wanted is the proper recognition and respect as

---

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid.

consumers: "They'll buy from anyone who wants to sell to them. But we all know that before you can sell to customers, you have got to get to know them."[68]

Johnson was offering himself, and his magazines, as a vehicle to help businesses reach African American consumers without alienating them. As Johnson saw it, too many white-owned businesses demeaned their African American customer, forcing them to endure disrespect to participate in the consumer marketplace. Indignities such as not being able to try on clothes before purchasing them or being on the receiving in of discourteous treatment from salespeople was not uncommon, so being respectful was a good way for a business to earn a positive reputation within the African American community. And increasingly, it was an expectation of African American consumers that they would be affirmed and appreciated through the purchasing process.[69]

This validation process meant that African American consumers wanted white salespeople to acknowledge them for their good taste and attention to and concern for quality. According to the film, salespeople should understand that African American consumers shopped "by brand," meaning that they wanted specific brands of goods and were not interested in other brands that they perceived as inferior. This ability to ascertain and demand quality served to soften the blow of consuming items that could be perceived as stereotypical and pejorative, such as alcohol. Although African Americans did buy alcohol at three times higher rates than whites with similar incomes, this did not make them drunks with unrefined taste because, "the Negro Market is a quality market." This allowed Johnson to rationalize, seeking

---

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid.

out the advertising dollars of large-scale alcohol producers and their extensive marketing budgets.[70]

Ebony could support its claims through its research program and its extensive library, which it claimed was the largest library of material on African Americans in the world. It was this broad and deep knowledge on the African American community that made *Ebony* "America's time-proven Negro advertising medium."[71] Because of this knowledge, *Ebony* was able to produce stories that show African Americans as productive and contributing members of American society, as full-equally citizen consumers that deserve the recognition and respect of businesspeople seeking to sell their products to anyone with enough money to buy them. This had been a difficult task, but by 1955 *Ebony* claimed that it had disproved the stereotypes that had existed about African American consumers and that now they were receiving the respect they deserved as consumers and as Americans, identities that had become one in the same.[72]

Coverage of a talk Johnson gave to the Chicago chapter of the American Statistical Association, where he noted that there were fourteen cities where to corner the market in these towns, companies would have to court the Negro market. Johnson reiterated that "the only thing that most Negroes demand is to be recognized like anyone else [….] A Negro likes to feel that his patronage is welcomed and coveted by business men." The cities Johnson listed were

---

[70] Ibid; "'Ebony'-'Jet' Study Finds Negro Market Likes Good Liquor," *Advertising Age*, September 7, 1953, 56; "'Negro Liquor Buyer Spends Up to 3 Times as much as Comparable White, 'Ebony' finds," *Advertising Age*, November 18, 1957, 35.

[71] Advertisement for *Ebony*, *Advertising Age*, October 17, 1955, 84.

[72] Ibid.

Atlanta, Baltimore, Birmingham, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, Memphis, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C. [73]

Johnson even appealed directly to the chief executives of potential corporate advertisers themselves to ask them to advertise in *Ebony*. Ultimately, Johnson was able to secure his first major advertisers, the Zenith Corporation, a consumer electronics manufacturer specializing and radios and televisions. Johnson was able, after considerable effort, to secure a meeting with Zenith President Commander Eugene F. MacDonald, who was quite impressed with Johnson's business acumen and persistence. Johnson explained how many African Americans already owned Zenith products, how loyal they were as consumers, and how much growth there was in the "Negro Market." MacDonald agreed and ordered his advertising department, who had rebuffed Johnson in the past, to place ads in *Ebony*. Perhaps more importantly, MacDonald connected Johnson to the chief executives of Armor Food, Elgin Watch, Quarter Oats, and Swift Packing and encouraged them to advertise in *Ebony* as well.[74]

Reflecting back, we should not over altruize Johnson's motivations; he was a businessman attempting to increase his advertising revenue to sustain and grow his successful but not quite profitable magazine. But in his efforts to do so, Johnson aligned his interests, those of African Americans more broadly, and the entire economic and political order of the United States; African Americans were consumer citizens, just like their white contemporaries, and fit for inclusion into the collective, capitalist consumption machine. While many have, in

---

[73] "'In 14 Cities, Marketer Must Have Strong Negro Sales to Dominate Market: Johnson," *Advertising Age*, December 10, 1956, 24.

[74] Chambers, "A Master Strategist," 131.

hindsight, seen that Johnson's belief in consumer citizenship to open up significant civil rights opportunities and racial equality was over optimistic, they have failed to place Johnson's motivations within their proper context. Ultimately, the fact that African Americans would be unable to achieve broader citizenship rights through consumer citizenship would be a continuity of the myriad way they would find themselves differentiated from their white counterparts.[75]

[75] Brooks, Dwight Ernest, "Consumer Markets and Consumer Magazines: Black America and the Consumption of Culture." (PhD Diss. University of Iowa, 1991), 157-164.

CHAPTER 5

THE NATION OF ISLAM'S ALTERNATIVE FOR THE 'SO-CALLED NEGRO'

This chapter of my dissertation will focus on an alternative vision to the consumerism personified in American culture through a Black nationalist lens, a lens that skews the wearer's view of African American success as an illusion. Success, for those who achieve it, is too integrationist or assimilationist. Furthermore, these members of the African American community believe that the depictions of success that grace the pages of publications like *Ebony* magazine are dangerous because they occlude the fact that the majority of African Americans are denied access to the means to lift themselves up. As a result, they contend that the only possible means for them to achieve their aspirations is together and separate from the broader American society through collective struggle. No organization better personified this belief than the Nation of Islam during the 1950s, linking personal piety with group uplift because of the inability to successfully integrate into the broader society.

How do we deal with the tension between the individual versus the collective in African American life? How does performative success elevate the race as a whole? African Americans are understood to have transcended race to the extent that they have achieved beyond race. These are celebrities, entertainers, athletes, and politicians whose successes are often celebrated by the broader society as indicative of the potential for achievement for anyone, regardless of race. Their accomplishments often serve as both spoken and unspoken indictments of African Americans who fail to live up to external standards of success when measured against the broader society. For members of the Nation of Islam, the success that was on display was not

success at all, but a grand distraction to hide the persistence of racial inequality and subjugation. America is on the decline, her doom sealed, and the fate of its inhabitants already decided. The only question remaining was if African Americans would be spared in America's destruction, a possibility only achievable by separating themselves from American society.

Founded by Elijah Muhammad in 1931, by the 1950s the Nation of Islam had become one of the largest African American civic and religious organizations in the United States. The NOI during the 1950s presents a unique and paradoxical case study to explore the tensions between the individual and the collective as it pertains to measuring success and advancement among African Americans. Many of the African Americans drawn to the NOI were considered to be of a lower-class, and they came into the organization due to their self-conceptualization of themselves as being marginalized outside of the mainstream American society, leaving them denigrated by both white and middle-class African Americans. Their desire to elevate themselves beyond their current station in life was met with resistance from those whom they believe wanted to keep them in their place, i.e., white society. The NOI offered a program that allowed them to lift themselves up without having to enter that society, which up until that point had shown nothing but hostility to them.[1]

---

[1] For information of Elijah Muhammad and the founding on the Nation of Islam, please consult Claude Andrew Clegg III, *An Original Man: The Life & Times of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Edward E. Curtis, *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1971); Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999); C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, rev. ed. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982); Dennis Walker, *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood: Elijah Muhammad, Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Atlanta, Ga.: Clarity Press, Inc., 2005).

Both Johnson and Muhammad sought to instill into their followers that entrepreneurship and enterprise were essential to improving the lives of African Americans. Through economic collectivism, both men sold remarkably similar bourgeois values to their working-class followers. The difference was the directional thrust of these efforts: for Johnson and his publishing empire it was outward into the dominant society with the goal being inclusion; for Muhammad and the NOI it was inward within the African American community with the goal being separation. That both men based their operations in Chicago is no accident. The large, diverse, and complex African American community of Chicago allowed both men to sell their unique visions for the future of the race in the same city with each achieving remarkably prominent levels of success. Muhammad and the Nation of Islam's vision for African Americans would fail to grab the attention of the majority of African Americans during the 1950s, in many ways defining the boundary conditions for the Civil Rights Movement and African American life for the remainder of the twentieth century more broadly.

Elijah Muhammad was born Elijah Poole in 1897 in Sandersville, Georgia. Born the year after the Supreme Court's decision in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, affirming the constitutionality of racial segregation, Muhammad's childhood was defined by the arbitrary violence and economic deprivation of life during Jim Crow. His father, William, was a Baptist preacher with an apocalyptic disposition, employing his congregants to live right because the end was at hand. Muhammad married his wife, Clara, in 1919 and moved with her to Detroit in 1923. Muhammad

held several various jobs at the American Copper & Brass Company, the American Nut Company, and Chevrolet Axle before finding himself having difficulty finding regular work.[2]

Vulnerability in the job market combined with a racially segregated housing market made the economic situation for African Americans dire as the nation descended into the Great Depression during the 1930s. To cope, many African Americans engaged in escapism through the church, civic and cultural groups, and illicit recreation. Muhammad noticed dissatisfaction among African Americans with the black church due to the perceived failure of preachers to model piety, the concentration of wealth in the hand of those leaders through the donations of its poor and working-class members, and the reliance on emotionalism at the expense of rational thought. These critiques would be employed by Muhammad for years, ironically leveled against the NOI as the organization's material prosperity dramatically increased in the 1950s and rumors of sexual impropriety followed him in the 1960s and 1970s.[3]

Muhammad would for a time succumb to the escapism he would later critique, becoming an alcoholic who would have to be picked-up out of the street by his son and carried home. Like many of his followers, Muhammad was in the depth of despair in the white man's world when in 1931 he met W. D. Fard, a mysterious man who the government would claim was bi-racial and born in Portland, Oregon, but who Muhammad would claim was Allah (God) in the flesh sent to resurrect the lost-found so-called Negroes in the United States through Islam and had chosen

---

[2] Clegg, *An Original Man*, 6, 14-16; Curtis, *Islam in Black America*, 67; Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 65-71.

