

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

**Flipping The Script: The Usurpation of Black Racial Politics**

How Concepts of Usurpational Idealism Supplant and Dupliciously  
Reinterpret Representations of Black American Belonging and Identity

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Ethnic Studies

by

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## Abbreviations

ACS	American Colonization Society
AMRS	American Moral Reform Society
CCM	Colored Conventions Movement
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
CRT	Critical Race Theory
CWL	Colored Women's League
CWLW	Colored Women's League of Washington
FAAW	Federation of African American Women
MIA	Montgomery Improvement Association
MOWM	March on Washington Movement
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NACW	National Association of Colored Women
NLCW	National League of Colored Women
RCB	Racial Colorblindness
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
WPA	Works Progress Administration (formally the Workers' Education Project)

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

### **Flipping the Script: The Usurpation of Black Racial Politics**

How Concepts of Usurpational Idealism Supplant and Dupliciously Reinterpret Representations of Black American Belonging and Identity

by

E. Nicole Vines

Doctorate of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Ethnic Studies  
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Dr. Jennifer Nájera and Dr. Dylan Rodriguez, Co-Chairs

Scholars in fields that explore Black historiographies have examined the various relationships between African Americans and identity formation and the ways in which African Americans crafted meaning between the concept of Americanness and belonging. The exploration of the lives of African descended peoples throughout the Diaspora beyond narrow interpretations has facilitated an epistemological body of knowledge that underscores the vast contributions peoples of African descent have made globally. From a perspective primarily situated on the experiences of African Americans in the United States, this research contributes to the body of scholarship within the field of Black Studies in that it furthers our understanding of how African Americans demonstrated agency by defining and exercising their rightful belonging within American society.

Whether it be redefining their identity and belonging through the facilitation of concepts such as racial colorblindness, convening conferences to strategize and leverage their desires, or an exploration of those who ignored rigid boundaries that limited the

accessibility of exercising legal entities, this research highlights the experiences of African Americans who fought for and redefined American identity while also maintaining a connection to their Blackness.

Further, this research aims to explore various ways African descended peoples in the United States resisted legal and social subjugation and, as a means of forging beyond liminal belonging, constructed identities legible within the nation-state. Understanding their relationship to American belonging as precarious, African Americans crafted and navigated their identities in myriad ways to gain access to what should have been rightfully theirs, although not always legally or socially extended to them.

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### Key Words

African American Womanism; Birthright Citizenship; Black Identity Formation; Black Racial Politics; Colored Conventions Movement; Free Communities of Color; “I Have a Dream speech;” Interest Convergence Theory; Morality; National Association of Colored Women (NACW); *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, 1896; Politics of Respectability; Public Identity; Racial Colorblindness; Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; Self-determination; *The Colored American*, (New York) 1837 - 1842; The March on Washington, 1963; U.S. Civil Rights Movement, 1950s/60s; Usurpatational Idealism; White Fragility

*“We are Americans, and as Americans, we would speak to Americans. We address you not as aliens nor as exiles, humbly asking to be permitted to dwell among you in peace; but we address you as American citizens asserting their rights on their own native soil. Neither do we address you as enemies, (although the recipients of innumerable wrongs;) but in the spirit of patriotic good will... We ask that in our native land, we shall not be treated as strangers, and worse than strangers.”*<sup>1</sup>

~ Frederick Douglass

*“...the Afro-American... “is a unique creation; he has no counterpart anywhere, and no predecessors.” ...[h]is plight in the United States has been that of an “exile in his own land,” of an “unloved stranger” excluded from the American Dream. The “cruel and totally inescapable ambivalence of his status in his country” has forced him to wage a persistent battle for self-identity and self-esteem.”*<sup>2</sup>

~ Willard B. Gatewood, Jr.

*“The story of the Negro in America is the story of America –or, more precisely, it is the story of Americans. It is not a very pretty story: the story of a people is never very pretty. The Negro in America, gloomily referred to as that shadow which lies athwart our national life, is far more than that. He is a series of shadows, self-created intertwining, which now we helplessly battle. One may say that the Negro in America does not really exist except in the darkness of our minds... In this arena, the black man acquires quite another aspect from that which he has in life. We do not know what to do with him in life; if he breaks our sociological and sentimental image of him, we are panic-stricken, and we feel ourselves betrayed. When he violates the image, therefore, he stands in the greatest danger (sensing which, we uneasily suspect that he is very often playing a part for our benefit); and what is not always so apparent but is equally true, we are then in some danger ourselves –hence our retreat or our blind and immediate retaliation.”*<sup>3</sup>

~James Baldwin

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Douglass, “Proceedings of the Colored National Convention, held in Rochester, July 6th, 7th, and 8th, 1853.,” National Convention of the Free People of Color, Rochester, NY, 1853. *Colored Conventions Project Digital Records*, accessed October 20, 2022, 9. <https://omeka.coloredconventions.org/items/show/458>.

<sup>2</sup> Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., “Introduction” in *Smoked Yankees and the Struggle for Empire: Letters from Negro Soldiers, 1898 – 1902* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1987), 3. Cited by Gatewood, the quotations from James Baldwin are found in his *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963) and *Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Dial Press, 1955).

<sup>3</sup> James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction: 1948–1985* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021), 75.

## I. Introduction

It is safe to say that my family, among other things, profoundly influenced my life. My story, my search for my identity, and the process of grappling with the complexities of belonging as well as the realities of dissociation as it relates to “Americanness”—the ideological underpinning of this project, in similar ways, connects to countless stories that have followed African Americans on parallel quests. The basis of this research project is grounded in examining how African Americans asserted agency and defined their own identities and selfhood in juxtaposition to how dominant society attempted to position them. Through exploring various histories of African descendant peoples (which contributed to this understanding), this research works to further an understanding of what it means to be an American of African descent in the United States. It is a narrative around identity that is both fraught with questioning how African descendant peoples fought to be included within the narrative of this lofty American “experiment” and a story that makes their desires for belonging even more salient.

Relating the concept of identity formation to my story, I was born and raised in the borough of the Bronx in New York City in the early 1970s. In the South Bronx, burnt-out and abandoned buildings, a vanquished community plagued by governmental neglect, over-policing, and rampant drug access were undoubtedly a part of what I saw growing up. Still, beyond that, I was surrounded by a stable family unit that ultimately kept me grounded. Raised in a somewhat traditional household, my parents and extended family members were instrumental in shaping my growth.

My mother was primarily a stay-at-home wife and mother until I was about thirteen, and my father, a truck driver—an owner-operator, to be exact. Throughout my childhood, my father held various jobs in the trucking industry. After being passed over for countless opportunities he was more than qualified for, my father came to the realization that others controlling his income did not work to his advantage. He found it necessary to work for himself to support his family. Taking a leap of faith, he began operating his own business as an independent contractor. Being a business owner facilitated a sense of self-worth that he did not experience working for someone else in general society. His experiences illuminate the shared complex societal relationship Black people often face in society and the constant fight to live by and on one's terms; for my father, the battle took its toll. He died prematurely at the age of forty-eight (alcohol was his vice of choice, to which I blame the stress he encountered being a Black man in American society). During the time we spent together loading the trailer, performing the annual chore of painting the white tire rims on his truck, and making sure not to get any paint on *his* tires or, on our bike rides throughout Crotona Park, I am grateful that he shared stories to which I mostly listened.

My father, John Vines, Jr., was born in Greene County, North Carolina, in 1941 (the same year as Emmett Till<sup>4</sup>), and growing up, I remember hearing stories of how he and his older brother George rode their bikes to escape the assaults from gangs of young white boys who had threatened to kill them because of —insert any reason here—the reality of them simply being Black. Eventually, he and Uncle George were sent from the deep South to live in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As a Black person raised in the deep South, my father developed a particular “toughness,” was keenly aware of his racialized existence, and wanted his children to know the impact of “race” and racism we would face in our lives. He was able to convey his experiences through his stories and revealed to me what I would inevitably come to know about “race” in America.

When I was of age to date, my father’s most infamous statement was, “now, you know I love you, but if you bring a white boy home, I *will* disown you.” Strong-willed, my response was to tell my father he was wrong for conveying that sentiment because we were raised to accept everyone regardless of skin color. From seeing his interactions with other truckers and people around the neighborhood, I knew my father did not “hate” all white people, so I was perplexed about why he would tell me that. In the early 1970s, our neighborhood was racially and ethnically diverse. Daily I saw other Asian, Black,

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<sup>4</sup> History.com Editors, “Emmett Till,” *History.com* (A&E Television Networks, December 2, 2009), <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/emmett-till-1>. Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Black youth, was murdered in August 1955 in a racist attack that shocked the nation and provided a catalyst for the emerging civil rights movement. A Chicago native, Till was visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi, when he was accused of harassing a local white woman. Several days later, relatives of the woman abducted Till, brutally beating and killing him before disposing of his body in a nearby river. Till’s devastated mother insisted on a public, open-casket funeral for her son to shed light on the violence inflicted on Black people in the South. Till’s murderers were acquitted, but his death galvanized civil rights activist nationwide.

and Latina/o's and the few white folks who had not yet abandoned the community. During the summer, whether it be playing outside or leaning out the window, it was like watching TV; there were various characters, each with rich stories to tell. Then, towards the late 1970s, things began to change. My neighborhood experienced Asian and white abandonment of the inner cities, now referred to as "white flight." Our community underwent a racial demographic shift –Black and Latinx people in the neighborhood were all left behind.

In some ways, communal alienation created a stronger sense of community. Within a two-block radius, it felt familiar –neighbors knew each other, helped each other, and for the most part, respected each other. "Mr. Johnny" (how my father was referenced) was a critical male figure in our community, providing our family with a bit of insulation from some of the adverse events in our neighborhood. However, that "safety" did not stop him from wanting his children to understand the social realities we would eventually be forced to confront as adults.

While impactful later in my life, initially, my father's stories did not resonate with me at that time because I was, through my mother's intentions, raised in "cosmopolitan" New York (as much as one could in the South Bronx). To tap into "better" educational resources and give my brother and me an educational experience beyond the confines of our neighborhood, we utilized my maternal grandfather's address (he owned his home in the southeast Soundview area of the Bronx). I attended a community-based school with a racially and ethnically diverse student population of African American, Asian, Italian, Polish, Native American, and folks of Puerto Rican descent.

In the 1970s, in the aftermath of successful Black political organizing, there was a push for greater parental oversight within school environments, and my mother was part of that push. Heavily involved in my school, holding a board seat on the Parent and Teachers Association (PTA), I understand now that the visibility and presence of involved Black parents shaped my early educational experiences in ways that, at the time, were beyond me. While I did not know why teachers treated me differently than the other Black students, I felt different, singled out as an “exceptional” Black child. My school was far from top-tier ranked. However, I was cognizant that I was not being scholastically “tracked” into underperforming classes. If anything, my parents pushed me to excel; academic excellence was my only job. As an educator, I have noticed that the approach of academic excellence in educational achievement is something pushed by many new United States immigrant families as they see education and industriousness as a means of success. After all, for parents, why sacrifice giving up all they have known and leave their native homelands only to produce mediocre progeny?

Through my mother’s lineage, both of her parents were first-generation, newly Americanized children of immigrants. My maternal grandparent’s lineage originated in the Caribbean West Indies; my maternal grandfather’s parents were from Barbados, and my maternal grandmother’s parents were from Jamaica. Although my maternal grandparents were divorced by the time I was born, growing up, I spent a considerable amount of time with each of them.<sup>5</sup> Family conversations would range from updating

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<sup>5</sup> My paternal grandparents were not in my life. My paternal grandmother died before I was born, and my paternal grandfather lived in Virginia. He and my father did not have the best relationship and I saw him only occasionally during the annual family reunion when we had the chance to attend.

each other on how we were doing in school to what we were watching on TV to other family gossip and drama. Unless someone had fallen asleep after the family meal and was reminded that they were “showing their color,” seldom were topics around “race” a central focus. Beyond my father’s “reminders,” “race” was not discussed within my mother’s family with any seriousness or concern. I specifically remember my grandmother going out of her way to dismiss the subject of “race.”

To that end of ignoring “race,” one childhood memory remains with me in adulthood. I was about nine years old, and after spending the day with my maternal grandmother, she took me back home. We were on a crowded New York City (NYC) public transit bus, and an older African American gentleman handed me a *JET* magazine and asked me to read a story from it.<sup>6</sup> I was petrified because someone I did not know was asking me to read in public, but my fear quickly allayed when my grandmother snatched the magazine out of my hand, shoved it back towards the gentleman, and curtly stated that I would not be reading anything from *that* magazine. I was relieved, and when we exited the bus, I asked my grandmother what magazine that was and why couldn’t I read it. Most, if not all, reading materials in our home were freely available to me, and *Reader’s Digest* magazines were at her house. I was not prevented from flipping through those, so what made *JET* so different? I remember seeing the beautiful depictions of

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<sup>6</sup> “Jet (Magazine),” *Wikipedia* (Wikimedia Foundation, August 7, 2022), Last modified, November 6, 2021. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jet\\_\(magazine\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jet_(magazine)). *Jet* is an American weekly digital magazine focusing on news, culture, and entertainment related to the African-American community. Founded in November 1951 by John H. Johnson of the Johnson Publishing Company in Chicago, Illinois, the magazine was billed as “The Weekly Negro News Magazine.” *Jet* chronicled the civil rights movement from its earliest years, including the murder of Emmett Till, the Montgomery bus boycott, and the activities of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

Black people throughout the magazine, but she dismissed it as “*some Black stuff that I need not be concerned with.*” Her tone let me know that that was not a conversation she would further comment on –I knew well enough to leave that topic alone.