[3] Curtis, *Islam in Black America*, 68; Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 84.

him as his messenger. The next year, Muhammad moved his family to Chicago, one year before John H. Johnson arrived in the same city.[4]

Steadily, Muhammad began to build his movement from his chosen home base of Chicago. While it is unclear why he chose Chicago over Detroit, the decision would prove fateful, as his relative unfamiliarity with the city caused his movement to fall victim to in-fighting, forcing him to move from Chicago to Milwaukee and then to Washington, D. C. throughout the 1930s, establishing a temple in each city. In 1942, he was arrested for failing to register for the draft. Although his age and slight frame made it highly unlikely that he would be drafted into the military, Muhammad believed it to be against to Muslim faith to serve in the armed forces. For his beliefs, Muhammad would serve three years in jail, being released in 1946.[5]

When Elijah Muhammad was released from prison in 1946, he had been through a great deal. Yet for all his suffering, he had little to show for it. The movement he had been building before its incarceration had been decimated due to his absence. Only a few faithful remained. Muhammad and the few faithful believers that remained slowly began rebuilding the NOI, establishing small commercial enterprises to raise funding, while also converting new converts with his message of personal piety and collective uplift. By 1950, he and the NOI were back on their feet, ready to begin a more public phase of their missionary work by articulating more pronounced critiques of the racially liberal orthodoxy of post-war America.

---

[4] Clegg, *An Original Man*, 21-25; Curtis, *Islam in Black America*, 68; Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 81; Walker, *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood*, 256-263.

[5] Clegg, *An Original Man*, 77-97; Curtis, *Islam in Black America*, 68; Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 134-155; Walker, *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood*, 265-270.

Figure 8: Elijah Muhammad, circa 1960. Chicago Urban League Records, 1916-2000. University of Illinois at Chicago, Richard J. Daley Library, Special Collections & University Archives, Chicago, IL.

In the 1950s, Muhammad and the NOI opposed the Civil Rights Movement and its vision of an integrated American. The NOI doctrine taught that whites were irreformable devils and trying to integrate with them was foolish and dangerous. Many Civil Rights Leaders

critiqued Muhammad and the NOI's view of the United States, while simultaneously having to acknowledge that white had in fact failed to support the integration of African Americans into the broader society. Furthermore, others critiqued Muhammad for failing to provide a concrete alternative to America's social order other than economic separatism that would, eventually, lead to physical separation. Unlike other Black Nationalists in the past, Muhammad displayed little interest in establishing a nation-state defined by physical territory.[6]

Muhammad and the NOI continued to be critical of the state of race relations even in the face of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision ending segregation in the field of public education. Publicly, Muhammad stated that the despite the ruling, white Americans had little intention of ever allowing African Americans to integrate into the social, economic, and political order of the United States. As a result, Muhammad's strategy for the NOI was for the organization to highlight the resistance to integration from certain segments of white America to prove what he believed to be the insincerity of white Americans who articulated support for integration.

Muhammad's indictment of whites gained salience due to a succession of racial riots in in the 1950s in Chicago. One such event occurred in July of that year in a public park. On the 28th of that month, a group of about 100 African Americans were having a picnic in Calumet Park when a group of nearly 7,000 whites attacked them. Their offense was violating the unspoken racial segregation of the park and using a portion that was "reserved" for whites. It took more than 500 police officers two days to end the conflagration. Afterwards, the white residents

[6] Curtis, *Islam in Black America*, 73; Walker, *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood*, 339.

determined that the use of violence and the subsequent negative press was undesirable. So, they committed to using non-violent means to keep African Americans out of their community. This reality—that few whites actually wanted to live alongside African Americans when presented with the opportunity—furthered the appeal of the NOI among segments of the African American community. [7]

The unique appeal of the NOI to African Americans at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder was because there were few opportunities for advancement in the broader world, coupled with the persistence of racial hostility in the United States. African Americans who had served time in jails and prisons and had criminal records found few employment opportunities. Furthermore, these men often found themselves unwelcomed in African American polite society. Wanting to change their life station and earn a measure of respect among other African Americans, the NOI offered the opportunity of upward advancement that was rooted in racial pride and self-respect that did not seek to conform to ideals that were perceived to affirm whiteness. NOI members would never be middle-class *materially* but could embody a self-respecting, middle-class ethos that affirmed their blackness and connected their identity as African Americans to being decent and industrious.[8]

Members of the NOI believed that they would always be considered second-class citizens in the United States, so they simply decided not to bother with the push for integration that they simply did not believe was ever going to bear any fruit. Instead, they leaned into their

---

[7] Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto : Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960*. Historical Studies of Urban America. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 65-67.

[8] Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 83; Walker, *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood*, 305-308.

double-consciousness and rejected any hope of joining the broader American society. They brought into the idea that they were *in* the United States, but they were neither *of* the United States, but they were physical and most importantly mental captives who were engaged in a process of recovering their true identities to mentally separate from white America in preparation for their physical separation. This ethos took on new appeal as the pace of racial integration remained slow.[9]

In February 1956, an advertisement for the "Moslem's Annual Convention" ran on the pages of the *Pittsburgh Courier*. The convention held February 24th to 26th took place at the NOI's headquarters, Muhammad's Temple of Islam No. 2, located at 5335 South Greenwood Avenue in Chicago. The advertisement advised readers to come and "hear Muhammad, the Moslems' Leader on the presence of Allah (God), and the Solution for the So-Called Negro's Problem of the Necessary Qualification for FREEDOM, JUSTICE, and EQUALITY, along Side by Side with the Nations of the Earth."[10] According to the advertisement, African Americans, whom the NOI referred to as "so-called Negroes" had "become a Nation in a Nation, and something must be done. They cannot depend upon the White Race for jobs, food, clothing, and shelter forever."[11] Finally, the advertisement noted that all were allowed to attend regardless of their religion and that there would be free meals, an enticement for attendees designed to attract new converts.

---

[9] Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 85; Walker, *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood*, 300.

[10] "Display Ad 88 -- No Title," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 25, 1956, A36.

[11] Ibid.

The year 1956 marked the beginning of a significant partnership between the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the NOI. In April of that year, the paper published a three-part series of glowing articles on the religious organization. Titled, "The Rise of Muhammad Temple of Islam," and written by the *Courier's* Chicago editor Ted Watson, the first article noted the prosperity of the organization, which by this time had amassed "a temple, university, restaurant, bakery and grocery and market, plus an apartment building with an estimated value running into many hundreds of thousands of dollars."[12] The article speaks glowingly of the "spotlessly clean" restaurant, and the grocery and bakery with all the modern conveniences you would expect to find in a major national chain, including name-brand products. The beef and poultry (no pork was sold in the store) was raised on the NOI's two-hundred-acre farm in White Cloud, Michigan.[13]

The article claimed that the Nation of Islam lacked any sort of a caste system, a factual inaccuracy. All of the top leadership positions in the NOI were held by relatives of Elijah Muhammad. As one example, Raymond Sherriff, the leader of the Fruit of Islam was Muhammad's son-in-law. Sherriff's wife, Ethel, was Muhammad's daughter and managed the clothing stores owned by the NOI. [14]

Watson depicts the NOI as a part of the larger, five hundred-million-person global community of Muslim believers, while ignoring the theological differences between the

---

[12] Ted Watson, "The Rise of Muhammad Temple of Islam," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 7, 1956, SM3.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

organization and the tenants of traditional strands of Islam practiced throughout the world. Furthermore, the author notes that the NOI represents the largest segment of Muslims in the United States. This segment, the author claims, is prosperous and that its rank-and-file members have established several businesses themselves, although the article does not list them. What is clear, however, is the strong connection between financial and material success and Islam; whereas Christianity is a religion of lack and poverty, Islam is presented as a religion of success and prosperity.[15]

The article also highlighted that families with one thousand children were also a part of the NOI. There was not misbehavior or delinquency in the NOI, the author claimed, due to the "modern and concise teachings of Mr. Muhammad."[16] The University, which was a Kindergarten through 12th Grade school-educated half of the young people in the NOI; more than 500 students attended the University, which was located next door to the Temple. Here, the students were taught the major academic subjects you would expect in a school, as well as the knowledge that "aims to free the so-called Negro from the teachings of his slave master [….] The Moslem child is made aware of all issues and is enlightened to the knowledge of himself, and the slave masters."[17]

The marriage of the NOI and the *Pittsburgh Courier* was a peculiar one. While Muhammad columns did appear in certain African American newspapers, many African American organs

---

[15] Ibid.; Ted Watson, "Rapid Rise of the Moslems: The Rise of the Moslems in Chicago," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 14, 1956, 1.

[16] Ted Watson, "The Rise of The Moslems: Messenger Muhammad Leads Thousands to Clean Living Through the Islamic Faith," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 21, 1956, B2.

[17] Ibid.

simply ignored the NOI in the late 1950s, particularly those located in Chicago. Both the *Chicago Daily Defender* and the imprints of Johnson Publishing Company engaged in a full-blown media blackout of the NOI. On some level, this allowed the NOI to grow without negative public sentiment. This lack of media attention in Chicago did not, however, mean that no one was watching the NOI in their hometown. The FBI kept track of Elijah Muhammad and the NOI throughout the 1950s, detailing the organization's growth and development through the decade.[18]

Leaning into the adage that 'controversy creates cash,' the *Courier* doubled down on its relationship with the NOI, carrying a column by Muhammad titled, "Mr. Muhammad Speaks," the first edition of which appeared on June 9, 1956. In it, Muhammad lays out the foundational believes of the NOI. Specifically, the "so-called Negroes" are the original people on Earth, members of the Tribe of Shabazz and called to be righteous Muslims. As Muslims, they should use God's proper name, Allah, and that he has commanded African Americans to submit to him so that they can have "heaven on earth," which would mean "freedom, justice, equality, money, good homes and friendship in all walks of life."[19] Christianity, as it has been taught, will not produce any of this. In fact, Muhammad claims that this is why white slave masters gave it to African Americans.

According to Muhammad, African Americans were brought to America as slaves in 1555. After these enslaved men and women had their first children, they were killed so they

---

[18] Neither the *Defender* nor *Ebony* wrote about the NOI during the decade of the 1950s. Clegg, *An Original Man*, 116; Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 173.