My grandmother, Cassandra C. Escoffery, was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania, in 1922. She was the third daughter of Phillip and Lilian Escoffery but the first person from that familial lineage to be born into American citizenship via *jus soli* citizenship (the rule followed in the United States that the place of birth determines citizenship). I do not know enough about the family history, but after researching information about my family ancestry, U.S. Census records from 1930 that indicate that my grandmother’s parents, Phillip and Lilian Escoffery, were originally born in Jamaica and, for some reason (most likely employment), migrated and lived in Panama for at least fifteen years before eventually journeying and settling in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Although my grandmother was not raised in Panama, the family’s time there impacted her. The impact would cause her (and that portion of my family) to see and experience the world in a way that was indifferent to issues around “race” or racialization in America.

As far back as I could remember, from personal memories and experiences, my grandmother never identified with or immersed herself in Black culture. She internalized Blackness –culture, identity, and people as undesirable and distanced herself from what she viewed as unfavorable Blackness on varying levels. Visually, my grandmother was fair-skinned and had dominant European features and red-colored, fine, textured hair.

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<sup>7</sup> I surmised that information through United States Census records taken in 1930 which indicate that my grandmother’s oldest sister, Roseline Escoffery, was fifteen at the time of the U.S. Census in 1930 and lists her place of birth as Panama.

When she would introduce me as her granddaughter, there was often a double glance at me as if folks were taking time to process their disbelief. I am unsure if she ever did, but she *could* have “passed” for white. “Passing” is one of those taboo, not openly discussed topics in the African American community based on legacies of colorism. My grandmother was from the “paper-bag test” generation that believed that you should marry someone lighter skinned to control the complexion of your children and “lighten up” the skin tone of the familial lineage (I heard that more than once growing up).<sup>8</sup> Through Panamanian culture, my grandmother was heavily influenced by the colorism legacies of enslavement and racism. Noted by Michelle Barrios in “The Enduring System of Colorism,” “[r]acism in Panama is, as in most Latin American countries, a systematic virus that limits the opportunities of those who are not part of a “good race” or have “good hair.”<sup>9</sup> To this, I would add that throughout the Diaspora, racism has influenced how people of African descent see themselves and has often had deleterious psychological effects.

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<sup>8</sup> David Pilgrim, “Brown Paper Bag Test - February 2014,” *Jim Crow Museum - Ferris State University*, <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/question/2014/february.htm>. According to Henry Louis Gates, “Some of the brothers who came from New Orleans held a *bag party*. As a classmate explained it to me, a bag party was a New Orleans custom wherein a brown paper bag was stuck on the door. Anyone darker than the bag was denied entrance....” These were students at one of the nation’s flagship universities. They were African Americans at an institution with relatively few students of color. While there, they were scrutinized, doubted, and marginalized. And, yet a fraction of the group decided to practice their own brand of bigotry-deny entry (friendship) to any black person darker than a standard brown paper bag. Why exclude their darker brothers? Because they, meaning those with lighter skin, not only had a fetish for white skin and Eurocentric features, but they had internalized the racist notion that light skin is a marker of intellectual, cultural, social, and personal superiority-over and above darker people.

<sup>9</sup> Michelle Barrios, “The Enduring System of Colorism,” *The African Press Club* (The African Press Club, May 31, 2021), <https://www.africanpressclub.com/stories/the-enduring-system-of-colorism>.

Growing up, I spent a considerable amount of time with my grandmother. Her influence was a significant factor that initially contributed to my identity and understanding of my formative world. However, I would have to unlearn everything I was taught about “race” and the negative perception of Black people reinforced by my grandmother. It would take exploring the histories and experiences of African descended peoples for me to learn the actual accounts and impact of “race” and racialized experiences to grapple with my identity as a Black person. My grandmother passed away in 2018, and I love and respect her. Still, as a Black woman coming into my own understanding of self, conversations I would bring up to her about “race” were where our philosophies diverged and were the cause of some of our most contentious exchanges.

All of this is to say that many influences play a role in shaping our identities. My first-generation U.S.-born American grandmother disregarded “race” as significant in shaping one’s experiences –she subscribed more or less to the “boot-strap” ideology of “hard work,” taking you wherever you wanted to go in life. My father, a sixth-generation Black, U.S.-born American, was rooted in a deeper understanding of racialization’s challenges and systemic limitations. I understand my identity as informed by and sitting at the apex of the dichotomous experiences formed between my father and grandmother’s influences. This research project is an attempt to highlight the ways in which, through similar experiences, African descendants in the U.S. traversed and negotiated their identities of belonging.

The imagery of American nationhood paints the picture of its national identity through its motto of “E Pluribus Unum.” However, as it relates to the foundational ideals established within the nation, the national investment in maintaining a hierarchical racial status quo illuminates a duplicitous understanding and experience of belonging for racialized bodies. The national narrative created at the inception of the U.S. nation-state bases its identity on tropes of Black inferiority along with sentimental imagery of white benevolence. The U.S. constructed its identity on anti-Blackness and attempts to obscure those histories; the crafting of the racialized hierarchical status quo connects to the fundamental ethos of Americanism. Regarded as a preeminent American intellectual scholar, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois—most prolific in his ability to assess, critique, and foreshadow the effects of “race” in American society, pointed to the “color-line” as a determining factor toward achieving civil rights and social equality. W.E.B. Du Bois believed that until racialized ideologies were dismantled, “race” would be a persistent impediment to social progress for those racialized.

In 1903 when Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folk*, he articulated the complex relationship between Black belonging, identity, and Americanness. Within the collection of essays in “*Souls*,” as it relates to the African American experience in the U.S., one of the most germane referenced quotes is taken from “Of Our Spiritual Strivings.” In it, Du Bois states, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings;

two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”<sup>10</sup> For many African Americans (including myself) in this passage, Du Bois conveys the duality of being Black in America as it relates to the simultaneous in-betweenness of belonging and not belonging. The “warring” ideology, the tug between the desire of wanting to embody an identity and claim belonging to something you should rightfully be entitled to claim yet, at the same time, being simultaneously rejected through historical distortions and attempts to eradicate your existence —the “warring” ideals which produce an ideological bifurcation between Americanness and Blackness, is what sits at the heart of this project.

This research project is, in many ways, personal and tangentially thinking through my own evolution and the varying stages of understanding my own identity. The embodiment of the Black American identity is complex and multifaceted. From my grandparent’s stories to my parents and others, the narratives of African Americans who fought for and redefined Americanness, identity, and belonging need to be explored and situated beyond the monolith to which “white supremacy” affords it —through this research, I aim to do just that.

Scholars in fields that explore Black histories have examined the various relationships between African Americans and identity formation and the ways in which African Americans crafted meaning between the concept of Americanness and belonging. The exploration of the lives of African descended peoples throughout the Diaspora

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<sup>10</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994), 2.

beyond narrow interpretations has facilitated an epistemological body of knowledge that underscores the vast contributions African peoples have made globally. Primarily situated on the experiences of African descendant peoples in U.S. American society, this research contributes to the body of scholarship within the field of Black Studies in that it furthers our understanding of how African descendants demonstrated agency by defining and exercising their rightful belonging within American society. Whether it be redefining identities and belonging through the facilitation of concepts such as racial colorblindness, convening conferences to strategize and leverage their desires, or an exploration of those who ignored rigid boundaries that limited the accessibility of exercising legal entities, this research highlights the experiences of African Americans who fought for and redefined American identity while also maintaining a connection to their Blackness.

For many African Americans, this identity cannot be reduced to an either-or identity; it encompasses their essence, and the freedom dreams they dared to dream. Although there were attempts by the U.S. American nation-state to limit the establishment and exercise of rights, when not granted full equality or equitable opportunities, as stated by Martha S. Jones in *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America*, Black Americans “claimed an unassailable belonging, one grounded in birthright citizenship;”<sup>11</sup> their paths toward belonging would take many “*stony trodden*” roads.

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<sup>11</sup> Martha S. Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1.

This research project aims to explore various ways African descended peoples in the United States resisted legal and social subjugation and constructed identities legible within the nation-state to forge beyond liminal belonging. Understanding their relationship to American belonging as precarious, African Americans crafted and navigated their identities in myriad ways to gain access to what should have been rightfully theirs, although not always legally or socially extended to them. Throughout this research, I look to one strategy in particular used to exercise belonging; how Black people created what I contend is the incipience of the concept of racial colorblindness.

Racial colorblindness, as it relates to social perspectives regarding how race functions and operates within the U.S. society, was popularly adopted as a “race-neutral” social operating logic in the post-Civil Rights Movement Era of the 1960s. Centered on notions of individualism and meritocracy, racial colorblindness adopted the perspective that due to juridical notions of social equality, primarily the Civil Rights Act of 1964,<sup>12</sup> U.S. legislation that outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, society was on the cusp of moving beyond officially structured racial inequality. The discourse of racial colorblindness suggested the imminent possibility of constructing a “race-neutral” society premised on possibilities of equal opportunity for social achievement.

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<sup>12</sup> Civil Rights Act of 1964 § U. S. Public Law 88-352 (78 Stat. 241). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin. Provisions of this civil rights act forbade discrimination on the basis of sex, as well as, race in hiring, promoting, and firing. The Act prohibited discrimination in public accommodations and federally funded programs. It also strengthened the enforcement of voting rights and the desegregation of schools. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasam/civil-rights-center/statutes/civil-rights-act-of-1964>

Through exploration of the concept of racial colorblindness, scholars such as Ian Haney-López and Tim Wise position the mass appeal of racial colorblindness as having gained current popularity in the aftermath of the “*Dream*”<sup>13</sup> speech delivered by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the rally for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 1963. After legislation such as the Civil Rights Act, 1964 and the Voting Rights Act, 1965<sup>14</sup> were passed, rather than address, confront, and dismantle systemic racial inequalities that provide white identified and identifying people in U.S. society the benefits of economic, political, and social advantage, as a way to move beyond the social strife initiated by African American demands of equality throughout the U.S. Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1950s-60s, racial colorblindness became a popularly accepted social operating logic.

As stated by Tim Wise in *Colorblind: Barack Obama, Post-racial Liberalism and the Retreat from Racial Equity*, “[a]s whites became increasingly agitated about urban riots during the middle and latter part of the sixties, these voices began to argue that in order for the nation to move forward on an agenda of opportunity for all, it would be necessary to de-emphasize the issue of racism and discrimination, and focus instead on

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Read Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘I Have a Dream’ Speech in Its Entirety,” *NPR* (National Public Radio, January 14, 2022), <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>.

<sup>14</sup> Public Law 89-110 (79 Stat. 437). Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which aimed to increase the number of people registered to vote in areas where there was a record of previous discrimination. The legislation outlawed literacy tests and provided for the appointment of Federal examiners (with the power to register qualified citizens to vote) in certain jurisdictions with a history of voting discrimination. <https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/voting-rights-1965>

other concerns.”<sup>15</sup> This research project attempts to explore the multifaceted aspects of racial colorblindness. As a social operating logic, it positions itself to function in three significant ways: ideologically, juridically, and operationally. From a contemporary perspective, the adopted racial colorblind logic theoretically resolves racialized subjects’ historical implications by ignoring “race.”

Dawn G. Williams and Roderic R. Land, in “The Legitimation of Black Subordination: The Impact of Color-Blind Ideology on African American Education,” published in the *Journal of Negro Education* (2006), point out how racial colorblindness, which in many ways acts as a societal measurement of an individual’s ability to achieve, functions from a perspective of putative meritocracy.

“[S]eemingly, obvious and repetitive acts of racism are being overlooked as key contributing factors affecting the achievement gap...[T]hrough a color-blind lens, “race-neutral” laws and policies aid in sustaining White dominance and legitimize Black subordination, which is argued as an infringement upon African Americans’ civil rights. This issue stringently needs to be addressed within the national conservative “color-blind” context of race relations and policy implementation that has had a deleterious effect on African Americans.”<sup>16</sup>

Ian Haney-López supports this theory in “How Conservatives Hijacked “Colorblindness” in that Haney-López discusses how racial colorblindness “has an intuitive, practical appeal: to get beyond race, colorblindness urges, the best strategy is to immediately stop

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<sup>15</sup> Tim J. Wise, *Colorblind: Barack Obama, Post-racial Liberalism and the Retreat from Racial Equity* (San Francisco, Calif: City Lights, 2010), 27.

<sup>16</sup> Dawn G. Williams and Roderic Land, “The Legitimation of Black Subordination: The Impact of Color-Blind Ideology on African American Education,” *Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 75, no. 4 (2006): 579.

recognizing and talking about race.”<sup>17</sup> While I agree that rather than address structural racial inequities, the contemporary deployment of the term was adopted as a subversive mechanism to appease white racial “fragility.” This research expands the lens on the historical period of examining racial colorblindness and posits a new perspective to position the term as having originated through the intentional actions and strategic maneuvering of African Americans.

Examining the symbiotic relationship between the African American positioning of racial colorblindness and American belonging, I contend that African Americans understood the synonymy of embodying racial colorblindness as a gateway to access Americanness. As stated by Leslie Alexander in *African or American?: Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784-1861*, “[a]lthough they yearned to be fully independent, economic and political, constraints forced them to use a moral appeal to gain equal treatment....”<sup>18</sup> That “moral appeal” emerged through an embodiment of racial colorblindness, which, for African descendants in the Americas, functioned as a way of making themselves legible within the framing of what it meant to be American.