[19] Elijah Muhammad, "MR. Muhammad SPEAKS," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 9, 1956, B3.

could not pass any knowledge of themselves down to their children. The children were then taught to please their slave master, who "made us blind, deaf, and dumb to the knowledge of self or anyone else and it stands true today that the American so-called Negroes don't know themselves or anyone else and the worst of all they don't know that they don't know themselves or others." Even worse, the slave masters gave these African Americans their names, and if African Americans continue to use their former slave masters' names, they will never be free.

Naming is an important aspect of life in the NOI. To take on an Islamic name marks the bearer as a threat to the dominate society because it symbolizes a rejection of the dominate society. Muhammad asserted that "the whole of the Western white civilization is opposed to Islam, the only true religion of God, therefore they (devils) don't teach of Allah and Islam to us."[20] Christianity is the white man's religion, designed to keep African Americans in mental slavery. Muhammad claims that the first slave ship was named Jesus and that the enslaved Africans were taught to pray to Jesus and given false hope that he would hear their prayers and send for them; the African Americans who worshiped Jesus do not understand that they are asking for their slave ship and not their savior.[21]

Finally, Muhammad rejects the premise of integration, arguing that there is no future for African Americans in the United States, and that any sign of improving race relations is a deception:

> "The Slavemasters' children are doing everything in their power to prevent the so-called Negroes from accepting their own God and salvation, by putting on a great show of false love and friendship. This is being done through integration as it is called, so-called

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

> Negroes and whites mixing together, such as schools, churches and even intermarriage with the so-called Negroes, and this the poor slaves (the so-called Negroes) really think that they are entering a condition of heaven with their former slaveholders, but it will prove to be their doom."[22]

In the next week's column, Muhammad expands on these ideas, arguing that America is failing and that the only course of action for African Americans is to separate themselves before it is too late. He claimed that African Americans are the Old Testament Hebrews who were prophesied to spend four hundred years in bondage, but that this time ended in 1955. Now, African Americans are being called by Allah to return onto their own and practice Islam under the guidance of Muhammad himself, Allah's messenger.[23]

But Muhammad had the claim that Allah had come to Detroit in 1931 and anointed him his messenger. A Mr. Fard Muhammad, God in person, came in the flesh to suffer for his people "at the hands of a people who by nature are evil, wicked, and have no good in them."[24] As if he knew this would be disputed, Elijah explains the criminal record of Fard Muhammad as suffering, similar to the suffering of Jesus Christ of the Bible.; he too was falsely accused of a crime by the authorities, but rather than be killed he escaped. This is because no one wants to see African Americans come into the knowledge of themselves: "The so-called Negroes are

---

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Elijah Muhammad, "MR. Muhammad SPEAKS: PERSECUTION FOLLOWS," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 23, 1956, B2.

absolutely friendless and have sought in vain friendship from their enemies, due to the ignorance of self and their enemies."[25]

Master W. F. Muhammad, the Great Mahdi, was Allah (God) in the flesh. According to Elijah Muhammad, Fard Muhammad to him "that there was no punishment great enough to repay the slavemasters for their evils done against the so-called Negroes of America. He also said that the country is filled with devils and every kind of evil."[26] America will ultimately lose her wealth, and all the nations of the world will suffer as a result. This financial ruin meant that "America will find her Just like Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar in the bible, America's wealth will be turned over to God's chosen people, the so-called Negroes," but that this will only happen if African Americans will reject Christianity and turn to Islam.[27]

If Fard Muhammad is Allah, then Elijah Muhammad is his chosen messenger and the true savior for African Americans who are in the hell of North America. But, according to Elijah Muhammad, "my people are yet sound asleep to the knowledge of the good that is being carried on for their deliverance. The whole world of our kind awaits the awakening, and our awakening is the last step in the Resurrection and Judgement of the world."[28] African Americans must accept Islam and the divinity of Elijah Muhammad, reject Christianity, and return the names that the white slave masters The Jesus of the bible was only a prophet, not the savior, and is dead

---

[25] Ibid.

[26] Elijah Muhammad, "MR. Muhammad SPEAKS," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 22, 1956, B2.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Elijah Muhammad, "MR. Muhammad SPEAKS: PERSECUTION FOLLOWS," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 23, 1956, B2.

and not alive, just like every other profit in the past. That African Americans still pray to Jesus, who has been dead for two thousand years, and believe that is alive and can hear their prayers have fallen into "the old-slavery teaching," and must escape it by turning to Islam the true religion of the prophets.[29]

White people and black nation have a different God, so that is why they have not been able to get along under Christianity. The Bible is the poison book, "It has poisoned the very hearts and minds of the so-called Negroes so much, so that they can't agree with each other. From the first day that the white race received the Divine Scripture they started tampering with its truth to make it to suit themselves, and bling the black man."[30] The Bible is the beginning of the White race, not the original Black man, and that the us who God refers to when making the white man is Himself and the original Black man. "The HOLY QUR-AN, it is holy because it is the word of ALLAH (God) speaking Himself directly to His Servant. HOLY means something that is PERFECTLY PURE and we just can't say that of the poison Bible."[31]

African Americans are the Lost Sheep, and the Prodigal Son mentioned the New Testament. "Regardless to our sins that we have committed in following and obeying our slave masters, Allah (God) forgives it all today, if we, the so-called Negroes, will turn to Him and our own kind."[32] Passages that promote slavery are poison that have been added by whites (Luke

---

[29] Ibid.

[30] Elijah Muhammad, "MR. Muhammad SPEAKS: THE BIBLE AND QUR-AN," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 30, 1956, B2.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Elijah Muhammad, "MR. Muhammad SPEAKS: 'HOLY QUR-AN AND BIBLE'," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 7, 1956, B2.

2:27-29). "It is against the very nature of God and man, and other life, to love their enemies. Would God ask us to do that which He, Himself, can't do? He hates His enemies so much that He tells us that He is going to destroy them in hell fire, along with those of us who follow His enemies."[33]

The columns written by Muhammad garnered significant attention. Yet the initial reaction printed in the *Pittsburgh Courier* was largely positive. A man by the name of Earl Hill wrote the following letter to the editor: "I would like to extend my thanks to you for putting 'Mr. Muhammad Speaks' in The *Pittsburgh Courier*. If I could only explain to you how you've been blessed. May the Almighty Allah bless you and keep you. On behalf of my sleeping and awakened brothers and sisters, I thank you from the depths of my heart."[34] The columns proved particularly popular with younger people. A group of college students attending historically black colleges and universities in Atlanta wrote to signal their approval: "We think you should let us hear more about him and Islam. The truth is there, I know it for a fact."[35] Another letter claimed that the "Mr. Muhammad Speaks" column was "the best thing that I have ever heard of read, anywhere" and want to read more things like it because they believed that "the people" to read more things like it.[36] Another reader, a Mrs. J. Mims, seemed to agree with the columns, noting

[33] Ibid.

[34] "Reader Is Cross With Carolyn Cross," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 7, 1956, 12.

[35] "Atlanta Readers Go for Mr. Muhammad," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 21, 1956, 12.

[36] Ibid.

that in her opinion "it is true that the white man's religion is nothing to be desired, which I, from day to day, avoid."[37]

However, the response was not uniformly positive. In response to another column speaking of the judgement of the world, a reader named Venora Scott says that the separation of black and white "not only contradicts the Bible, but is an obvious, subtle effort to further divide racial groups, while NAACP and other similar organizations work to accommodate them."[38] Another reader, Mrs. Hattie B. Perryman claims that the column "can be misleading to some people who have not taken time to find the true meaning of God's word for themselves. I wonder for what purpose an article of this sort is allowed to be printed in such a fine paper."[39]

Muhammad would continue his critique of the bible: "THE POISON BOOK and the enemies of black mankind, who accuse the righteous daily of being other than righteous, then charge me, and my followers with teaching hatred, overlook the hatred taught by others."[40] African Americans have been taught to love everyone but, "one who loves everyone is not a true lover of anyone, not even himself or herself [….] If a righteous person loves an unrighteous person, he or she is also unrighteous. Who can trust in who loves everyone?"[41] Muhammad argues that the only way African Americans can truly be free is to separate themselves from

---

[37] "'Mr. Muhammad Speaks' Irks These Readers," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 14, 1956, 12.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Elijah Muhammad, "MR. Muhammad SPEAKS: HOLY KUR-AN AND BIBLE," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 14, 1956, B2.

[41] Ibid.

whites and have a nation of their own: "The great time of separation is now on between the righteous and the devils (black and white), but the American so-called Negroes, my people, don't understand who they are or anyone else, and we must teach them regardless of the cost."[42]

As the original man and woman, African Americans must separate themselves from the wicked white society. This is what God (Allah) wants them to do, and it is essential for the survival of both races. Rather than engage in the foolishness of integration, righteous members of the NOI have already begun the process of separating themselves from their white counterparts. Somewhat paradoxically, Muhammad claims that this separation has actually improved race relations between his members and the few whites they come in contact with, because his members are able to properly deal with whites because they know their true nature, which is wickedness and evil. Separation was the key to survival and the solution to the "race question" that was vexing the nation at the time.[43]

In August of the same year, the *Pittsburgh Courier* published yet another glowing article on the parents and students at the University of Islam, which educated students "from the kindergarten level to the most advanced courses of study in all sciences and the Arabic language."[44] The school was hosting a program to highlight the benefits of their education program and invited guests to come see accomplishments of the students and staff. The food was prepared by chefs at the restaurant owned by the NOI, and the keynote speaker was

---

[42] Ibid.

[43] Elijah Muhammad, "MR. Muhammad SPEAKS: Who Is the Original Man?" *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 28, 1956, B2.

[44] Ted Watson, "Moslem Parent-Teachers Association Fete In Chicago Highlights Islamic Education," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 4, 1956, B6.