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<sup>17</sup> Ian F. Haney-López, “How Conservatives Hijacked Colorblindness and Set Civil Rights Back Decades” *Salon.com*, 2014, [http://www.salon.com/2014/01/20/how\\_conservatives\\_hijacked\\_colorblindness\\_and\\_set\\_civil\\_rights\\_back\\_decades/](http://www.salon.com/2014/01/20/how_conservatives_hijacked_colorblindness_and_set_civil_rights_back_decades/).

<sup>18</sup> Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American?: Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784-1861* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 10.

African descendants, who did not envision themselves as only identifiable through or simply reduced to a “skin color,” reinterpreted and utilized language as a space of resistance —the embodiment of the concept of racial colorblindness helped them exercise their “subject” agency. Although displaced from their various ethnic cultures and experiencing despotism, as culturally African descended peoples, African Americans understood cultural identities; they rooted themselves in “Americanness” —the culture in which they found themselves and strategically adopted as their own. Viewed as a concept embodied by African Americans seeking and redefining what it meant to be American, they utilized language in a manner in which they made themselves legible. The racial colorblind logic formalized one relational perspective of African American belonging within U.S. American society.

The ideological rhetoric of contemporary racial colorblindness attempts to ignore racialized experiences in an attempt to erase ethnic and racialized identities to promote an agenda of social homogeneity —this should be read as upholding the values of whiteness. Given this explanation, I want to reassert what this work is moving toward —that there is a substantial difference between the espoused rhetoric of racial colorblindness crafted by African descendants seeking access to Americanness and the resulting experiences of African descendants as subjugated racialized peoples due to racial colorblindness. Given this difference, a central objective is to understand the historical origins of racial colorblindness.

Research in this field of analysis points to *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and Justice John Marshall Harlan's dissenting opinion as one of the origins of the racial colorblind concept. However, limited research traces the teleological origins of the term and its acceptance as a race-neutral social operating logic within the post-Civil Rights era. Scholarly work in this field positions contemporary racial colorblindness as having been achieved because outward social attitudes and expressions of racism have shifted toward racial tolerance, and negative attitudes toward non-whites are no longer overtly expressed as they were in the past. Yet, there is a significant gap in the research examining how the concept originated, why the term was used in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), and when the term was ideologically and socially popularized through Martin Luther King's 1963 March on Washington "I Have a Dream" speech. There is limited research on the origins of racial colorblindness and its mainstream adoption. This dissertation will contribute to the scholarship by historicizing the philosophy of racial colorblindness and examining how its social operating logic "replaced" institutionalized racism by claiming to justify equal opportunities through which upward mobility could be achieved.

Racial colorblindness has been positioned as having been ideologically achieved due to, in part, juridical notions of *symbolic* equality. I say symbolic because outward appearances such as laws and social practices gesture toward providing equality. Still, there is a need to interrogate the intent of laws that deploy the rhetoric of racial colorblindness and the material results of this operating logic. The marginalization of racialized and minoritized communities stem from actions such as contemporary iterations of racial colorblindness that have failed to provide redress. I argue that the

operating logic of racial colorblindness is fundamentally exclusionary in nature. Central to this work is how the practice of racial colorblindness has functioned as an inverse ideology in the context of social inclusion and how it has been transformed to function as a cover for maintaining anti-Black sentiment.

The approach of this study is primarily based on exploring the ascent of racial colorblindness through intersecting axes of social history, mainly African American/Black<sup>19</sup> political strategies organized between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries for economic, political, and social inclusion. These strategies of inclusion are rooted in the discourse which, as historian Patrick Rael discusses, utilized tenets of social uplift, and promoted the “politics of respectability” to position African Americans as socially acceptable members of US society. Adopted by the Colored Conventions Movement and Black women’s club organizations (which I contend “Black social uplift” and the “politics of respectability” offer a foreshadowing of racial colorblindness that will be appropriated and reinterpreted), these types of organizations maintained “that through all self-conscious acts of public political speech, [they could employ] tropes of racial uplift, elevation, and respectability as the tools to be used in an assault on white supremacist arguments of black inferiority.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The terms used to represent current day African Americans vary and evolve throughout this project. While I see terms such as African American and Black as somewhat interchangeable throughout this project, I also use African descendant, free/d Africans, free people of “colour” and other terms that represent the legal and social status of African descendants during time period being referenced. Due to the often-indeterminate legal status of African descendants in the United States during the antebellum period, I feel terms like African American are disingenuous across time to represent the demographic population of African descendants in the United States.

<sup>20</sup> Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway, *Black Women’s Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* (Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont Press, 2007), 217.

A socio-historical perspective will ground this project. This perspective is essential since, according to historian Raphael Samuel, “as an academic practice, social history derives its vitality from its oppositional character. It prides itself on being concerned with ‘real life’ rather than abstractions, with ‘ordinary’ people rather than privileged elites, with everyday things rather than sensational events.”<sup>21</sup> Emerging in the 1960s, social history, from a methodological perspective, adopts a multi-disciplinary perspective—one which according to historian Peter Sterns, is open “to the historical construction of various aspects of the human experience, the valuation of relatively ordinary people as historical subjects and agents, and some sense of key historical causes and big changes in the human experience overall, [that] combine to create considerable analytical power....”<sup>22</sup> Prioritizing and highlighting the experiences of African descendant peoples is critical to telling a complete narrative.

For this research project, the socio-historical approach will allow for an examination of racial colorblindness from a “bottom-up” perspective which is necessary to tether ideological links of causality to demonstrate a complete history of the evolution of racial colorblindness. If this historical link is not made, as pointed out by Gerald Torres in “Neoliberalism and Affirmative Action,” “[then] a problem is dehistoricized, [and] how is it possible to adequately understand or regulate the relationship between

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<sup>21</sup> Raphael Samuel, “What is Social History?” *History Today*, Volume 35, Issue 3, March 1985. <http://www.historytoday.com/raphael-samuel/what-social-history#sthash.Y8XeKQuK.dpuf>

<sup>22</sup> Peter Sterns, “Social History Present and Future” *Journal of Social History* 37, No. 1 (2003): 12. [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal\\_of\\_social\\_history/v037/37.1stearns.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_social_history/v037/37.1stearns.html)

society and the state?”<sup>23</sup> This relationship between society and the state, between the rhetoric of the state about racial colorblindness and how society understands its functionality, is circular and co-dependent. Viewing the practice of racial colorblindness through, as Antonio Moore describes, a decadent veil which obscures the reality of Black marginalization, dominant society accepts racial colorblindness as having been achieved, yet for those who are racialized, current social and material conditions belie that notion.

From a theoretical perspective, we can ground and extend the social operating logic of racial colorblindness to theories of “cultural hegemony.” As Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci positioned it, society is rooted in artificial ideological constructs controlled through hegemonic forces of coercion and consent. The citizenry within society believes racial colorblindness functions and provides equal opportunity simply because hegemonic powers have promoted this ideology. From the perspectives of whiteness and privilege, that hermeneutical orientation positions experiences as comparable to the dominant culture –everyone has similar experiences and opportunities for fair and equal treatment. As such, racial colorblindness was accepted without questioning its effectiveness in practice because it did not force a confrontation of or alteration to the perceived realities of access. This research project examines experiences beyond the white lens and gaze and will help us understand racial colorblindness as introduced and intended by African descendant peoples.

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<sup>23</sup> Gerald Torres, “Neoliberalism and Affirmative Action.” *Cultural Dynamics* 27, no. 1 (March 2015): 44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0921374014564654>.

## II. Chapter Outlines

### i. Chapter One: Black Identity Formation: Defining the Objectives of Belonging Within the Nineteenth Century Colored Conventions Movement

While it has been argued and demonstrated that Africans in the Americas maintained connections to African cultural practices through the formation of Maroon communities throughout the Diaspora, acts of resistance such as The Haitian Revolution (1791), or the maintenance of various elements of African-based religious and burial practices, the reality is that by the early 1800s, within many enslaved and “free/d” Black communities in the United States, African descendants found themselves contemplating their futures and tethered themselves to the notion that the developing United States was their home.

Although there was acknowledgement of their African heritage, they anchored their identities and roots of belonging to where they found themselves. Within the original colonies of the United States, during the era of colonial enslavement, as demonstrated by Martha Jones in *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America*, betwixt an indeterminate citizenship status and freedom, African descendants in the US “...claimed an unassailable belonging, one grounded in birthright citizenship. No legal text expressly provided for such, but their ideas anticipated the terms of the Fourteenth Amendment...black Americans developed ideas about citizenship and claims to the rights that citizens enjoyed.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Martha S Jones, *Birthright Citizens*, 1.

The central focus of chapter one, “Black Identity Formation: Defining the Objectives of Belonging Through the Nineteenth Century Colored Conventions Movement,” examines how free/d African descendant peoples in the United States positioned themselves in relation to dominant understandings of citizenship and how they challenged their subjugation through various mechanisms, primarily conference organizing, in an effort to exercise rightful belonging. Surveying how we see African descendants in the U.S. interjecting and positioning their voices and experiences as inherently and undoubtedly worthy of *jus soli*<sup>25</sup> citizenship, what strategies did Black activists and radical organizers utilize to demonstrate what they saw as their inherent right to citizenship? Additionally, in juxtaposition to Black liberation politics, in fighting to establish and maintain the hierarchical racialized status quo, what tactics did the dominance of whiteness utilize to usurp the organizing efforts of Black activist organizations?

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<sup>25</sup> Citizenship acquired via place of birth or, “right of the soil.”

- ii. Chapter Two: Realization of the Freedom Dreams they Dared to Dream: Articulating Racial Colorblindness in the Nascence of African American Women’s Political Organizing

Continuing to examine Black identity formation through the concept of racial colorblindness, chapter two, “Realization of the Freedom Dreams they Dared to Dream: Articulating Racial Colorblindness in the Nascence of African American Women’s Political Organizing,” explores how organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and individuals such as Mary Ellen Pleasant, Mary Church Terrell, and Anna Pauline “Pauli” Murray espoused philosophies that would build upon the ideas introduced within the Colored Conventions Movements (including the American Moral Reform Society (AMRS)) and build upon the core principles of racial colorblindness. More specifically, this chapter surveys how African American women “asserted agency in the construction and representation of themselves as new subjectivities –as Americans as well as blacks...within the context of an American identity.”<sup>26</sup>

Deploying various modalities and strategies of resistance, although Black women were integral in confronting and dismantling unjust laws and racial inequality, they experienced tenuous support in advancing their social interests. Demonstrated by the public assaults on their characters, chapter two explores how Black Womanist movements and the strategy of “respectability politics,” which sought to transform Black life by regulating the behaviors of African Americans through adhering to an aspirational

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<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth McHenry, “Spreading the Word, the Cultural Work of the Black Press” in *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 86.

bourgeoisie model of being, were re-articulated and molded into the functional concept of racial colorblindness. Taking control to shape their identities beyond the confines of whiteness, their efforts were earnest attempts at challenging pervading logics of a supposed innate biological inferiority of African descendants; however, rather than function in a manner that was beneficial and inclusionary, their identity politics were usurped and reinterpreted from a white perspective and further excluded African Americans access to “Americanism.”

iii. Chapter Three: Usurpational Idealism: How Processes of Usurpation Function to Protect the Hierarchical Nature of Whiteness and Power

“Usurpational Idealism: How Processes of Usurpation Function to Protect the Hierarchical Nature of Whiteness and Power” outlines how in the aftermath of social parity demanded by African American activists in the U.S. Civil Rights era, the concept of racial colorblindness was appropriated by white society as a means of maintaining power and privilege. The contemporary practice of racial colorblindness is one example of maintaining social control and inequality while appearing to offer equal access to achievement. Chapter three builds on the original concept initiated by Black people as a means of being included in the idea of Americanness yet explores how the concept was usurped to serve white desire. From a foundational perspective, American acceptance and belonging are limited to free white of good moral character. Beyond the subjectivity of morality, the limitations of American belonging remain the same: whiteness. The primary focus of the chapter examines how the recent deployment of the racial colorblindness concept is connected to other theoretical tenets, such as White Fragility introduced by Robin DiAngelo; is an ideological construct, practice, and derivative of the Interest Convergence theory articulated by Derrick Bell; functions under the scope of the public identity theory examined by Ange-Marie Hancock. Altogether, these theories function to maintain the hierarchical racial status quo by usurping Black racial political organizing through a process termed usurpational idealism.

## Chapter One: Black Identity Formation: Defining the Objectives of Belonging Within the Nineteenth Century Colored Conventions Movement

### Key Words

Birthright Citizenship; Black Racial Politics; *The Colored American*, 1837 - 1842; Colored Conventions Movement; Free Communities of Color; *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, 1896; Self-determination; Usurpational Idealism

### ABSTRACT

While it has been argued and demonstrated that Africans in the Americas maintained connections to African cultural practices through the formation of Maroon communities throughout the Diaspora, acts of resistance such as The Haitian Revolution (1791), or the maintenance of various elements of African-based religious and burial practices, the reality is that by the early 1800s, within many enslaved and “free/d” Black communities in the United States, African descendants found themselves contemplating their futures and tethered themselves to the notion that the developing United States was their home.

Although there was acknowledgement of their African heritage, they anchored their identities and roots of belonging to where they found themselves. Within the original colonies of the United States, during the era of colonial enslavement, as demonstrated by Martha Jones in *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America*, betwixt an indeterminate citizenship status and freedom, African descendants in the U.S. “...claimed an unassailable belonging, one grounded in birthright citizenship. No legal text expressly provided for such, but their ideas anticipated the terms of the Fourteenth Amendment...black Americans developed ideas about

citizenship and claims to the rights that citizens enjoyed.”<sup>27</sup> The ideas around citizenship developed by African descendants laid the foundational groundwork upon which the U.S. would construct legally recognized identities and belonging.

The central focus of chapter one, “Black Identity Formation: Defining the Objectives of Belonging Through the Nineteenth Century Colored Conventions Movement,” examines how free/d African descendant peoples in the United States positioned themselves in relation to dominant understandings of citizenship and how they challenged their subjugation through various mechanisms, primarily conference organizing, in an effort to exercise rightful belonging. Surveying how we see African descendants in the U.S. interjecting and positioning their voices and experiences as inherently and undoubtedly worthy of *jus soli*<sup>28</sup> citizenship, what strategies did Black activists and radical organizers utilize to demonstrate what they saw as their inherent right to citizenship? Additionally, in juxtaposition to Black liberation politics, in fighting to establish and maintain the hierarchical racialized status quo, what tactics did the dominance of whiteness utilize to usurp the organizing efforts of Black activist organizations?

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<sup>27</sup> Martha S. Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Citizenship acquired via place of birth or, “right of the soil.”

*“The colored people of today are not the colored people of a quarter of a century ago and require very different means and measures to satisfy their wants and demands, and to effect their advancement... Their feelings, tastes, predilections, wants, demands, and sympathies, are identical, and homogeneous with those of all other Americans.”*<sup>29</sup>  
~Martin R. Delaney

*“What we have got to know, so far as possible, are the things that actually happened in the world. Then with that much clear and open to every reader, the philosopher and prophet has a chance to interpret these facts; but the historian has no right, posing as scientist, to conceal or distort facts; and until we distinguish between these two functions of the chronicler of human action, we are going to render it easy for a muddled world out of sheer ignorance to make the same mistake ten times over.”*<sup>30</sup>  
~ W.E.B. Du Bois

*“To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture.”*<sup>31</sup>  
~Franz Fanon

*“For the realization of a new theory, we require new history.”*<sup>32</sup>  
~ Cedrick Robinson

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<sup>29</sup> Martin R. Delaney, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (Amherst NY: Humanity Books, 2004), 1.

<sup>30</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860 – 1880* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1935), 722.

<sup>31</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Translated by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 38.

<sup>32</sup> Cedrick J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 307.

## I. Flipping the Script: Cementing Identity and Belonging through Language

When scholar and social activist bell hooks passed away in 2021, it was a tremendous loss for the Black intellectual community. hooks' work stands alongside the pantheon of Womanist and theoretical thinkers that challenged society to think beyond the liminal constructs of "race," class, and gender. Possessing an ability to frame and process the complexities of language with such profound understanding, in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), "Language: Teaching New Worlds/New Words," hooks focuses on how language constructs meaning and how it can be molded to oppress or, utilized as a means of liberation—stating, "...I know that it is not the English language that hurts me, but what the oppressors do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize..."<sup>33</sup> hooks unpacks how interpretations and the utilization of language can often be subjective and open to vast interpretations depending on the context, intent, and location.

With this body of research focusing on African American positionality, reading these words, I applied hooks' theory to how groups of African descendant peoples were dislocated from their homelands and experienced trauma from the practices of the Transatlantic slave trade. After coming to the realization that where they found themselves was now "home,"—what tools did they have to their avail to make sense of it all? Many historians, including the notable scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., have

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<sup>33</sup> bell hooks, "Language: Teaching New Worlds/New Words," in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 168.

documented how enslavers intentionally separated African peoples who were captured together so they could not communicate or conspire with each other easily. Stated by Kehinde Andrews in *Back to Black: Retelling Black Radicalism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, “[w]hen Europeans loaded Africans onto the slave ships, purposefully mixing up tribes so that they could not communicate, it was the Blackness of the enslaved that brought them together. It was their Blackness that unified them into a force to resist and mutiny. Blackness is relational to whiteness only in that sense; it was the contrast to the racism of whites that brought together the expression of Blackness in that form. Our understandings of difference and Blackness, are not simply to mimic those of White society.”<sup>34</sup>

The ability to communicate between enslaved people was disrupted by the fact that not everyone spoke the same “tongue.” In this instance, the idioms of African peoples were tools used to suppress their abilities to connect to one another. Once in the “new world,” they had “to learn, master, and utilize a strange and foreign language ... [i]n addition to strange sights, smells, sounds, and people, there would be a near total inability to understand what anybody was saying. A lucky few would have learned some English, Dutch, Portuguese, or French in slave castles or slave ships or perhaps found a fellow countryman or woman amongst their fellow slaves....”<sup>35</sup> Over time, they shapeshifted language to convey *their* interpretations of community, identity, of belonging.

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<sup>34</sup> Kehinde Andrews, *Back to Black: Retelling Black Radicalism for the 21st Century* (London: Zed Books, 2019), 157.

<sup>35</sup> Jared Hardesty, “Mastering the Master’s Language,” *African American Intellectual Historical Society* (Black Perspectives, December 21, 2015), <https://www.aaihs.org/mastering-the-masters-language/>.

Exploration of the *Maafa*<sup>36</sup> of U.S. Colonial enslavement details how Western perspectives often ignore the nuances of African cultural and tribal affiliations. People of African descent, the myriad cultures, and ethnicities are repeatedly flattened out and reduced to simply “Africans,” yet, African peoples transported to the “new world” did not identify or see themselves as reduced to a racialized color, nor did they adopt the ideology that they were inferior. As Akan, Fon, and Yoruba descended peoples (among others), they originated as cultural/ed beings; finding themselves in a new land in which “Americanness” was the prevailing culture, enslaved African descendants entwined “new world” linguistic tenets of Americanness with their ways of being and crafted new identities as a means of survival.

The ability of African descendants in the U.S. to reclaim power through cultural practices (language being a cultural element) and craft meaning to redefine their positionality is seen through the use of language, which they constructed as a site of liberation. As hooks states, their existence was dependent on their ability to communicate with one another – “[l]earning English, learning to speak the alien tongue, was one way enslaved Africans began to reclaim their power within a context of domination. Possessing a shared language, black folks could find again a way to make community, and a means to create the political solidarity necessary to resist.”<sup>37</sup> Through “counter-hegemonic speech,” language gave the enslaved, manumitted, and free people of African descent the ability to facilitate, maintain and redefine their relationship and status

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<sup>36</sup> Maafa is a Kiswahili word that means “great tragedy.”

<sup>37</sup> hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 170.

within the U.S. nation and advocate for their liberation on their terms. Language was commonly used to communicate instructions and systematize efficient productions of labor, yet,

[n]eeding the oppressor's language to speak with one another they nevertheless also reinvented, remade that language so that it would speak beyond the boundaries of conquest and domination. In the mouths of black Africans in the so-called "New World," English was altered, transformed, and became a different speech. Enslaved black people took broken bits of English and made of them a counter-language. They put together their words in such a way that the colonizer had to rethink the meaning of the English language.<sup>38</sup>

In putting "together their words," I argue that African descendants strategically adopted the "flattening out" concept and applied a flattened nationalistic cultural perspective to their embrace of "Americanness" as a rationale for securing liberation and facilitating citizenship. The idea of using language to "speak beyond the boundaries of conquest and domination" is where this research project advances the theory that through language, reinterpretations of Americanness were utilized and embodied by people of African descent as a means of legally facilitating their inclusion as American citizens into the U.S. nation-state. An unpacking of the teleological deployment of Americanness demonstrates one of the ways in which African descendants attempted to narrate and materially shape their liberation. Additionally, I claim that, as it relates to the African descendant experience in the U.S., if we explore how they utilized language, through their interpretations of cultural practices that demonstrated Americanness, African descendant peoples crafted a precursor to the operating logic undergirding the racial

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<sup>38</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 170.

colorblindness logic as a strategic means of inclusion into the citizenry of the United States. However, this term and operational logic would be usurped by whiteness and utilized in such a way that its meaning shifted to embody the antitheses of the inclusion of African descendants in civil society.

## II. Making it Make Sense: Unpacking the History of Racial Colorblindness and Concept of Usurpational Idealism

There are two theoretical concepts that I am relying upon to support the basis of this body of research; racial colorblindness and the conceptualization of a term I am defining as usurpational idealism. I will provide grounding for each and how these terms and concepts apply to the arguments presented within this research project.

### i. Racial Colorblindness

The rhetoric of the racial colorblind concept asserts that as a nation, the U.S. legal system has removed racialized barriers that once hindered legal and social mobility and that racial designations are no longer factors that determine achievement; it was during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s/60s, that this discourse was popularized. Racial colorblindness ascended in an attempt to maintain white racial comfort through revisionist histories which reshaped the role “race” played in the nation’s formation.

Exploring the overwhelming social adoption and embrace of the term, and concept of racial colorblindness in the 1960s, scholars in “race” and legal studies, including Ian F. Haney-López, point to Justice John Marshall Harlan’s dissenting opinion in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) as one of the earliest legal references to the term colorblindness. The pertinent details of *Plessy* are as such: in 1890, the state of Louisiana mandated the separation of “races” on public transportation. Refusing to ride in the railcar designated for “coloreds,” Homer Plessy sat in a white designated railcar and was arrested. Plessy’s lawsuit claimed that under the equal protection clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, his constitutional rights had been violated. However, by a 7-1 majority, the

Supreme Court of the United States decision rendered in *Plessy* would legally legitimize the practice of racial segregation through a “separate but equal” ruling. The dissenting opinion offered by Justice John Marshall Harlan is believed to have introduced the terminology of colorblindness that would be positioned as transcending the consequences of “race” and moving society toward meritocracy. According to Haney-López in “Is the Post in Post-Racial the Blind in Colorblind?,” Justice Harlan “declared –in what amounted to aspiration rather than description –that [o]ur Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes of citizens.”<sup>39</sup> This reference is one of the earliest recorded written iterations of the racial colorblind concept, yet Justice Harlan’s interpretation was not intended to convey racial equality. While Harlan believed the decision rendered in *Plessy* would sow the “seeds of race hate” in society, clarified through Haney-López’s analysis of Justice Harlan’s interpretation of colorblindness:

First, Harlan clearly never meant to proscribe all governmental uses of race. Rather, Harlan advocated colorblindness to limit excessive oppression, in the context of what he supposed would be the eternal reign of white supremacy. He began the very paragraph in which he invoked colorblindness as follows: “The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth, and in power. So, I doubt not, it will continue to be for all time.” Harlan approved of many government racial restrictions that codified what he perceived as the natural inferiority of blacks. Some years before *Plessy*, Harlan had voted to uphold an Alabama law forbidding interracial marriage. And two years after *Plessy*, Harlan wrote an opinion supporting a whites-only high school. Harlan’s famous dissent was not a call that the country literally become blind to race; quite the contrary. Perceiving a world where racial hierarchy was fixed, Harlan interpreted the Constitution to allow society to mark boundaries around those naturally relegated to the bottom. Even so, unlike his brethren, he objected to extreme civic exclusion. Harlan opposed the segregated train cars at issue in *Plessy* because he felt they

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<sup>39</sup> Ian F. Haney-López, “Is the Post in Post-Racial the Blind in Colorblind,” *Cardozo Law Review*, Vol. 32 (2010): 809. <http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/facpubs/1816>

unfairly limited the capacity of blacks to participate in civil life and the marketplace, not because he opposed any governmental use of race, and certainly not because he thought, as contemporary colorblindness doctrine asserts, that the Constitution forbade state efforts to ameliorate racism.<sup>40</sup>

As bell hooks points out, examining the contextualization of language through Justice Harlan's dissent, Haney-López provides an interesting linkage between the salience of "race" and economics. From the juridical perspective offered by Harlan, it was not illegal to discriminate against Black people because it created unfair and unequal social outcomes. Harlan believed it was unfair to limit the "capacity of blacks to participate in civil life and the *marketplace*."<sup>41</sup> Haney-López goes on to say, "a sharp distinction must be made between colorblindness as an ideal and as a current strategy for moving in that direction."<sup>42</sup> Justice Harlan's interpretations of the U.S. Constitution as "colorblind" offered no redress or solutions to move society in the direction of colorblindness. Having owned enslaved people and an ardent supporter of First Amendment rights, his relationship to African descendant peoples was complex. Not necessarily "seeing" them, Harlan simply stated that Black people should be free to participate in society and contribute at the economic level.

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<sup>40</sup> Ian Haney-López, "How Conservatives Hijacked 'Colorblindness' and Set Civil Rights Back Decades," *Salon* (Salon.com, January 21, 2014), [http://www.salon.com/2014/01/20/how\\_conservatives\\_hijacked\\_colorblindness\\_and\\_set\\_civil\\_rights\\_back\\_decades/](http://www.salon.com/2014/01/20/how_conservatives_hijacked_colorblindness_and_set_civil_rights_back_decades/).

<sup>41</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, web.

<sup>42</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, web.