Raymond Sharrieff, the captain of the Fruit of Israel which is referred here as a "men's club." Malcom X was also in attendance, and his final remarks Sharrieff commended the students and staff for another successful semester of instruction at the school.[45]

In the "Mr. Muhammad Speaks" column that appeared in the same issue, Muhammad claims that America is a wicked civilization. Perhaps not accidentally, the column focuses on education, claiming that the education African Americans received in schools controlled by whites only serves to keep them in a subservient position:

> Certainly, the so-called Negroes are being schooled, but is it the equal of their slave masters? No, the so-called Negro are still begging for equal education. After being blinded to the knowledge of self and their own kind for 400 years, the slavemasters REFUSE to CIVILIZE the so-called Negroes into the knowledge of themselves of which they were robbed. The slavemasters also persecute and hinder anyone who tries to perform his most RIGHTFUL DUTY.[46]

Muhammad goes on to note that African Americans know that this education is not for their own benefits, but it is the "fear of being deprived of food, clothing and shelter," as well as the approval of whites in the form of "the usual smile of the white slavemasters' children," that "prevents them from seeking the true knowledge of their own nation's civilization." [47]

As a result of this poor education, African Americans have been taught to engage in destructive behavior such as eating "the wrong food and drinks, games of chance (gambling), going half-dressed, looking for salvation after death, and not giving a hoot for salvation in this

---

[45] Ibid.

[46] Elijah Muhammad, "MR. Muhammad SPEAKS: IF THE CIVILIZED MAN FAILS TO PERFORM HIS DUTY[….]," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 4, 1956, B2.

[47] Ibid.

life, as right civilization teaches us."[48] African Americans are the people being warned in the book of Revelation to "come out of her my people, that you be not partakers of her sins, and receive not her plagues," and American is the "her."[49] America is an evil and wicked place, and her downfall is justified by the Bible: "Ancient Sodom, Gomorrah, Nineveh, Babylon and Roman sins were only children's acts compared with the modern sins of America. The Wicked cry and rage for more freedom to commit more sins."[50] Ultimately America's punishment is the result of its decision to enslave African Americans, and although there are some who would want to forgive their former slave masters for their transgressions, they do not have to power to do so; only Allah (God) has that power and, according to Muhammad He has declined to do so.[51]

Beginning in 1957, as the popularity of the "Mr. Muhammad Speaks" column continue to grow, he was joined on the pages of the *Pittsburgh Courier* by his chief national minister, Malcolm X. The one-two punch of Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X brought new scrutiny to the Nation of Islam and its teachings. An Elder Clayton McCoy, Minister of the Church of the Living Good in Fresno, California challenged the NOI and its national spokesman, Malcolm X, rejecting the idea that African American Christians are dumb and blind. McCoy noted the

---

[48] Elijah Muhammad, "MR. Muhammad SPEAKS: THE GREAT IS FALLING (Rev. 18: 2, 4)," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 15, 1956, 18.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

success of Ralph Bunche, the famous African American delegate to the United Nations, the fact that there were three African Americans serving in the United States Congress, and numerous other African American professionals to disprove the idea that blacks are hopelessly relegated to a decline. Finally, McCoy claims that many of the programs of Mr. Muhammad and the NOI were not particularly unique or compelling; many of the "successes" of the organization have and are already being done by other schools and businesses established by African Americans, as well as the Urban League and the NAACP.[52]

Perhaps as a sign of the turmoil that would consume the relationship between Muhammad and Malcolm later, McCoy addresses his remarks to the student (Malcolm) and not the teaching (Muhammad), yet Muhammad writes the response to the McCoy. The crux of his rebuttal is that despite what McCoy's claims, African Americans had not made significant progress in the United States under the control of whites. Muhammad dismissed the educational gains the McCoy claimed that African Americans have achieved because the schools are controlled by whites for their benefit: "Regardless to how much education your slave masters give you, if they never teach you a true knowledge of self, you are only a free slave to serve them or others than your own."[53] Muhammad believes that this is no education at all, and that the only way education can benefit a people is if they have their own country "where your highly

[52] Elder Clayton McCoy, "Elder McCoy Answers 'Malcolm X'," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 5, 1957, B3.

[53] Elijah Muhammad, "MR. Muhammad SPEAKS," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 26, 1957, B2.

trained and educated men and women can be benefitted. May Allah and Islam give it to them. There is no hope for such under the slave masters' children and their flag."[54]

Islam, by its very nature, would give African Americans this opportunity. Muhammad claimed that, in fact, that the Prophet Muhammad was of the black race and that this was precisely the reason why whites vehemently oppose the Muslim religion. The Muslim faith was the religion for African Americans and provided them the means to flee the bondage of Christianity and choose a religion that will allow them to be completely free to lead themselves and defend themselves. Ultimately, Elijah Muhammad claims that McCoy is wrong, and that no other organization or religion had produced the results for African Americans that the NOI and Islam had: "I am doing that for thousands which Christianity failed to do, and that is united the so-called Negroes and making them know God and the Devil and making them to leave off evil habits that the preachers of Christianity haven't been able to do for a hundred years. We are that in Islam what Christianity offers beyond the grave."[55]

The Christianity espoused by McCoy and other Christian preachers constitutes a mental slavery that has kept African Americans in bondage even though chattel slavery ended nearly one hundred years ago, Muhammad said. Christianity had also proved to have no power on earth to protect African Americans from "their slavemaster's whip, gun, lynch, limb and fire."[56] Even more damming, white Christians did not respect their fellow African American Christians,

---

[54] Ibid.

[55] Elijah Muhammad, "MR. Muhammad SPEAKS: 'Those Who Live in Glass Houses Shouldn't Throw Stones'," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 2, 1957, B2.

[56] Elijah Muhammad, "MR. Muhammad SPEAKS: 'Islam for the American So-Called Negroes'," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 9, 1957, B2.

bombing the homes and churches simply because African Americans wanted to be treated as brothers and as equals with them. If that was not enough for African Americans to forsake Christianity and the United States, Muhammad claimed that the federal government was preparing to allow significant numbers of European immigrants into the country and allow them access to resources and opportunities that it denies African Americans: "Why should you fear for your future? Why not turn toward your people for a place and a job? Four hundred years slaving and shedding your blood like water for your slavemasters only now to be denied justice. But you seem to like it."[57]

Whether they like it or not is not clear, nor is exactly what Muhammad is referring to as it pertains to an increase of European immigrants coming into the country. What is clear, however, is the significant growth the NOI had undergone over the past year. As time approached for their annual convention, the organization would need more space to hold it. The NOI selected Tabernacle Baptist Church, located at 4130 South Indiana Avenue in Chicago, a not insignificant sign of ecumenical cooperation for the Christian church to be willing to hold the convention, and for the NOI to be willing to use it. Most likely, the need for more space, the lack of large venues that would be appropriate for such an event on the South Side of Chicago, and the more generally race-conscience nature of the event made it acceptable.[58]

For this year's theme Muhammad had selected, "The Control and Protection of the so-called Negro Woman," because he believed that history had shown "that a nation can rise no

---

[57] Ibid.

[58] "Muslims--Set for 3-Day Annual Convention," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 16, 1957, 8.

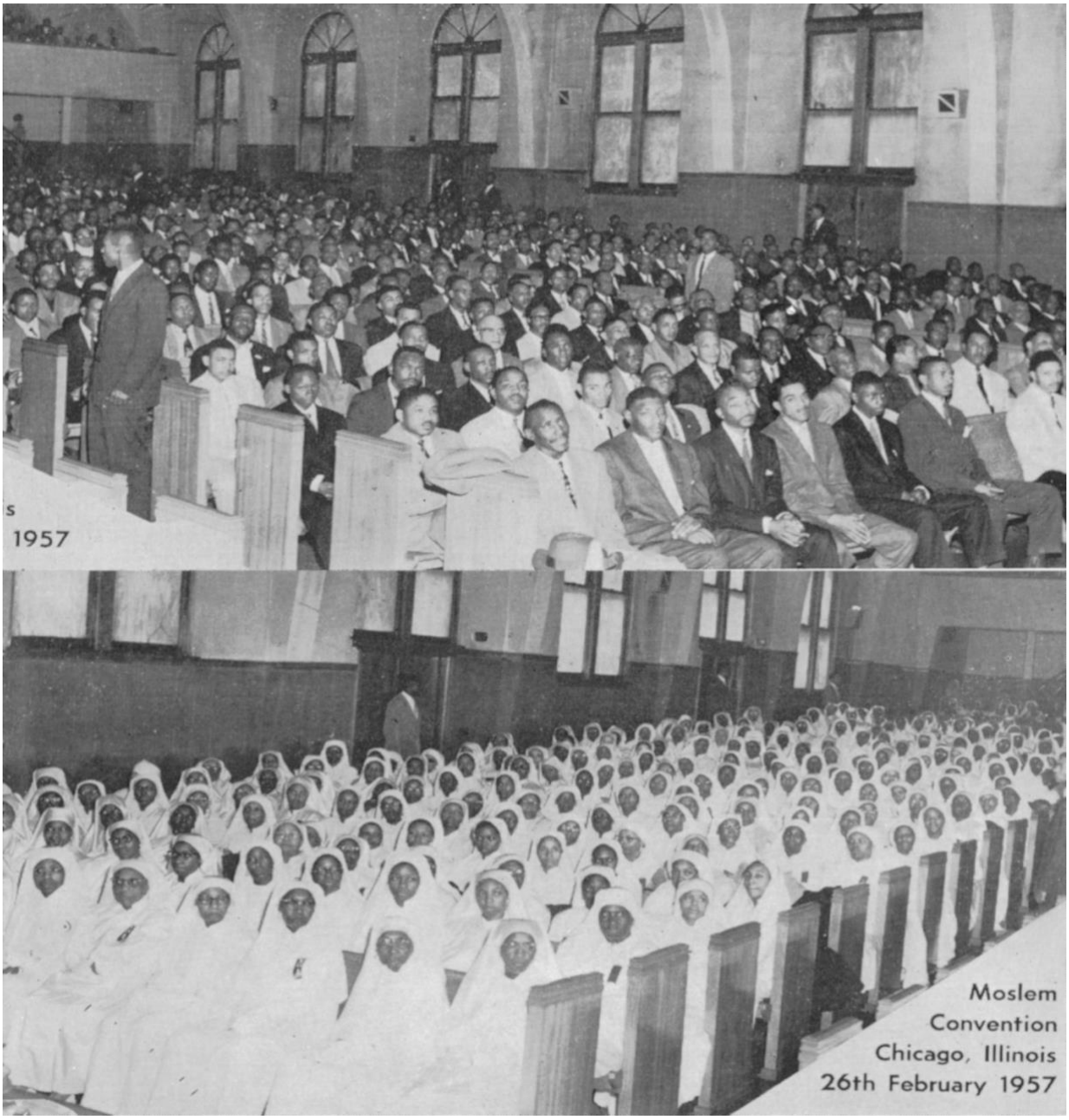


Figure 9: Attendees at the 1957 NOI Annual Convention. Reprinted from Elijah Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Islam, 1957), 86-87.