As has traditionally been the case, the means through which Black people have been rendered “visible” in U.S. society has been tethered to and rooted in sources of economies (i.e.: enslavement and low-wage labor). I think “a sharp distinction must be made between colorblindness” as interpreted by the dominant society and what I view as the original intentionality offered by African descendants. As noted earlier, African descendants saw themselves as fully functioning human beings with cultural practices, identities, and lineages, viewing the application of justice as a natural human right, through their embrace of Americanness, they attempted to articulate that the extension of rights should not be based on skin color. Demonstrated at the New York state convention of the Colored Citizens held in Albany in 1840, attendees stated, “...[w]e can find no system of moral or political ethics in which rights are based upon the conformation of the body, of the color of the skin...”<sup>43</sup> Believing that there should be a link between political ethics and perspectives that function to facilitate human rights, particularly during the era where African bodies were not extended their rights of humanity, Black activists understood the necessity of laws and social practices to advance and protect the exercise of legal rights. If, as stated, Harlen was a staunch supporter of the First Amendment after emancipation was granted, it is possible that he may have been influenced by the rhetoric put forth by Black activists.

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<sup>43</sup> Convention of the Colored Inhabitants of the State of New York, “Minutes of the State Convention of Colored Citizens, held at Albany, on the 18th, 19th, and 20th of August, 1840, for the purpose of considering their political condition.,” *Colored Conventions Project Digital Records*, accessed May 13, 2022, <https://omeka.coloredconventions.org/items/show/620>.

This research posits the theory that the ideology of racial colorblindness predates its widespread acceptance in the 1960s. Offered by African descendants, the ontological conception of racial colorblindness was crafted as a means of defining nationalistic inclusion but also protecting human rights within the U.S. nation-state. While chapter three explores the contemporary discourse of racial colorblindness and reveals the duplicitous operating logic adopted by the mainstream society within the U.S., chapter one highlights the efforts of African descendants who put forth an understanding of racial colorblindness as a means of American inclusion. Seeking to dismantle the hierarchical racialized status quo, their efforts forced "...the colonizer to rethink the meaning of English language..."<sup>44</sup> and reinterpret it such that racial domination continued through "rethinking" and duplicitous reinterpretations of exclusion through language.

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<sup>44</sup> hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 170.

ii. Usurpational Idealism

For additional clarity, another theoretical concept that I am relying upon to support the basis of this body of research is termed usurpational idealism. As will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three, the theoretical framing of this body of research relies on previously scaffolded intellectual concepts –White Fragility (Robin DiAngelo), Interest Convergence Theory (Derrick Bell), and the Public Identity concept (Ange-Marie Hancock), as supporting justifications for the mainstream embrace of the racial colorblind doctrine. However, I think explaining a concept I am introducing is essential to ground this research further. Thematically and conceptually, the notion of usurping Black racial politics to maintain the hierarchical racial status quo undergirds the basis of this research. However, I theorize the term usurpational idealism as applying most succinctly within the process of preserving hierarchies of racialization and, as such, who was legally included as citizens.

I define usurpational idealism as building upon an “umbrella theory” that combines various theories and concepts, specifically white fragility, interest convergence, and the public identity, as a series of successive processes deployed to recenter whiteness as an idealized standard. Attempting to maintain the pathology of whiteness as the vanguard within the hierarchy of the racialized status quo, usurpational idealism is the process by which the status and privileges of whiteness are utilized to usurp situational politics in an effort to restore the equilibrium of society to a state that maintains the desires of whiteness as an ideal state of being. Accomplished through co-opting, encroaching upon, weighing benefits of involvement, and taking credit/control of ideas,

narratives, or proposals for the benefit of maintaining aspects of whiteness, usurpational idealism explains one way in which the normalization and material value of whiteness is perpetuated and sustained.

The concept of usurpational idealism attempts to bring salient focus to what Charles W. Mills describes in his 2015 book, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*, where he discusses how whiteness and white experiences are positioned as normative. Mills states:

White experience is embedded as normative, and the embedding is so deep that its normativity is not even identified as such. For this would imply that there was some other way that things could be, whereas it is obvious that this is just the way things are. A relationship to the world that is founded on racial privilege become simply the relationship to the world. And black philosophy, correspondingly, necessarily appears as a somewhat deviant and peculiar exercise, contrasted with “white” philosophy but with philosophy unqualified, philosophy simpliciter.<sup>45</sup>

I do not situate usurpational idealism as specifically a “Black philosophy;” however, it attempts to explain an a posteriori positioning of whiteness.

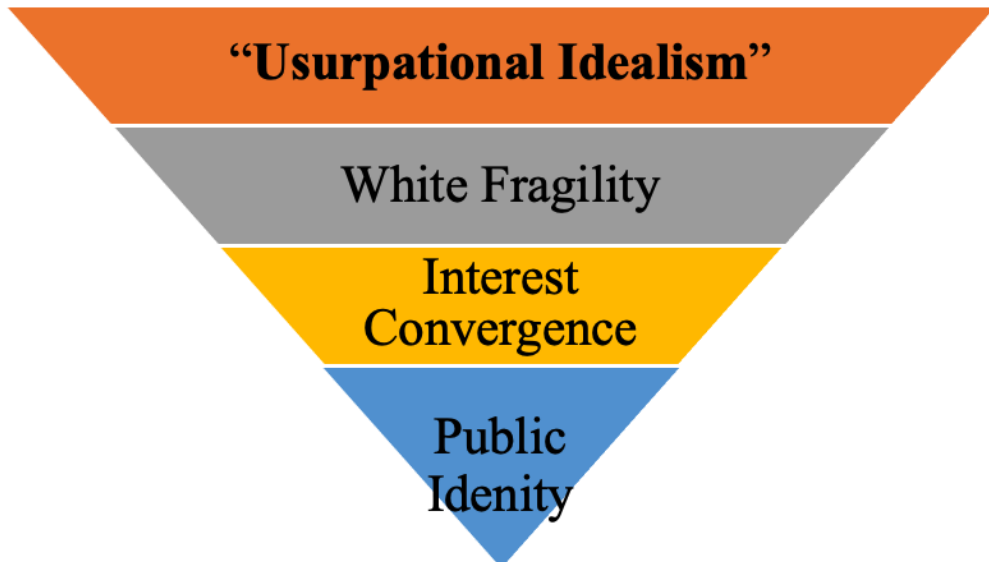
In and of itself, whiteness is not “normal,” it has been *normalized*; legally, politically, and socially, the normalization of whiteness points to the systemization of processes that have enabled it. Theories presented and outlined in greater detail throughout this research project each represent a necessary component in explaining how whiteness, via “race” proxy, operates within society –yielding advantages to some and disadvantages to others; whiteness is executed through a series of actions. I contend the deployment of usurpational idealism acts as a subterfuge to conceal the hierarchical

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<sup>45</sup> Charles W. Mills, “Non-Cartesian Sums: Philosophy and the African-American Experience” in *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 10.

nature of power and whiteness. Ultimately, usurpational idealism functions as a strategy and proportionate process sequenced in the effort to maintain whiteness as the ideal standard within the hierarchical racialized status quo.

As a preliminary grounding of how racial politics of African descendants are co-opted by mainstream society through the concept of usurpational idealism, I argue that the concept of racial colorblindness is one of the political strategies usurped by the dominant culture to limit and reify the parameters of American belonging to whiteness. In chapter one, I am considering what Americanness meant to those classified as a subjugated status. How did African descendants employ social resistance and apply concepts such as crafting and embracing racial colorblindness as a tactic of inclusion yet were confined to aspects of racialization? What role did the Colored Conventions Movement organizing play in redefining African descendant identities and their relationship to U.S. belonging? This chapter will demonstrate that as political concepts and strategies developed by African descendants are often usurped and broadly redeployed (often not accomplishing the original intent of their political objectives), to define what Americanness meant to the selfhood of African descendants, they fought to redefine and interpret for themselves the necessary organizing tactics through an embrace of the concept of racial colorblindness.



*Figure 1: Usurpational Idealism Theoretical Chart*

1. An event/situation challenges the hierarchical racial status quo of “whiteness.” The situation creates cognitive dissonance for the “subject” that facilitates white fragility, exhibited by the disruption to the environment/expectation of racial comfort.
2. Attempts to restore equilibrium to an ideal state that maintains the hierarchical racialized status quo are accomplished by processing the uncomfortable individual/situation in a manner that makes the “subject” appear to want to resolve the issue. Deployed through the interest convergence concept (how would “resolve” benefit me in this situation), the subject initiates taking the lead in working towards an “amenable” resolution that would work for and satisfy both parties.
3. The solution is to follow steps outlined by public identity, which results in an outcome that is only beneficial to restoring the hierarchical racial status quo.

### III. Navigating the Precarious Nature of “Freedom” in the New Nation

The United States Declaration of Independence in 1776, declared the original Thirteen United American Colonies no longer bound to Great Brittan; subsequently, the colonies would function as a sovereign nation. The contrariety this presents is that U.S. independence came at a time when the nation elucidated the inhumane bondage of African descended chattel laborers, yet, four years later, in the same state in which the Declaration of Independence was signed, gradual abolition for the enslaved would be ratified.

The 1780 Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery began the slow process of granting manumission to those enslaved in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The first state in the nation to enact legislation on abolition, the Pennsylvania state legislature pointed to what was termed “universal civilization.” Recognizing variations in human “complexions” as a divine appointment, the Commonwealth declared that it was

not for us to enquire why, in the creation of mankind, the inhabitants of the several parts of the earth were distinguished by a difference in feature or complexion. It is sufficient to know that all are the work of an Almighty Hand. We find in the distribution of the human species, that the most fertile as well as the most barren parts of the earth are inhabited by men of complexions different from ours, and from each other; from whence we may reasonably, as well as religiously, infer, that He who placed them in their various situations, hath extended equally his care and protection to all, and that it becometh not us to counteract his mercies. We esteem it a peculiar blessing granted to us, that we are enabled this day to add one more step to universal civilization, by removing as much as possible the sorrows of those who have lived in undeserved bondage, and from which, by the assumed authority of the kings of Great Britain, no effectual, legal relief could be obtained.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> John Bayard, “An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery (1780),” *USHistory.org* (Independence Hall Association), accessed June 27, 2022, <https://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/history/gradual.php>

Heavily influenced by Quaker religious values, parameters of gradual emancipation—the dismantling of *Partus Sequitur Ventrem*<sup>47</sup> laws and requirements to annually register and document the ages of enslaved “property” to provide manumission by the age of twenty-eight— was a compromise to immediate and permanent abolition.

Be it enacted, and it is hereby enacted, by the representatives of the freeman of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, in general assembly met, and by the authority of the same, That all persons, as well Negroes and Mulattoes as others, who shall be born within this state from and after the passing of this act, shall not be deemed and considered as servants for life, or slaves; and that all servitude for life, or slavery of children, in consequence of the slavery of their mothers, in the case of all children born within this state, from and after the passing of this act as aforesaid, shall be, and hereby is utterly taken away, extinguished and forever abolished.<sup>48</sup>

As enslavers attempted to work around the law by relocating their “property” to areas where enslavement was legal, fully aware that their fate and legal status were increasingly in jeopardy, enslaved and free/d African descendants accelerated forms of resistance and strategies to gain control of their destinies. Some, having fought in service of British objectives during The American Revolutionary War, 1775-83, and seeing an increased reliance on enslaved African laborers, understood the new nation as continuing

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<sup>47</sup> Jennifer L. Morgan, “Partus Sequitur Ventrem: Slave Law and the History of Women in Slavery,” *Eisenberg Institute for Historical Studies* (University of Michigan, February 15, 2015), web.

In 1662, legislators in the Virginia Colony passed a law that determined that, in the matter of sex between free English men and “negro women,” the legal condition of the child should follow that of the mother. Long understood as the law that codified hereditary racial slavery, this code reassured slave owning settlers that, in the matter of enslaved people, enslavability devolved through the mother: Partus Sequitur Ventrem or, literally, “offspring follows belly.” <https://lsa.umich.edu/eihs/news-events/all-events/archived-events/2015/02/eihs-lecture---partus-sequitur-ventrem--slave-law-and-the-histor.html>.

<sup>48</sup> General Assembly of Pennsylvania, “An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery,” (1780), *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*, accessed July 20, 2022, [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/pennst01.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/pennst01.asp)

its hostility toward African descendants.<sup>49</sup> Interrogating how to best develop strategies that served their interest towards gaining citizenship and equality, many began reaching out to extended operational networks to collectively resolve these issues.

In 1787, when Anthony Taylor, President of the Free African Union Society,<sup>50</sup> contacted white benefactors to fundraise for international land procurement, he stated, “[o]ur earnest desire of returning to Africa and settling there has induced us further to trouble you in order to convey a more particular idea of our proposal. That a number of men from among ourselves shall be sent to Africa to see if they can obtain, by gift or purchase, lands sufficient to settle upon.”<sup>51</sup> Additionally, that same year in Boston, “[a]s the first black society in American history devoted to social, political, and economic improvement, the Black Masons had a tremendous impact on the wider community, involving themselves in every battle for the liberty and rights of blacks...”<sup>52</sup> This battle included drafting a document referred to as *The Boston Plan*. Signed by seventy-three “African Blacks,” *The Boston Plan* was submitted as a petition to the General Court of Massachusetts to request funding and support for a Black-led emigration effort.