higher than its women," and it was "time that we did something for our women."[59] Most likely to entice members from around the country to attend the convention, as well as show the geographical reach of the NOI, the announcement also included a list of all the regional

[59] Ibid.

ministers that would be speaking at the convention. Headlined by Malcolm X (Shabazz) from New York, it also included Isaiah Karriem from Baltimore, Lucius Bey from Washington, D.C., James A. Shabazz from Atlanta, Lenard Hassan from Detroit, and Henry Majied from Los Angeles. They expected an overflow crowd and would be hosting an exhibition of arts and crafts created by the women members of the NOI. As for the schedule, at 2 p.m. on February 25th, the students from the University of Islam will have a program highlighting their work, and at the same time the following day "Messenger Muhammad will deliver a warning to the "so-called" American Negroes of the presence of All-mighty God and His purpose of returning to their own."[60]

The convention was a success with three thousand people in attendance. Muhammad spoke for three hours on his theme, claiming that because African American women lack the protection of African American men they engage in inappropriate behavior in public. The proper place for a woman was in the home, but African American men had done a poor job providing home for their women. This, he claimed, was because African Americans were wasting their time attempting to integrate with whites instead of focusing on their own families and communities. Until African Americans made themselves their chief priority their families and communities would continue to be in disarray, and other races would continue to disrespect them. Islam, Muhammad claimed, was the only means by which African American men could

[60] Ted Watson, "'Recognition for Negro Women' Is Muslim Theme: Moslems Hold Nat'l Convention," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 23, 1957, 15.

control and protect their woman, and that by doing this they would "elevate" her, which would cause both genders to return to their true religion to save one another and the race.[61]

The NOI displayed a respect and appreciation for African American women that appealed directly to them. Specifically, the organization's moral and personal code of conduct provided a level of self-esteem for a group of people who had encountered few sources for such previously. Women felt the organization offered them protection from the wickedness of the outside world, although many women found the regimented gender roles of the organization stifling. Ultimately, for those who chose to remain the tradeoffs were well worth it and by 1957 the NOI was stronger than ever, having grown to nineteen temples. Detroit, the site of Muhammad's encounter with Allah in the person of Master W. F. Muhammad, was the first temple; Chicago, the national headquarters was the second; Milwaukee, Wisconsin the third; Washington D.C. the fourth; Cincinnati, the fifth; Baltimore, the sixth; New York City, the seventh; San Diego, the seventh; Youngstown, Ohio the ninth; Atlantic City, the tenth; Boston, the eleventh; Philadelphia, the twelfth; Springfield, Massachusetts the thirteenth; Hartford, Connecticut the fourteenth; Atlanta, the fifteenth; Lansing, Michigan the sixteenth; Joliet, Illinois the seventeenth; Cleveland, the eighteenth; and Dayton, Ohio the nineteenth.[62]

From the list, it is clear that the geographical strength of the NOI was in the industrial Northeast and Midwest of the United States. These urban and relatively prosperous sections of

---

[61] Ted Watson, "'Protect Our Women,' Says Muhammad: Activity Plentiful at Annual Muslim Convention," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 9, 1957, 1; Ted Watson, "Mr. Muhammad Urges Rigid Control Over Negro Women; Attacks False Pride," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 16, 1957, 52.

[62] Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 88; Clegg, *An Original Man*, 100-101; "Highlights Of Muslim Convention," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 16, 1957, 52.

the country had seen significant growth in their African American population since the onset of World War II. Despite his population growth, or because of it, African Americans found themselves regulated to a second-class economic citizenship as it pertained to employment and income. While the north lacked the physical trappings of Jim Crow-style racism that were common in the south, there was little doubt among many African Americans in cities such as Chicago where they were not welcomed. Additionally, many employers refused to hire African Americans. Or, if an employer did hire African Americans, it was common for them to have a strict quota on the amount they were willing to hire. For those who did hire African Americans, they regulated them to the most menial and lowest-paying jobs at the company.

These labor practices resulted in a sense of economic dislocation for the majority of the African American labor force in these industrialized urban centers, moving through a constant turnover of low-paying jobs punctuated by significant periods spent out of work. Disillusioned with this persistent economic vulnerability and lack of employment opportunities, the Nation of Islam held a unique appeal to African Americans who felt that American society and its dominant institutions, Capitalism, and Christianity had all conspired against them to keep them at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. "The lower-class Negro who has the capacity and motivation for self-improvement must seek it within the Negro community." "He cannot afford the luxury of middle-class make-believe. He knows he is black, but he wants to be self-respecting, He may be poor, but he wants to be decent." "The need for identity and the desire for self-improvement are the two principal motives which lead individuals to join and to remain in the Nation of Islam." Members of the NOI are aware of their second-class citizenship, their

double-consciousness, and their self-alienation, things that they are allowed to reconcile through their participation in the organization.[63]

1957 also marks the first instance of Muhammad and the NOI made at least a rhetorical alliance with white supremacists. In his April 6, 1957, column, Muhammad claimed that Mohamed claims that white supremacist J.B. stoner "told the truth "When he said that Christianity is the white man's religion because Islam is the religion for African Americans:

> Islam is a religion of divine power, and will give power to the helpless so-called Negroes to overcome the devils and their false religion, Christianity. It has never helped the Negroes against the white Christian's brutality [….] The white Christians preach that Jesus, who they killed 2,000 years ago, will hear and save the Negroes. Let them prove that lie! How can a dead man hear and save people? [….] We must not pray to dead prophets. They can't hear our prayers [….] The day of resurrection of the dead so-called Negroes has arrived.[64]

Ultimately, African Americans must reject Christianity because it is the religion of white supremacists and turn to Islam because that is the only means by which they will achieve true freedom.

In his next column Muhammad notes again that America's under divine judgment and will be punished for its treatment of African Americans. Now that African Americans are turning to Islam, whites are fearful and disparaging anyone who is fearless enough to teach the truth: "This is done to try and put fear in them—so that they might stay away from their God

---

[63] Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 85.

[64] Elijah Muhammad, "Mr. Muhammad SPEAKS: 'Salvation for the So-Called Negroes in Islam'," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 6, 1957, B2.

Allah and His true religion Islam (as the devil knows) their salvation and defense."[65] Also, whites are trying to tempt African Americans into rejecting Islam "with their women (white women) in newspapers, magazines, in streets half-nude, and posing in the so-called Negroes' faces in the most indecent manner that is known to mankind—to trick them (the so-called Negroes) to death and hell with them." African Americans must turn away from whites, remove any images of whites in their homes and celebrate themselves.[66]

1958 marked the high-water mark of Elijah Muhammad's and the NOI's influence before their introduction to the broader American mainstream the following year. Their 1958 annual convention showed a confident Mohammed announce a $3.5 million building program for new buildings, intended to be completed by 1961. The NOI was the right organization because they practiced "love of self" and "unity." He noted that Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey failed because they lacked self-sufficiency (due to Washington's reliance on white philanthropy) and knowledge of self (due to Garvey's lack of knowledge of Islam and the true nature of African Americans as the original people) as a key part of their philosophies. He challenged the intellectuals of the day to join him and his thriving nation before it was too late, although perhaps in a sign of things to come the *Courier* noted that only 2,700 people attended the convention, which would be a ten percent decrease from the previous year. Muhammad

[65] Elijah Muhammad, "MR. Muhammad SPEAKS: America Is Falling--Her Doom is Sealed," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 13, 1957, B2.

[66] Ibid.

noted that the African Americans had tremendous economic power, and that they must be willing to channel it in the right direction, which is internally.[67]

The NOI and Muhammad represented the living embodiment of the philosophy of economic self-sufficiency. The economic empire of the NOI continued to grow, as the economic philosophy of cooperative spending and buying within the African American community was one of the three key elements of the NOI's program and appeal, the others being their religious teaching and the educational component. They rejected the idea that African Americans should take their purchasing power else ware, the opposite of the message being propagated on the pages of *Ebony*.

In Chicago, the NOI owned businesses in a model that they would replicate in other cities throughout the nation where their temples were located. In addition to the bakery, laundry and cleaners, grocery stores, and restaurant the NOI had established by 1956, in the following two years they had added an auto repair and paint, a cleaning service, and a women's clothing store and a men's clothing store. They also owned seven buildings where their businesses were housed, such as the eight-unit apartment building above the restaurant and grocery store, a two-flat apartment building, and a fifteen-unit apartment building. This did not include the temple and university. The article noted that "all] the business establishments are extremely modern and cater to the general public. The food is delicious, the prices extremely reasonable, the service excellent, courteous, highly efficient."[68] The NOI's success was a model for all African

---

[67] William G. Nunn, "Muhammad Blasts 'Intellectuals': Challenges Leaders During Chi Confab," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 8, 1958, 11.

[68] William G. Nunn, "Chicago Moslems Show the Way: Eight Business Firms Operated Successfully By Muhammad Group," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 15, 1958, B5.

Americans to follow because it demonstrated the collective economic power of the African American community and their ability to successfully manage businesses.

The increasing popularity of the NOI allowed Muhammad to host numerous large rallies throughout the United States. Held at the Park Palace Theater, a 13,000-person capacity crowd came to the Unity Fest to hear Elijah Muhammad and answer his call for "a united front of black men."[69] The event proved so popular that the crowd overflowed into Central Park. Several members of the Harlem political elite attended the event, and several religions and civic groups sent delegations as well. African American politicians, sensing Muhammad's popularity with potential constituents, were willing to appear on stage with him. City Councilman Earl Brown, Judge Carson Dewitt Baker, State Senator James Watson, and Manhattan Borough President Hulan E. Jack all addressed the crowd. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell was out of town but sent greeting and "his blessings for success" via telegram.[70]

The event, a smashing success, showcased Muhammad's ability to be a race leader and not only appeal to Muslims believers but to the broader African American community as well. And while winning 500 converts that day was important, more vital for Muhammad was the opportunity to wield his influence. Despite this, Muhammad and the NOI never embraced a

[69] "Mr. Muhammad Calls for United Front Of Black Men at New York City Rally," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 19, 1958, B2.