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<sup>49</sup> J. David Hacker, “From ‘20. and odd’ to 10 million: The Growth of the Slave Population in the United States.” *Slavery & Abolition* Vol. 41, 4 (2020): 840-855. doi:10.1080/0144039x.2020.1755502 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7716878/>

<sup>50</sup> The Free African Union Society was a mutual aid benefit organization comprised of free Black people in Newport, Rhode Island.

<sup>51</sup> “Emigration or Colonization? African American Identity during the Period of Slavery, African American Identity: Vol. I, 1500-1865,” *National Humanities Center*, accessed June 25, 2022, <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/identity/text10/text10read.htm>.

<sup>52</sup> “Africans in America/Part 2/The Boston Plan,” *PBS* (Public Broadcasting Service), accessed June 24, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h59.html>.

Serving as a blueprint for future “Back to Africa” movements, African descendants in the U. S. sought options to live better lives. Stating,

“...we, or our ancestors have been taken from our dear connections, and brought from Africa and put into a state of slavery in this country;...[t]his, and other considerations, which we need not here particularly mention, induce us earnestly to desire to return to Africa, our native country, which warm climate is much more natural and agreeable to us; and, for which the god of nature has formed us; and, where we shall live among our equals, and be more comfortable and happy, that we can be in our present situation; and, at the same time, may have the prospect of usefulness to our brethren there.”<sup>53</sup>

As the U.S. widened its path towards a slaveocracy for African descended people, keeping in mind that “[t]here is no such thing as a unified black politics. Mobilizations have taken forms so wide-ranging they have led to violent confrontations [and] Black people have disagreed with each other as to the way forward,”<sup>54</sup> yet, foreseeing the nation’s political trajectory, “Back to Africa” movements gained popularity as one way to escape racialized oppression. However, as Pennsylvania created a pathway to freedom, Colonists feared the stance of manumission would be adopted more widely. As a result, instituted across the original Thirteen United American Colonies in 1790 through the establishment of the 1790 Naturalization Act, the United States Congress legally defined eligibility and extended the nation’s first citizenship rights to “free white persons...of good character.”<sup>55</sup> Indicated by “race,” residency requirements, and an administered oath

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<sup>53</sup> Massachusetts State Archives, “Africans in America/Part 2/the Boston Plan.” *PBS* (Public Broadcasting Service), accessed June 24, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h59t.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Kehinde Andrews, *Back to Black: Retelling Black Radicalism for the 21st Century* (London: Zed Books, 2019), xvi.

<sup>55</sup> “Nationality Act of 1790,” *Immigration History* (Immigration and Ethnic History Society, UT Austin, January 31, 2020), <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/1790-nationality-act/>.

of allegiance, it was clear the U.S. was putting into motion the legal parameters of belonging. As discussed previously, under the purview of “states’ rights,” a limited number of states extended rights of citizenship to free/d African descendants. However, as the nation defined racially whom it deemed citizens, expanded its borders Westward, and, in 1793, instituted “fugitive slave laws” allowing enslavers to recover enslaved property, it concretized the role the “peculiar institution” of enslavement would play going forward.

With the purchase of the Louisiana Territory in 1803, the United States expanded its geographical boundaries and nearly doubled its land mass.<sup>56</sup> The acquisition of this substantial swath of land generated many ideas and questions about the future direction of the U.S. nation. One question, in particular, loomed heavy on the hearts and minds of people of African descent (enslaved and free/d) –*what would be their status*—would the practice of enslavement expand in the developing nation or, would the status and rights of U.S. citizenship now be conferred? Contemplating the precarious nature of “freedom,” free/d “people of colour” fully understood their fate as tangentially tethered to that of their enslaved brethren. They wanted to progress within the nation but not at the cost of expanding the use of enslaved African laborers. Exclaimed by Mr. Henry at the 1856 California Colored Conventions Movement meeting, “I love my country, with all her

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<sup>56</sup> History.com Editors, “Louisiana Purchase,” *History.com* (A&E Television Networks, December 2, 2009), <https://www.history.com/topics/westward-expansion/louisiana-purchase>. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 brought into the United States about 828,000 square miles of territory from France, thereby doubling the size of the young republic. What was known at the time as the Louisiana Territory stretched from the Mississippi River in the east to the Rocky Mountains in the west and from the Gulf of Mexico in the south to the Canadian border in the north.

faults, I love her, “but I cannot hail with joy her progress; if, by progress, is meant the acquisition of Territory and the extension of slavery therein, as in the case of Texas, Kansas, and Nebraska.”<sup>57</sup>

If the U.S. expanded the use of enslaved African chattel laborers across the growing nation, what impact would this have on free/d people of color? Free/d African descendants in the U.S. were not the only people cogitating this question. In the U.S., populations of free/d African descendants presented a problem because their existence highlighted the paradox between messages that situated African descendants as inferior and, for some, the reality of many independent, thriving, free Black communities. Rather than leave their fate to be determined for them, free African descendants levied their organizing skills and orchestrated their desires.

As sites of Black opposition materialized through acts of resistance and their demands for access to voting rights intensified, abolitionist movements were gaining traction on emancipation by highlighting the perils of enslavement and the indeterminacy of the free/d Black population. To that end, traveling to the British West African colony of Sierra Leone (settled in 1787 by enslaved people who had been manumitted from the British Crown), Paul Cuffe (of African descendant born in the U.S.) surveyed the colony of Sierra Leone as an option for African descendants in the U.S. Colonies to start anew.

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<sup>57</sup> “Proceedings of the Second Annual Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California, held in the City of Sacramento, Dec. 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th, 1856.,” *Colored Conventions Project Digital Records*, accessed June 22, 2022, <https://omeka.coloredconventions.org/items/show/266>.

In a *Brief Account* written in 1812, Cuffe stated, “I merely wish to convey a brief account of the situation of the colony as I found it, hoping the information may prove serviceable and interesting to some of my friends in the United States.”<sup>58</sup> Self-financed by Cuffe at the cost of approximately four thousand dollars, by 1815, his account detailing economic, educational, and religious opportunities, political systems, and cultural practices of neighboring tribes had encouraged nine free Black families from the U.S. Colonies to settle in Sierra Leone. As the U.S. nation debated options for dealing with its “free negro problem,” rather than confront the paradox within the nation, Cuffe’s emigration “success” was taken into consideration as a viable possibility for releasing the U.S. of its free/d African descendant population.

Across the U.S. nation, debates in 1817 shifted to explore the possibility of migrating to Canada or repatriation to the African continent. Colonization schemes gained popularity as a solution to maintain enslavement and eliminate the free/d population of African descendants within the borders of the nation altogether.<sup>59</sup>

According to the White House Historical Association:

Through colonization, the free Black population would be settled in their own nation, eliminating the group of people deemed an imminent threat to the institution of slavery. A few proponents of colonization initially suggested the creation of a colony for Black people west of the Mississippi or the West Indies. But after Paul Cuffe, a mixed-race Quaker, shipbuilder, and activist, made a successful, self-financed trip with thirty-eight Black

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<sup>58</sup> Paul Cuffe, *A Brief Account of the Settlement and Present Situation of the Colony of Sierra Leone, in Africa* (Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1970), 3.

<sup>59</sup> It is important to note that colonization schemes were adopted by both white and Black people. Lending support to the basis of this research project, the idea of duplicitous interpretations of Black racial politics, Black people envisioned colonization as a pathway to achieve freedom beyond the reach of white domination however, whites adopted the idea that colonization was beneficial because it physically separated the sphere of influence between enslaved and free African descendant peoples.

people to Sierra Leone for the purpose of settling other free Black people in 1815, other supporters of colonization deemed the western coast of Africa the ideal location for a new colony. The perceived success of Cuffe's voyage, along with the desire to remove free Black people from the United States altogether, served as the inspiration for the American Colonization Society.<sup>60</sup>

Officially formed by Reverend Robert Finley and others, the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color of the United States, later shortened to the American Colonization Society (ACS), operated from 1817 to 1964 and was an organization created as an alternative to the abolition of the institution of enslavement and emancipation of the enslaved U.S. population. Supported by Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, et al., in 1822, the ACS colonized a settlement on the west coast of the African continent; this colony became the independent nation of Liberia in 1847. Believing that migration out of the U.S. on their own terms would provide greater freedom and opportunities to thrive, records demonstrate that approximately thirteen thousand free/d African descendants emigrated to the new settlement. Physically located on the African continent, which they presumed to be beyond the yoke of racial oppression, for African descendants in the U.S., migration symbolized a "Black cultural ethos that was centered on ideas of collectivity in a commitment to African people worldwide...;"<sup>61</sup> however, it did not offer a complete resolution. While Paul Cuffe's initial voyage exemplified the efficacy of Black self-determination, colonization schemes

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<sup>60</sup> Morgan Robinson, History Intern, "The American Colonization Society," *WHHA* (en-US) (White House Historical Association, June 22, 2020), <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-american-colonization-society>

<sup>61</sup> Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American?: Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784-1861* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), xvi.

were taken up and “championed by white racists who did not want to interact with free blacks on an equal basis and plotted to forcibly remove blacks from the United States before they gained their American citizenship and posed a real threat to southern slavery.”<sup>62</sup>

Supporting the objective basis of this research project, duplicitous interpretations of Black racial politics, in the U.S., as a core value outlined through usurpational idealism, the relocation of free/d African descendants out of the U.S. was a veiled attempt towards efforts to maintain the hierarchical racial status quo and limit citizenship to white people. If African descendants were decreased or eliminated altogether, with little opposition, a tightened grip to expand the practice of enslavement and expand its use across the nation was possible. In their attempts to prevent the continuance or spread of enslavement, many African descendants’ relationship with the U.S. was complicated and fraught. Still, their identities and lineages blended traditional African cultural practices with U.S. cultural practices and customs.<sup>63</sup> The fusion of cultural identities and the commonality of African ancestry aided a sense of “collective identity,” yet, the African continent was *not* “home,” nor would embracing it offer a pathway to U.S. citizenship. They believed they needed to demonstrate an absolute allegiance to the nation to further their efforts of belonging and citizenship.

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<sup>62</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 68.

<sup>63</sup> This is evidenced through burial rituals, dance celebrations and language patterns.

For those free/d African descendants that remained in the U.S., “[t]hey quickly discovered that efforts to balance their African identity and passion for black community building with a growing desire for freedom and equality in the United States created an ideological tension...”<sup>64</sup> The tension between wanting to claim and maintain elements of African identities while simultaneously desiring full and equal rights as citizens in the land of their birth led Black leaders to question “...whether their connection to Africa might be irreconcilable with their mission to establish a community in the United States.”<sup>65</sup> By 1810, this irreconcilability resulted in diverging agendas that fractured the ideological trajectories within the black community yet also facilitated one of the greatest national collectives to push for civil rights.

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<sup>64</sup> Alexander, *African or American?*, xvii.

<sup>65</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. *Ibid*, xviii.

#### IV. The Colored Conventions Movements: Coordinated Efforts that Redefined American Identity and Belonging

In Ohio, the state constitution of 1802 legally ratified the abolition of enslavement. However, although Black people were legally “free,” Ohio implemented aggressive measures to curb Black immigration to the state. Between 1804 and 1807, African descendants who wanted to reside in the state had to post an upfront bond of five hundred dollars to guarantee good behavior. Prior to federal regulation, as immigration was officiated at the state level, African descendants wanting to reside in Ohio had to produce evidence proving they were free. Resisting to whom “freedom” applied, African descendants refused “to accept their place as people who were not really, not fully, citizens even when they were said to be “free.”<sup>66</sup> While people of African descent could not be held in bondage or indentured servitude, legally, they could not assert voting rights, hold public office, or serve in militias. Increasingly, white fear, hostility, and violence led to a rise in anti-Black violence and a wave of exclusionary laws that forced over two thousand Black residents to leave the state of Ohio and many more to contemplate their fate.

Identified as an impetus for the formation of the Colored Conventions Movement, as fugitive slave laws allowing enslavers to “recapture their absconded property” ignited across the nation, Hezekiah Grice, born free in 1801 and now residing in Ohio, encountered racial discrimination. Unable to gain “meaningful employment and status as

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<sup>66</sup> P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson, *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, (Chapel Hill: Univ of North Carolina Press, 2021), 21.

a citizen,” in 1830, Grice, contemplating solutions for equality, including migration, solicited advice through a letter campaign. Writing letters to Black leaders, Grice questioned if migration to Canada would be the best opportunity for him to live with “basic human rights.”<sup>67</sup> Bishop Richard Allen, an influential Black leader who founded the Free African Society, 1787 (“co-founded with Absalom Jones as a mutual aid society independent of any particular religious affiliation yet tied to a strong sense of morality”)<sup>68</sup> and the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in 1794, answered Grice’s question.

Taking five months to organize and assemble at the Mother Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia, by September 20, 1830, Black leaders convened to discuss issues plaguing Black communities. Namely racial discrimination, the possibility and effectiveness of emigration on their terms, and of most importance, addressing the indeterminacy of their status as U.S. citizens. What resulted from this first meeting was the formation of a national organizing body, the Colored Conventions Movement, that operated from 1830 through the 1890s. The Colored Conventions Movement held over two hundred national and state-level meetings throughout its tenure. In these gatherings of free/d African descendants, as Martha Jones in *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America* states, “...they claimed an unassailable belonging, one grounded in birthright citizenship...Black Americans imagined, claimed, and enacted

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<sup>67</sup> “Traditional Origin Story,” *The Meeting That Launched a Movement: The First National Convention*, February 25, 2021, <https://coloredconventions.org/first-convention/origins-1830-convention/traditional-origin-story/>.