[70] Ibid.

broader leadership role in civic or political affairs. Anytime significant exposure would be gained by focusing on secular issues, a retreat to religious concerns would take place.[71]

But Muhammed could no longer ignore the outside world as his material success became more apparent and the NOI began to attract more middle-class members. Muhammad needed to reconcile some of his earlier teachings about the wickedness of the world with his and the NOI's increasing prosperity. Instead of telling African Americans to forsake their worldly possession, he instead argued that worldly possessions were the proper benefit of the Muslim faithful and that by becoming a Muslim and following his teachings, his followers would not only have all their material needs met but you would have friendship in all walks of life. "If you don't have money or good homes in this world, your religion is not doing you much good. If you want money, good homes, and friendship in all walks of life, come and follow me."[72] Muhammad seemed content to remain in the insular world of African American life as he and his followers became more prosperous until forces beyond his control forced him to confront the media spotlight.

The NOI was able to achieve significant growth and influence within the African American community without significant intrusion from the broader mainstream media. The lack of attention all changed with the broadcast of *The Hate that Hate Produced*, a documentary that aired on July 13–17, 1959 on local tv station in New York. Co-produced and co-hosted by a

---

[71] Ibid. Many sources have documented the uneasiness with overt political activism among Muhammad and the NOI. See: Clegg, *An Original Man*; Curtis, *Islam in Black America*; Evanzz, *The Messenger*; and Walker, *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood.*

[72] "Mr. Muhammad Calls for United Front Of Black Men at New York City Rally," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 19, 1958, B2.

white journalist named Mike Wallace (who would go on to host the iconic television news magazine *60 Minutes*) and trailblazing African American journalist Louis Lomax, the documentary positioned the organization as an unrepentant, "black supremacist" organization.[73]

The documentary began with a scene from a theatrical production by the NOI titled, *The Trial*. In it, the "white man" is charged with various crimes against the "black man" and society more broadly. The audience serves as the jury as the play's only character serves as the prosecutor, listing a long list of offenses that white man has committed. At the conclusion of the play, the audience renders its verdict (which is always a guilty one) and the sentence is death. The documentary also made clear that the NOI considered whites to be devils, that the United States was headed towards a race war unless there was separation between African Americans and whites, and that ultimately the country would fall under God's judgement for its mistreatment of African Americans.[74]

In many ways, the fallout from the documentary set the trajectory for the NOI for the remainder of its existence. The backlash was swift, with mainstream publications and civil rights leaders all condemning the NOI for extremist views. The documentary and the controversy around the organization caused its membership to grow, as many disillusioned African Americans discovered the organization for the first time and agreed whole-heartedly with its critiques of the United States. But the film also cemented the NOI's reputation for hate, limiting

---

[73] Clegg, *An Original Man*, 125; Curtis, *Islam in Black America*, 80; Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 196.

[74] WNTA-TV New York, "The Hate that Hate Produced," produced by Mike Wallace and Louis Lomax (1959), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsYWD2EqavQ (Accessed January 24, 2022).

once and for all its appeal to middle-class African Americans; to be associated with a hate group was something that only a social pariah was willing to do, or at least that was the thinking until the heavyweight champion of the world, Cassius Clay announced his membership in the NOI in 1964 and changed his name to Muhammad Ali. It also cemented the perception among the broader public that the NOI was a New York entity and was led by Muhammad's charismatic lieutenant, Malcolm X. He was featured prominently throughout the film, and it was clear that when it came to the press and the public, Malcolm was the much more compelling figure.

Malcolm X became the face of the NOI. So much so, in fact, that many people believed that he, and not Muhammad, actually led the movement. While that was not true, and Malcolm did everything in his power to deflect any such notion, the damage had been done. The two men's relationship would continue to deteriorate until Malcolm was forced out of the organization in 1964 and assassinated the following year, an event that would also limit the NOI's appeal into the future. And finally, the rumors of sexual impropriety within the NOI on the part of Muhammad would continue to grow and finally come to a head with his death and the revelation that he had fathered at least fifteen children outside of his marriage to Clara, although his followers would claim that these children were conceived through plural marriages sanctioned in Islam.[75]

The rendering of the NOI as a third rail in African American life decided the battle of ideas between the integrationist sentiments and the more nationalist ideologies within the community. While notions of Black nationalism would continue to ebb and flow within the

[75] Clegg, *An Original Man*, 149-189; Curtis, *Islam in Black America*, 80; Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 196-200.

public consciousness throughout the remainder of the twentieth century (including the rise of the Black Power Movement in the 1960s and 1970s, and the reemergence of the Nation of Islam in the 1980s and 1990s) the die had been caste as to the boundaries of legitimate means of achieving success. African Americans would remain between their dual identities, unable to shed either one completely in order to claim a different reality. They would remain in the liminal space between restriction and possibility and must develop new strategies to negotiate that space into the future.

CONCLUSION

The 1960s would prove to be a pivotal decade in African-American history. The Civil Rights Movement, which had gotten its start during World War II and had transitioned into a new stage in the mid-1950s, would accelerate to new heights in the 1960s. This phase of the movement would culminate with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, after the passage of these two seminal pieces of legislation, the movement would pivot once again, this time to issues of poverty in the urban north and the rural south to make tangible the legislative successes of the movement.

As the movement sought to transition from challenging *de jour* segregation to *de facto* segregation, it also shifted its geographical focus, moving from the south to the north. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference chose Chicago as the site of the next phase of their work. Without any racist laws to challenge, the SCLC joined forces with Al Raby, who served as the nominal head of the loosely-organized Coordinating Council of Community Organizations and sought to challenge the conditions that affected the urban poor, such as substandard housing, schools, and economic dislocation. Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley, who had ignored many of these concerns before King's arrival, sent building inspectors to enforce violations and undercut the claims of neglect. At the end of the Chicago Freedom

Movement, there had been little improvement in the lives of African Americans concentrated on the South and West Sides of Chicago.[1]

Ultimately, the issues of urban poverty would confound policymakers and activists as an ever-increasing amount of government programs failed to significantly change the plight of those who appeared to be unextractable from the bottom of the nation's socioeconomic ladder. Meanwhile, the decade of the 1960s also saw a rise in highly-visible examples of African American achievement that for many people came to symbolize racial progress. From Sidney Poitier becoming the first African American to win an Academy Award for best actor in a motion picture for his role in *Lilies of the Field,* to Bill Cosby winning several Emmy awards for his role in the television series *I Spy*, to the success of Motown recording company in permanently blurring the lines between African American music and popular music and declaring themselves the "Sound of Young America," to the election of more African Americans to public office, including the election of Cleveland Mayor as the first African American mayor of a major city in the United States, to the ever-increasing numbers of African Americans reaching into the middle and even upper-middle class, there was enough evidence to argue that progress was certainly being made.[2]

---

[1] Mary Lou Finley, Bernard LaFayette, Jr., James R. Ralph, and Pam Smith, eds., *The Chicago Freedom Movement: Martin Luther King Jr. and Civil Rights Activism in the North* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015).

[2] Seymour Korman, "Sidney Poitier, 1st Negro, Wins Oscar: 'Jones' Best Film POITIERO, 1ST NEGRO, WINS FILM OSCAR," *Chicago Tribune*, April 14, 1964, 1. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/sidney-poitier-1st-negro-wins-oscar/docview/179443210/se-2?accountid=14657 (Accessed May 11, 2022); "'I SPY' COSBY WINS EMMY FOR TV ROLE: VAN DYKE, HOPE SHOWS GET 4 AWARDS EACH," *Chicago Tribune,* May 23, 1966, C19.

Yes, African Americans had lived in the space between racialized restriction and limitless possibilities in the past, but now more African Americans were actualizing possibilities that had seemed impossible even a decade earlier, so the argument went. Soon the question was asked: why, then, were a significant portion of African Americans still unable to lift themselves up? To answer this question, many people turn their attention to notions of a permanent underclass whose opportunities were not limited by racism, but rather by their culture. These notions of a "ghetto" culture meant that now it was the poor and disadvantaged who bore the primary responsibility for their failure to conform to normative societal expectations, which in turn led to a level of familial dysfunction that further limited their opportunities and life outcomes. Failing schools that had neither integrated nor improved significantly since *Brown v. Board of Education* had promised the end of racial segregation in public education soon became inundated with a never-ender cycle of plans and reforms designed to improve the educational outcomes of students who were deemed underachieving, yet this new logic claimed that it was the *culture* of the students and the *values* they were (or were not) being taught at home that bore the primary responsibility for this failure.[3]

---

http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/i-spy-cosby-wins-emmy-tv-role/docview/178986239/se-2?accountid=14657 (Accessed May 11, 2022); Whitney Young, Jr. "To be Equal: Election Victory for Democracy." *The Chicago Defender*, November 18, 1967. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/be-equal/docview/493183267/se-2?accountid=14657 (Accessed May 11, 2022); For information on Motown's "crossover appeal," please consult Andrew Flory, *I Hear a Symphony: Motown and Crossover R&B* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

[3] The books on this subject are numerous, but the most definitive is William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

As a result of these factors, there was a split in the African American community where a significant minority was able to take advantage of the economic openings in the United States to participate in the consumer marketplace in ways previously unimaginable, while the majority of African Americans were left behind economically. With large, white-owned corporations now willing, and in some instances eager, to do business with African American consumers these businesses targeted African Americans in their advertising to cultivate them as loyal consumers. Now that they are loyal consumers, African Americans can leverage their consumer status to demand that the company engage in certain business practices to continue to receive their business. From employing more African Americans in certain roles, diversifying their supplier base, and treating African American customers with respect, these expectations all became standard among African American consumers.[4]

Despite the ability to extract some concessions for corporations seeking to cultivate and attract African American consumers, no amount of African American customers could make these corporations operate under the same dual mandate of servicing the larger community while seeking to earn a profit that African American-owned businesses engaged in. Insurance companies provide an illuminating example here. After years of engaging in discrimination against African American customers, large insurance companies began offering their products and services to them. To do this, these insurance companies enlisted entrepreneurial African Americans as franchise owners, operating with a license from the large corporation to sell insurance on their behalf. While these new insurance companies were technically owned by

[4] This phenomenon, described as "the splintering of Black America," has been chronicled most thoroughly, although not exclusively, by Eugene Robinson in his book *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America* (New York: Doubleday, 2010).