<sup>68</sup> Michael Baraga, “Free African Society,” *Social Welfare History Project*, January 12, 2022. <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/eras/colonial-postrev/free-african-society/>.

their relationship to the law.”<sup>69</sup> Although many states throughout the U.S. did not legally acknowledge or extend rights to African descendants as full and equal citizens, African descended people assembled, organized, and applied pressure to make their demands known.

The Colored Conventions Movements provided organizing spaces for radical abolitionism to transform the indeterminacy of citizenship status into a certainty of belonging. From one perspective, they were responding to what was happening around them. They witnessed the American Colonization Society ramping up deployment of their “deportation” schemes, yet, although African descendants identified their lineage as connected to African peoples and recognized the afflictions and harm done to the African continent, they firmly situated themselves as American:

the African Colonization Society...does not meet with our approbation. However great the debt which these United States may owe to injured Africa, and however unjustly her sons have been made to bleed, and her daughters to drink of the cup of affliction, still, we who have been born and nurtured on this soil, we, whose habits, manners, and customs are the same in common with other Americans, can never consent to take our lives in our hands and be the bearers of the redress offered by that Society to that much afflicted [*sic*] country.<sup>70</sup>

In the gathering spaces of the Colored Conventions Movement, informed public audiences developed political plans, discussed and strategized state-level issues, built community-based projects, celebrated racial unity, protested violence, and debated and

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<sup>69</sup> Martha S. Jones, *Birthright Citizens*, 1.

<sup>70</sup> American Society of Free Persons of Colour (1830: Philadelphia, PA), “Constitution of the American Society of Free Persons of Colour, for improving their condition in the United States; for purchasing lands; and for the establishment of a settlement in upper Canada, also, The Proceedings of the Convention with their Address to Free Persons of Colour in the United States,” *Colored Conventions Project Digital Records*, accessed June 8, 2022, <https://omeka.coloredconventions.org/items/show/70>.

organized ways to best implement policies to secure Black civil rights. While it can be argued that the radical abolitionism of the Conventions was not a new phenomenon – abolitionism functioned on the slavers used to transport enslaved people to the “new world,” as P. Gabrielle Forman in *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century* articulates, the importance of the work accomplished at these meetings was monumental. Conventions laid the foundation for formal Black organizing. When the histories of the conventions are thoroughly examined, they problematize “a genesis story that continually situates radical abolitionists as the progenitor and sponsor of nineteenth-century movement for Black freedom.”<sup>71</sup> These conventions, rooted in the long-standing liberatory practices of African descendants, were not the ultimate panacea for liberation; they represent the communal space and organizing body where conversations and debates tackled issues facing the Black community. In these spaces, Black people worked to link meaning to freedom and claims to their rights as citizens. They maintained their commitment to further racial justice while at the same time debating and adapting to deracialized “American” identities as part of a concerted strategy for U.S. citizenship inclusion.

Facilitated by Bishop Richard Allen, who served as the inaugural President, the Colored Conventions Movement assembled a national organizing body dedicated to collective action. These spaces demonstrated “the determination, eloquence, organizational commitment, and community building”<sup>72</sup> needed to unify the objectives to

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<sup>71</sup> Foreman, *The Colored Conventions Movement*, 28.

<sup>72</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. *Ibid*, 57.

overcome racial injustice and reform the nation. The Colored Conventions Movement attempted to “speak directly to the ongoing issues Black people face as disenfranchised denizens of the United States and as global, diasporic, citizens of the world.”<sup>73</sup> Not wanting to institute a top-down approach to governing the issues facing African descendants, the organization grounded its objectives in the concerns voiced by convention attendees and wove into its organizing principles at national annual conventions, issues facing Black communities across the nation at the local state level.

Interlaced as a three-prong approach,

[i]n reading about each convention, at least three factors emerge as separate, but ultimately interrelated, focal points; arising within each convention, they thread their way serially from one to the next. The first factor is ideological principle, and the stand taken by the convention concerning Black civil rights (education, voting, trade, agriculture, etc.); the second is strategy, the most efficacious way of thinking about and then determining what course of action to take; the third is the action itself. In each instance, principal informs strategy and vice versa, and action results from the two.<sup>74</sup>

Organizing efforts at the national convention generated various other sociopolitical endeavors for attaining equality. Examining the records from an offshoot organization, the American Moral Reform Society (1835), and state conventions held in New York (1840-1870) and California (1855-1865), the objectives of the collective movement and resulting actionable strategies can be seen in the minutes generated at these state-level conventions held across the nation.

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<sup>73</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 57.

<sup>74</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 106.

i. American Moral Reform Society

There are a range of debates that question if the conference held in September 1830 in Philadelphia was the first “official” conference meeting of the Colored Conventions Movement. Referenced as the *American Society of Free Persons of Colour*, the original participants of the convention assembled to improve the conditions of free persons of color in the United States, purchase lands, and establish a settlement in Upper Canada. While forty delegates from around the nation attended the initial gathering, the organizational focus was reevaluated after Richard Allen’s death on March 26, 1831.

By the 1831 June meeting, the convention title had changed to the Annual Convention for the People of Colour, but the following year, the convention held in 1832, June 4<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup>, once again added the word “free.” The convention title would undergo various iterations, including incorporating references to Colored Citizens and Colored Freemen into the title, which led to the formation of separate organizations such as the National Emigration Convention of Colored People and the Colored National Labor Convention. Nonetheless, the overarching focus of the collective was meant to serve the pressing needs of the Black community as a whole. Free or enslaved, the organization’s mission was to liberate Black people from the shackles of oppression.

Quickly discovering the need for collecting and organizing the abundant issues presented by variations of laws administered across each state, state-level conventions were introduced to document and establish the challenges African descendants encountered across the nation. Various states had abolished the use of enslaved laborers; some states granted citizenship status to African descendants while other states extended

voting rights with erroneous stipulations such as land ownership requirements. It was precisely this inconsistency and the unequal distribution of laws that conference attendees rallied around. Simultaneously admonishing emigration schemes that attempted to push free/d African descendants out of the U.S., defending and calling for the protection of citizenship rights, and fighting for educational access and voting rights –these vast disparities highlighted the volume of issues and facilitated the splintering of ideals at the national level; in 1835, a fracturing of purpose led to the formation of an offshoot organization, the American Moral Reform Society.

Headed initially by Samuel E. Cornish, James Forten, Walter Proctor, Reuben Ruby, and William Whipper, the American Moral Reform Society (AMRS) based their arguments for inclusion and the extension of rights as a moral issue. With a focus that emphasized “education, temperance, economy, and *universal liberty*,” the movement’s objective was rooted in a universalism philosophy. Here, I argue that the American Moral Reform Society put in motion the genesis aspects of racial colorblindness. Their arguments, rooted in universalism and moral suasion, articulated how they “...had no use for distinctions of color or complexion, and they choose to disregard geographical boundaries in their efforts to elevate the entire human race through Christian example and persuasion.”<sup>75</sup> If we situate the objectives of the racial colorblindness concept as aiming “to treat individuals as equally as possible, without regard to race...,”<sup>76</sup> and adopting a

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<sup>75</sup> Howard H. Bell, “The American Moral Reform Society, 1836-1841.” *The Journal of Negro Education* 27, no. 1 (1958): 34.

<sup>76</sup> Monnica T. Williams, “Colorblind Ideology Is a Form of Racism,” *Psychology Today* (Sussex Publishers, December 27, 2011), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/culturally-speaking/201112/colorblind-ideology-is-form-racism>.

philosophy that prioritized a universality of human rights, the actions of the AMRS provided the origins of the racial colorblind ideology that was deployed initially by African descendants who rejected racial designations as a strategy to find acceptance within the nation. To African descendants, racial colorblindness was not conceptualized for approval of the white gaze; it was instituted as an act of resistance to being unable to claim and exercise Americanness.

Exposing the hypocrisy of the Christian religion, the AMRS pointed out that “congregations that refused to affirm the unity of the human species thus flaunted their sins and ignorance.”<sup>77</sup> Positioning racism as a sin, religions that claimed to demonstrate love for all brethren yet did nothing to challenge the evils of the enslavement of African peoples or racialized disenfranchisement were called out for the duplicity of their actions. The AMRS “...addressed themselves to an attack upon racial prejudice as it existed in the average American church. Brotherly love and true forbearance were held to be necessary if professing Christians were to be free of the sin of racial prejudice. *All men* were shown to be brothers by Bible definition of man’s relationship to his fellow man.”<sup>78</sup>

Pushing for people to grapple with the meaning and ramifications of “race,” especially the term “colored,” the AMRS unpacked how “[r]ace categories did not merely justify any quality, but they embodied and structured it. They were linguistic, ideological, and behavioral tools that regulated access to social, political, economic,

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<sup>77</sup> Joan L. Bryant, “Colored Conventions, Moral Reform, and the American Race Problem” in *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 167.

<sup>78</sup> Bell, “The American Moral Reform Society,” 35.

legal, and religious opportunities by investing in maintaining whiteness...[h]ierarchies were intrinsic to the discourse of “color.” Deploying race designations gave credence to invalid notions of difference in rank.”<sup>79</sup> Rejecting the term “colored,” which the AMRS denoted as maintaining racial difference, and embracing the title and identity as “American,” they attempted to dismantle “*that there are rights peculiar to the color of a man’s skin.*”<sup>80</sup> They rooted their movement in principles rather than “race.” Their reimagining the language of “race” as a counter-hegemonic tool connects to hooks’ perspective on how African descendants used language as sites of freedom. Adopting a racially colorblind perspective that embodied their humanity rather than their racialization, they attempted to free themselves from the confines and limitations of the racialized identities imposed on them. Pointed out by Joan L. Bryant in “Colored Conventions, Moral Reform, and the American Race Problem,” in *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, in “[d]eclaring themselves “members of the human family,” participants assailed racial designations to pinpoint the wrongs of disenfranchisement and establish their citizenship claims....”<sup>81</sup> Black people understood and positioned “race” as a creation of prejudiced men and not guided by the godly principles of religion.

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<sup>79</sup> Bryant, “Colored Conventions, Moral Reform, and the American Race Problem,” 174.

<sup>80</sup> Forman, *The Colored Conventions Movement*, 109.

<sup>81</sup> Bryant, “Colored Conventions, Moral Reform, and the American Race Problem,” 176.

The AMRS comprehended that their duty was to advocate for the liberation of African descendant peoples. However, the organization took an approach rooted in nationalistic ideals and embodied an American nationalist identity as a way to reject the limitations of “race.” Insisting “that “moral power” transcended complexional and state boundaries”<sup>82</sup> and seeing racial categories as confining, the idea was to, as the racial colorblind concept promotes, move beyond “race” and underscore the humanity and loyalty demonstrated by African descendants within the U.S. nation. This rejection of the term “colored” would be met with fierce opposition as many saw the refusal as antithetical to and disconnected from the needs of the Black “community.”

For many Black leaders, the central question was both complex and circular, questioning how one could give up the identity characteristic that formed their self-understanding, they also probed the point of holding on to that same identity characteristic that created the condition of their inequality. Moving forward, due to the fact that “race” created the condition of inequality, some questioned what the benefit was in now embracing a deracialized identity. Without “race,” how would Black people advocate for themselves as a collective community? Would they still be able to demonstrate the harm caused as a result of racialization? Many Black leaders began to question the motives of the AMRS and quickly moved to disassociate the organization from the national Colored Conventions Movement.

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<sup>82</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 174.

ii. Impact of Colored Conventions Movement in the State of New York

After approximately two hundred years of allowing legal enslavement to operate, the state of New York passed legislation for the complete eradication of legalized enslavement; July 4, 1827, marked the official date of emancipation. However, similar to Ohio, laws and practices were created shortly thereafter that limited the exercise of rights. Wanting to fight against exclusionary laws and practices such as only allowing Black men to vote if they owned property valued at over two hundred dollars, a delegation of representatives from New York, including Jos. Adams, George L. Brown, Austin Steward, and Leven Williams traveled to the National Colored Conventions Movement conference assembling in Philadelphia at the Mother Bethel AME Church on September 20, 1830; this conference would transform Black political organizing.

While the formation of the Colored Conventions Movement in 1830 was a pivotal moment in the formalization of Black organizing, vaguely stating their objective as tackling to improve the condition of “free persons of colour [*sic*]” was not always definitive enough to yield results. Many conference attendees advocated moving away from a broad-based political platform and toward orienting their organizing around specific goals. After the AMRS was created in 1835 and embraced a racially colorblind ethos within its organizing, seeing the trajectory of the AMRS, while he initially supported the organization, Samuel E. Cornish would change his position and state that unless the AMRS adopted and embraced the term “colored” and advocated explicitly for Black peoples, it “would never amount to anything unless it reorganized with a specific

reform program to carry out on a community basis.”<sup>83</sup> The direction of the AMRS highlighted concerns that national-level organizing was not working in the best interest of addressing the multiple issues facing Black people across the nation. At the national conference, it was brought to the attention of organizers that there were specific state-level racial issues that needed to be addressed. These issues spawned state-level conferences in which the state of New York led one of the most active chapters. Commencing in 1840, the New York chapter of the Colored Conventions Movement formed political associations to tackle the issue of voting rights, advocated for educational access for their children, challenged both American Colonization Society schemes and Fugitive Slave laws, and fundraised to support causes. However, the biggest fight in the New York chapter would materialize around naming, identity, and representation.