African Americans, their franchises lacked the access to the financial capital necessary to engage in the dual mandate as it relates to serving as a financial service company in the African American community. These franchises cannot underwrite mortgages or furnish business loans. While they may provide jobs and some financial advancement for their owner-operators they cannot serve the financial needs of the broader community.[5]

Ultimately Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company would succumb to the lack of continued operational support and the ability of more and more African American consumers to find other insurance options and fall into insolvency in the 1990s. The failure of Supreme Liberty was emblematic of a pattern among African American businesses who ultimately found themselves left behind as more economic opportunities and resources allowed their customer base to take their business elsewhere. More recently, a similar situation occurred with the now-defunct Johnson Publishing Company. Johnson, in many ways, became a victim of many of the same market forces they unleashed by demonstrating the purchasing power and vitality of the African American consumer market. Large white-owned magazine publishers realized that placing African American models and celebrities on the covers and the pages of their magazines would entice African Americans to purchase their publications. Whereas in the past, *Ebony* may have very well been the only magazine on the newsstand with a black face on the cover, soon

[5] Robert Weems, Jr., "Racial Desegregation and Black Chicago Business: The Case Studies of the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company and the Chicago Metropolitan Assurance Company," in Robert Weems, Jr. and Jason P. Chambers (eds.) *Building the Black Metropolis: African American Entrepreneurship in Chicago* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

that was no longer the case. Once the African American market was opened, it was an open competition for their dollars and not enough to go around.[6]

The tide of consumer integration also attributed to the decline in popularity of the Nation of Islam. As African Americans gained access to more economic opportunities the logic of the NOI lost its appeal. The falling out with, and ultimate assassination of Malcolm X meant that the nation lost one of its key recruiters. There was no one in the NOI in the 1960s as charismatic as Malcolm X, not even his ultimate replacement Louis X, who would rise to prominence as Louis Farrakhan. Not even converting the Heavyweight Boxing Champion of the World, Cassius Clay, and giving him the Islamic name Muhammad Ali could not reverse the organization's fortunes. Soon, word of Elijah Muhammad's numerous children with his secretaries, whom followers would later claim were his wives in the Muslim tradition of plural marriage also dealt a blow to the organization. After Muhammad died in 1975, his family would fight over his estate, proving that what had been held as a collective endeavor was the personal bequest of one person, and his successor and son, Wallace D. Muhammad, would transition the organization into Suni Islam and end the anti-white nationalism that had defined the organization. Disillusioned by the theological shift, Farrakhan would rebuild the organization in its original form, buying many of the old buildings and appointing himself as the leader.[7]

---

[6] Ibid.; Rachel Siegel, "Johnson Publishing Company, the ex-publisher of Ebony and Jet magazines, files for bankruptcy," *The Washington Post*, April 10, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/04/10/johnson-publishing-company-which-produced-ebony-jet-magazines-files-bankruptcy/ (accessed May 11, 2022).

[7] Claude Andrew Clegg III, *An Original Man: The Life & Times of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

The persistent lack of economic opportunities and the persistence of an African American underclass made for a fertile recruiting ground for this reincarnated NOI in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Soon, elements of the NOI's teaching would appear in African American expressive culture, with clips of speeches appearing in popular hip hop songs, and Farrakhan becoming a leader to a generation of African American men who found his message of personal accountability in the face of unchanged white racism appealing. This gendered appeal culminated with the Million Man March in Washington, D.C. in 1995, with a call for the men to atone for failing to take responsibility for their communities and committing themselves to do better. Despite the showing, the NOI ultimately failed to attract a critical mass of African Americans to their side; while Farrakhan limited his public contempt of Christianity, his theology and the constant charges of antisemitism, and the endless debates about the matter in which he failed to compellingly disprove them, ultimately restricted his and the NOI's appeal.[8]

Perhaps no other site of aspiration has seen the tensions of African American life play out more so than housing and homeownership. Into the 1960s and 1970s, as housing discrimination was outlawed, lending institutions and the federal government continued to deny access to homeownership to African Americans. Furthermore, homeownership itself because a heavy burden as the programs that existed to help them from the Federal Housing Authority and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development only exacerbated heavy racial segregation in areas with declining home values. To this very day, African American rates of homeownership have remained stagnant since 1968 and African Americans still encounter racial

[8] Perhaps the most balance account of the modern NOI under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan, please consult Mattias Gardell's *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996).

discrimination when seeking mortgages, having to sue to compel lenders to provide them the same terms on their loans as similarly situated white applicants.[9]

Ultimately, this dissertation wrestles with the question of progress among American Americans. Given their existence in the liminal reality between possibility and restriction, have African Americans made progress? To this question, there is no easy answer. This is because to answer this question, we must define the terms on which we will measure progress, and what progress is. A criterion can be established that proves African Americans are progressing in American society. From the ascension of prominent figures to ever-increasing heights of success, these individual achievements are held up as evidence of collective success. Yet another criterion—the persistence of racial discrimination, the racial wealth gaps, disparities in any number of societal indicators, continued incidents of police violence against unarmed African Americans—can be used to argue that no progress is being made at all. Then, it is the criteria of progress itself that is the contested value in African American life and is the product of the liminality of the African American experience.

Even when African Americans disagree on whether or not progress *has* been made, the overwhelming majority believe that progress *can* be made. There remains a deep and abiding hope in their ability to successfully navigate life in the United States, even if their hope rests on fundamentally transforming the economic, political, and racial pillars that the United States has

---

[9] Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership. Justice, Power, and Politics* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 1-23; Emily Flitter, "A Black homeowner is suing Wells Fargo, claiming discrimination," *New York Times*, March 21, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/21/business/wells-fargo-mortgages-discrimination-suit.html (Accessed May 11, 2022).

rested on since its founding. The successes that African Americans have had in reforming deeply entrenched inequities in the past mean that for many there remains that same potential for change in the future. But reform is not transformation, and the liminality of the African American experience has evolved but the divergent sides have yet to be completely reconciled. That is the work that is left to be done.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ARCHIVAL SOURCES

Abbott, Robert S. Abbott – John H. Sengstacke Family papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Robert J. Ahrens papers. Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.

Claude A. Barnett papers. Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.

Etta Moten Barnett papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Bethel New Life records. Chicago Public Library, Harold Washington Library Center, Special Collections, Neighborhood History Research Collection, Chicago, IL.

Charles Bishop papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Timuel Black papers. Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.

Timuel D. Black, Jr. papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Willie Box papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters records. Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.

Leroy Bryant papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Ben Burns papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Horace R. Cayton papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Commission on Race and Housing Records, 1955-1958. The University of Chicago, Special Collections Research Center, Chicago, IL.

Chicago Afro-American Analytic Union Catalog archives Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Chicago SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) History Project archive. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Chicago Urban League Records, 1916-2000. University of Illinois at Chicago, Richard J. Daley Library, Special Collections & University Archives, Chicago, IL.

Charles A. Davis papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

William L. Dawson papers. Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.

Earl A. Dickerson papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Richard Durham papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Englewood Hospital records. Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.

Charles J. Evans papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Greater Lawndale Conservation Commission records. Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.

Greater Lawndale Conservation Commission records. University of Illinois at Chicago, Richard J. Daley Library, Special Collections & University Archives, Chicago, IL.

Herbert Hill papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Edward Holmgren papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference Records, 1895-2011. The University of Chicago, Special Collections Research Center, Chicago, IL.

Illinois Writers Project: "Negro in Illinois" papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Rev. J. H. Jackson papers. Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.

Marjorie Stewart Joyner papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

The Links, Incorporated – Center Area papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Dorothy Rogers Livingston papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Joseph Logsdon papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

J. Fred MacDonald papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

William McBride papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Ralph Metcalfe papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Arthur W. Mitchell papers. Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.

Morgan Park Co-op Credit Union archives. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Archibald J. Motley, Jr., papers and photographs collection. Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.

Olivet Baptist Church (Chicago, Ill.) records. Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.

Parkway Community House records, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.

Ethel L. Payne papers. Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.

Rusty Restuccia papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Joseph W. Rollins, Jr. papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Era Bell Thompson papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Dempsey Travis papers. Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.

Dempsey Travis papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

United Transport Service Employees of America records. Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.

Charles Walton papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Leonard Walsh papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

The Woodlawn Organization records. Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.

Irma Cayton Wertz papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

Rev. Addie and Rev. Claude Wyatt papers. Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago, IL.

NEWSPAPERS AND PERIODICALS

Advertising Age

Chicago Bee

Chicago Defender

Chicago Daily News

Chicago Daily Times

Chicago Sun

Chicago Sun-Times

Chicago Daily Tribune

Ebony

Jet

The Pittsburgh Courier

SCHOLARLY MONOGRAPHS

Baldwin, Davarian L. *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, & Black Urban Life*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Bell, David and Joanne Hollows, et al. *Historicizing Lifestyle: Mediating Taste, Consumption and Identity from the 1900s to 1970s*. Aldershot, England Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006.

Best, Wallace D. *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915-1952*. Princeton University Press, 2005.

Black, Jr., Timuel D. *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's First Wave of Black Migration*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press; Chicago: DuSable Museum of African American History, 2003.

———. *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's Second Generation of Black Migration*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press; Chicago: DuSable Museum of African American History, 2007.

Bone, Robert. *The Muse in Bronzeville: African American Creative Expression in Chicago, 1932-1950*. Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2011.

Cayton, Horace. *Long Old Road: An Autobiography*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1964.

Clegg, Claude A. *An Original Man: the Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.

Cohen, Lizabeth. *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

———. *A Consumer's Republic: the Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. 1st ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

Condit, Carl. *Chicago, 1930-1970*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.

Curtis, Edward E. *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.

Denning, Michael. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in* Diamond, Andrew J. *Chicago on the Twentieth Century*. London; New York: Verso, 1998.

Dolinar, Brian. *The Black Cultural Front: Black Writers and Artists of the Depression Generation*. Jackson

Dolinar, Brian, ed. *The Negro in Illinois: The WPA Papers*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013.

Diamond, Andrew J. *Chicago on the Make: Power and Inequality in a Modern City*. Berkeley: University of California Press

———. *Mean Streets: Chicago Youths and the Everyday Struggle for Empowerment in the Multiracial City, 1908-1969*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

Drake, St. Clair and Horace R. Cayton. *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1945.

Dyja, Thomas. *The Third Coast: When Chicago Built the American Dream*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2013.

Essien-Udom, E. U. *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971.

Evanzz, Karl. *The Messenger: the Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad*. 1st ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1999.

Flory, Andrew. *I Hear a Symphony: Motown and Crossover R&B*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017.

Gaines, Kevin K. *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

Gellman, Erik S. *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

Green, Adam. *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Greer, Brenna Wynn. *Represented: The Black Imagemakers Who Reimagined African American Citizenship*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019.

Grimshaw, William J. *Bitter Fruit: Black Politics and the Chicago Machine, 1931-1991*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Grossman, James R. *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Henderson, Alexa Benson. *Atlanta Life Insurance Company: Guardian of Black Economic Dignity*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990.

Hine, Darlene Clark and John McCluskey, Eds. *The Black Chicago Renaissance*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012.

Horne, Gerald. *The Rise and Fall of the Associated Negro Press: Claude Barnett's Pan-African News and the Jim Crow Paradox*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017.

Jenkins, Betty, Susan Phillis, and Metropolitan Applied Research Center. *Black Separatism: A Bibliography*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976.

Johnson, John H., and Lerone Bennett, Jr. *Succeeding Against the Odds*. New York, NY: Warner Books, 1989.

Kennedy, David M. *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Kimble, Jr., Lionel. *A New Deal for Bronzeville: Housing, Employment & Civil Rights in Black Chicago, 1935-1955*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015.

Knupfer, Anne Meis. *The Chicago Black Renaissance and Women's Activism*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

Lincoln, C. Eric. *The Black Muslims in America*. Revised edition. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982.

Mills, Charles. *State of White Supremacy: Racism, Governance, and the United States*. Stanford University Press, 2011.

Muhammad, Elijah. *The Supreme Wisdom*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Islam, 1957.

Mullen, Bill V. *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935-46*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999.

Newman, Mark, and British Association for American Studies. *Black Nationalism in American History: From the Nineteenth Century to the Million Man March*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018.

Pacyga, Dominic A. *Chicago: A Biography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Reed, Christopher Robert. *Black Chicago's First Century*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2005.

———. *The Rise of Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1920-1929*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011.

———. *The Chicago NAACP and the Rise of Black Professional Leadership, 1910-1966*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.

———. *Depression Comes to the South Side: Protest and Politics in the Black Metropolis, 1930-1933*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press,

Rampersad, Arnold. *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume II: 1941-1967, I Dream a World*, 2nd ed. Oxford

Retman, Sonnet. *Real Folks: Race and Genre in the Great Depression*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011.

Robinson, Eugene. *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*. New York: Doubleday, 2010.

Rowley, Hazel. *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Saulnier, Raymond J., and the National Bureau of Economic Research. Financial Research Program. *Urban Mortgage Lending by Life Insurance Companies*. [New York]: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1950.

Schlabach, Elizabeth Schroeder. *Along the Streets of Bronzeville: Black Chicago's Literary Landscape*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013.

Shabazz, Rashad. *Spatializing Blackness: Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015.

Sitkoff, Harvard. *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Sparrow, James T. *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Spear, Allan H. *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.

Spinney, Robert G. *City of Big Shoulders: A History: The Transformation of Chicago*. DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000.

Stuart, Merah Steven. *An Economic Detour: A History of Insurance in the Lives of American Negroes*. College Park, Md.: McGrath Pub. Co, 1969.

Susman, Warren. *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003.

Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership. Justice, Power, and Politics*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019.

Van Deburg, William L. *Modern Black Nationalism: From Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.

Vylder, Florent de. *Life Insurance Theory: Actuarial Perspectives*. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997.

Walker, Dennis. *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood: Elijah Muhammad, Louis Farrakhan, and the Nation of Islam*. Atlanta: Clarity Press, 2005.

Walker-McWilliams, Marcia. *Reverend Addie Wyatt: Faith and the Fight for Labor, Gender, and Racial Equality*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016.

Weems, Robert E. *Black Business in the Black Metropolis: The Chicago Metropolitan Assurance Company, 1925-1985*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.

Weems, Jr., Robert E. and Jason P. Chambers, eds. *Building the Black Metropolis: African American Entrepreneurship in Chicago*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017.

Williams, Jakobi. *From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013.

Wilson, William J. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

DISSERTATIONS AND THESES

Brooks, Dwight Ernest. "Consumer Markets and Consumer Magazines: Black America and the Consumption of Culture." PhD Diss. University of Iowa, 1991.

Greene, Kevin. "'Just a Dream': Community, Identity, and the Blues of Big Bill Broonzy." PhD Diss. University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2011.

Hageman, Dave. "Deindustrialization and the Urban Landscape: Race, Space, And Memory in Back of The Yards, 1950-1980." PhD Diss. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015.

Hayes, Worth. "In Our Own Hands: Black Private Education in Chicago, 1940-1986." PhD Diss. Emory University, 2010.

Jeffrey Helgeson, "Striving in Black Chicago: Migration, Work, and the Politics of Neighborhood Change 1935-1965." PhD Diss. University of Illinois at Chicago, 2008.

Kent, Kenneth. "The Missing Link': Black Police and Black Power in Chicago, 1965-1987." PhD. Diss. University of Florida, 2015.

Kryczka, Nicholas. "Selective Renewal: Choice, Community, And School in Post-Civil Rights Chicago." PhD. Diss. University of Chicago, 2019.

Losier, Toussaint. "Prison House of Nations: Police Violence and Mass Incarceration in The Long Course of Black Insurgency in Illinois, 1953-1987." PhD. Diss. University of Chicago, 2014.

McCammack, Brian. "Recovering Green in Bronzeville: An Environmental and Cultural History of the African American Great Migration to Chicago, 1915-1940." PhD Diss. Harvard University, 2012.

Rocksborough-Smith, Ian. "Contentious Cosmopolitans: Black Public History and Civil Rights in Cold War Chicago, 1942-1972." PhD Diss. University of Toronto, 2014.

Searcy, Jennifer. "The Voice of The Negro: African American Radio, WVON, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Chicago." PhD Diss. Loyola University Chicago, 2013

Todd-Breeland, Elizabeth. "'To Reshape and Redefine Our World': African American Political Organizing for Education in Chicago, 1968-1988." PhD Diss. University of Chicago, 2010.

Watts, Cadis. "Black Mosaic: Expanding Contours of Black Identity and Black Politics." PhD Diss. Duke University, 2011.

SCHOLARLY ARTICLES

Allen, Ernest. "Religious Heterodoxy and Nationalist Tradition: The Continuing Evolution of the Nation of Islam." *The Black Scholar* 26, no. 3 (1996): 2-34.

Berg, Herbert. "Mythmaking in the African American Muslim Context: The Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam, and the American Society of Muslims." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 3 (2005): 685-703.

Blayton, J. B. "Are Negroes Now in Business, Business Men?" *Journal of Negro History* 18, no. 1 (January 1933): 56-65.

Bunche, Ralph J. "A Critical Analysis of the Tactics and Programs of Minority Groups." *The Journal of Negro Education* 4, no. 3 (July 1935): 308-320.

———. "A Critique of New Deal Social Planning as it Affects Negroes." *The Journal of Negro Education* 5, no. 1 (January 1936): 59-65.

Clegg III, Claude Andrew. "Rebuilding the Nation: The Life and Work of Elijah Muhammad, 1946-1954." *The Black Scholar* 26, no. 3 (1996): 49–59.

Colley, Zoe. "'All America Is a Prison': The Nation of Islam and the Politicization of African American Prisoners, 1955–1965." *Journal of American Studies* 48, no. 2 (2014): 393–415.

Curtis, Edward E. "Islamizing the Black Body: Ritual and Power in Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam." *Religion and American Culture* 12, no. 2 (2002): 167–196.

Dratch, Howard. "The Politics of Child Care in the 1940s," *Science & Society* 38, No. 2 (Summer, 1974): 167-204.

Frazier, E. Franklin. "The Status of the Negro in the American Social Order." *The Journal of Negro Education* 4, no. 3 (July 1935): 293-307.

Fredericksen, Hazel A. "The Program for Day Care of Children of Employed Mothers," *Social Science Review* 17, No. 2 (Jun. 1943): 159-169.

Gibson, Dawn-Marie. *"Making Original Men: Elijah Muhammad, The Nation of Islam, and The Fruit of Islam." Journal of Religious History* 44, no. 3 (2020): 319-337.

Huzar, Elias. "Selective Service Policy 1940-1942," *The Journal of Politics* 4, no. 2 (May 1942): 201-226.

Losier, Toussaint. "… For Strictly Religious Reason[s]: Cooper v. Pate and the Origins of the Prisoners' Rights Movement," *Souls* 15, nos. 1-2 (2013): 19-38.

O'Leary, Paul M. "Wartime Rationing and Governmental Organization," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 39, No. 6 (Dec. 1945): 1089-1106.

Paschal, Andrew G. "The Paradox of Negro Progress." *The Journal of Negro History* 16, no. 3 (July 1931): 251-265.

Reid-Pharr, Robert F. "Speaking through Anti-Semitism: The Nation of Islam and the Poetics of Black (Counter) Modernity." *Social Text* 49, no. 49 (1996): 133–147.

Sweezy, Paul M. "Rationing and the War Economy," *Science & Society*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Institute on the Problems of the War (Winter, 1943): 64-71.

Wesley, Charles H. "The Concept of Negro Inferiority in American Thought." *The Journal of Negro History* 25, no. 4 (October 1940): 540-560.

Zangrando, Joanna Schneider and Robert L. Zangrando, "Black Protest: A Rejection of the American Dream." *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Dec., 1970): 141-159.