Born in New York in 1793, Samuel E. Cornish was an activist, editor, journalist, and minister, to name a few of his professions. An ardent renaissance man, Cornish worked with the African Free School in New York in 1787, establishing himself as a resource between school administrators and Black parents. Realizing that the school was not equipping Black children with the tools necessary for them to cement their status as U.S. citizens, Cornish turned to other methods to advocate for Black liberation. With his involvement in Black abolitionist circles and wanting a vessel that African descendants would control to amplify their perspectives, along with John Russwurm, Cornish created the first African American-run newspaper dedicated to rebuffing racist propaganda.

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<sup>83</sup> Bell, “The American Moral Reform Society,” 19.

Publishing the first issue of the *Freedom's Journal*, March 16th, 1827, in New York, Cornish stated, “We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the publick [*sic*] been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly, though in the estimation of some mere trifles.”<sup>84</sup> Six months after the initial publication, Cornish resigned from the *Freedom's Journal* paper due to ideological differences when Russwurm, similar to the American Colonization Society, supported the colonization and emigration of African descendants in the U.S. to Africa. Two years later, in 1829, the *Freedom's Journal* publication, struggling due to lack of financial support, ceased printing. Cornish would go on to publish and edit several newspapers and dedicate his efforts to supporting other Black causes.

With the formation of the national Colored Conventions Movement in 1830, although *The Liberator* (1831 – 1865) was in existence as an anti-slavery abolitionist paper dedicated to exposing the ills of enslavement, it was dedicated to anti-slavery efforts and operated by William L. Garrison, a white abolitionist. Cornish understood the importance of prioritizing the Black perspective and wanted a Black centered vessel to extend the conversation beyond anti-slavery efforts. Wanting to connect a publication to the national Colored Conventions Movement to serve as the literary “mouthpiece” for the organization, Cornish started the *Weekly Advocate* newspaper in 1837 to promote equality and citizenship rights for African/Black descendant peoples. At a subscription cost of \$1.50 annually, it was extremely popular in free/d communities of color in the

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<sup>84</sup> “The Newspaper Age: Blacks Speak Out in Own Paper,” *Citizenship: Freedom's Journal* (Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), accessed July 2, 2022, [https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/newyork/laic/episode2/topic1/e2\\_t1\\_s3-bp-sd.html](https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/newyork/laic/episode2/topic1/e2_t1_s3-bp-sd.html)).

U.S. However, two months after the initial publication, Cornish changed course and reorganized the objective of the paper. The name of the *Weekly Advocate* was changed in March 1837, to *The Colored American* to align with the goals of the Colored Conventions Movement.

The objective of *The Colored American* mirrored the activist aims of the New York chapter of the Colored Conventions Movement. Focusing on African descendant peoples' moral, political, and social uplift, "[t]he paper distinguished itself by its use of original reporting rather than relying on boiler-plate, filler material taken from other publications."<sup>85</sup> The name change reflected the ideological direction of the paper, which was to promote African descendants' rightful claims of U.S. belonging. Cornish believed African descendants born on U.S. soil were rightfully American by birthright; however, he also understood their condition to be based on their racialization. Lashing out in opposition to the deracialized emphasis of William Whipper and the AMRS, Cornish saw "race" as a significant component of identity. While there were primarily three distinct groups organizing, "free people of color," "colored Americans," and "enslaved Africans," the concept of naming highlighted both the tensions and an indeterminate characterization in which a multitude of conflicting meanings was used to determine what each term meant, what each group was attempting to accomplish and, also served as the impetus in which people like Cornish cemented their identities in Americanness.

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<sup>85</sup> *The Colored American New York, NY, 1837-42*, The Library of Congress (Washington, DC), January 1, 1837. <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn83027091/>.

Situating naming as a form of adornment and ornamentation –how one names themselves, references themselves– these labels can create, facilitate and cement belonging and identity so much so that “[w]hen establishing the *Colored American*, [Cornish] insisted that the term “colored” denoted the population’s distinctive contours and needs. Names mattered. Moral reformers should welcome being called “colored,” he reasoned because it was superior to the alternative of being “nothing else but NEGROES, NEGROES.” The designations “*Negroes, Africans, and blacks*” were all “names of reproach” that compromised claims of the American identity... although he perceived color designations as markers of stratification, he was convinced that they could function as a useful way to distinguish among Americans.<sup>86</sup> The paper’s title was originally the *Weekly Advocate*, which was the paper’s objective –to advocate the desires of African descendants. When the title changed two months into publication to *The Colored American*, this was Cornish’s stance to fulfill the activist objectives of the New York chapter in that African descendants, although of “color,” *were* Americans, albeit Americans with “race” specific claims and goals.

Published as a weekly periodical, advertisements, editorials, and other notices directed to the African descendant community were routinely published in the paper. Including the voices and perspectives of the Black community, in the article “A Convention,” we see African descendants articulating their caste status and backing claims to a specific American identity because they believed that “being of the American nation, we ought to identify ourselves with the American people, and with American

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<sup>86</sup> Bryant, “Colored Conventions, Moral Reform, and the American Race Problem,” 172.

interests, yet there are and will be, special interests for us to attend to.”<sup>87</sup> They also questioned their citizenship status and made a point of connecting citizenship to birth location. In the article “This Country Our Only Home,” it is stated:

“...If we are not citizens of this country, then we cannot see of what country we are, or can be citizens; for Blacstone, who is quoted, we believe, as the standard of civil law, tells us, that the strongest claim to citizenship is birthplace. We understand him to say, that in whatever country or place you may be born, of that country or place, you are in the first and highest sense a citizen; in fine, this appears to us too self-evident to require argument to prove it. Now probably three-fourths of the present colored population are *native American born* and, therefore, American citizens.

Suppose we should remove to any other country, and claim a foothold among them; could we not be rejected on the ground that we were not of them, because not born among them? Even Africa—identity of complexion would be nothing, neither would it weigh anything, because our ancestry were of that country—the fact of our not having been among them, would be sufficient ground for any civil power to refuse us citizenship.<sup>88</sup>

Providing examples to support and encourage their true liberation, in attempts to shame the U.S. into doing what they viewed as morally correct, *The Colored American* highlighted an editorialization of the British Empire’s emancipation of the West-India Islands in 1833 and published speeches from Black abolitionist leaders such as Frederick Douglass who actively participated in the New York conventions.

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<sup>87</sup> “A Convention.” *The Colored American*, Vol. 1, Issue 9, May 2, 1840. Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive (accessed July 4, 2022). <https://link-gale-com.mimas.calstatela.edu/apps/doc/GB2500082072/SAS?u=calstate&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=250e56bb>.

<sup>88</sup> “This Country Our Only Home.” *The Colored American*, Vol.1, Issue 10, May 9, 1840. Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive (accessed July 4, 2022). <https://link-gale-com.mimas.calstatela.edu/apps/doc/GB2500082098/SAS?u=calstate&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=e680e413>.

Noted by P. Gabrielle Forman in *The Colored Conventions Movement*, in references familiar to the U.S. Constitution, Douglass was making a claim in support of birthright citizenship when he stated:

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES WAS FORMED TO ESTABLISH JUSTICE, PROMOTE THE GENERAL WELFARE, AND SECURE THE BLESSINGS OF LIBERTY TO ALL THE PEOPLE OF THE COUNTRY.” He went on to argue that these obligations extend it to blacks because “we are... American citizens asserting their rights on their own native soil,” and he based his argument on the following claims: 1) Black men are citizens of New York State, since nowhere does the word “white” appear in its constitution and since they had all been voters before 1821; 2) according to the U.S. Constitution, “the citizens of each state shall be entitled to all the privileges and immunities of citizens in the United States”; 3) therefore, as citizens of New York State, Black men are perforce citizens of the United States.<sup>89</sup>

Douglass articulated what he saw, to Black people, as the unfavorable political direction the U.S. was moving toward. It was suppressing anti-slavery discussions, not allowing Black people the exercise of their rights, expelling free people of color from residing within the borders of the U.S., and expanding the use of enslavement by “placing their black population, fourteen million in number, under the banner of the slave power.”<sup>90</sup>

The U.S. nation-state was increasingly gravitating toward cementing its identity as a slaveocracy, but free and enslaved African descended peoples would challenge this at every level. The New York conventions ran from 1840 – 1891 and tackled a host of issues; that the organization lasted almost sixty years beyond the granting of initial emancipation in 1827 in New York speaks to the ways in which, for Black people,

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<sup>89</sup> Foreman, *The Colored Conventions Movement* 115-116.

<sup>90</sup> Frederick Douglass, “Colored Men’s State Convention of New York, Troy, September 4, 1855.,” *Colored Conventions Project Digital Records*, accessed May 13, 2022 <https://omeka.coloredconventions.org/items/show/238>.

“freedom” did not continually transmute into liberation. Through Cornish’s leadership and grassroots organizing, he used *The Colored American* to articulate recognition of African descendants as Americans and campaign for their rightful citizenship. Operating from 1837-1841, *The Colored American* collectively gave voice to a global Black community who knew there would be no easy fight and that challenges lay ahead. As Black people in other states across the nation challenged their racial subjugation, the National Colored Conventions Movement provided the space for them to assemble, brainstorm, and resist. As the U.S. nation expanded its borders westward, offering promise, California’s “free” state status entered the fray for Black liberation.

### iii. Impact of Colored Conventions Movement in the State of California

In the state of California, prior to official statehood, throughout the 1840s/1850s, debates centered on settling if California would be admitted to the union as a “free” or “slave” holding state. Not wanting to infringe on the self-determination of white labor rights, the Compromise of 1850, which attempted to distribute free versus slave-holding states across the nation evenly, settled the debate. California was admitted as a free state, yet the Black population did not experience complete acceptance or total equality; they would take on an uphill fight for their rights. The story of contemporary Black California began with their search for opportunities. With limited resources and facing the perils of enslavability, the physical distance between the eastern and southern seaboard and the West coast made California attractive to those seeking freedom.

As the lure of the California Gold Rush Era (1848-55) attracted newcomers and facilitated one of the greatest migrations across the nation, elected in 1849 and referencing African descendants, California’s first governor, Peter Burnett, stated, “the object is to keep them out.” However, Black migrants came to California in search of jobs, better economic promises, and freedom from racial conflict. Freed when she entered the territory of California, people such as Elizabeth Flake Rowan (settling in what is now San Bernardino) worked as a laundress and caretaker, her husband a barber. They lived a simple life yet, were perceived as a threat simply because of their race. These types of perceived threats caused legislators such as Isaac Allen to introduce legislation to maintain social segregation because Allen believed that Black people associating or

intermingling with whites “leads to foster the ignorant pride of the free Negro.”<sup>91</sup> Allen’s bill did not become law; however, due to the increasing numbers of free Black settlers, anti-Black resentment across the state grew.

Resulting from the hostility directed at Black migrants, held five times between 1855 and 1889 in northern California –Sacramento and San Francisco, the organizing and strategies developed via The Colored Conventions Movement in California assisted African descendants in asserting their belonging and how to strategize solidarity around issues regarding the lack of educational institutions for their children, not being able to testify in courts as well as building entrepreneurial opportunities for business ownership. Educated and having access to economic resources, many Black California Bay area residents organized under the banner of bringing “together a full delegation of people of color, from all parts of the State, in order that they may compare notes, communicate information as to the general condition of things among themselves, and if possible fix upon some common plan for the intellectual, moral and social improvement of their condition as a class in this State.”<sup>92</sup> Establishing themselves through entrepreneurship, although their population numbers were less than six thousand across the state, by the 1857 state convention, they documented owning capital tantamount to three million dollars. However, access to financial resources did not exempt them from discrimination.

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<sup>91</sup> Erin Blakemore, “California Once Tried to Ban Black People,” *History.com* (A&E Television Networks, February 9, 2018), <https://www.history.com/news/california-once-tried-to-ban-black-people>.

<sup>92</sup> First State Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California (1855: Sacramento, CA), “Proceedings of the First State Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California. Held at Sacramento Nov. 20th 21st, and 22d, in the Colored Methodist Church [sic].,” *Colored Conventions Project* accessed June 22, 2022, <https://omeka.coloredconventions.org/items/show/265>.

Understanding they had little to no protection under state laws, Black Californian's used their resources to set up contingency funds to fight for various causes and demonstrate proof of their capacity to function as full and equal citizens.

Rather than explicitly focusing on "race," California Convention participants rooted their opposition to discrimination as a sociopolitical-based argument. They embodied the concepts of Americanness as industrious, self-reliant, and morally righteous and underscored how they had no desire to be "on par" with their oppressors, whose actions they interpreted as ignorant. Embodying a racially colorblind ethos and understanding that "[w]hitenedness is nothing more than the false consciousness of working-class whites, who have been tricked into being racist by their capitalist oppressors,"<sup>93</sup> convention participants reached across racial lines in an attempt to demonstrate to poor whites how their economic, social and political status was equal to that of "the negro." Wanting to "...[c]onverse with our ignorant white brethren, those who despise the poor negro because he is a negro, and convince them that their social condition and ours are alike degraded, and whatever political measures afflict us, are none the less severe upon them...",<sup>94</sup> they demonstrated a commonality of sociopolitical class oppression which was not confined to aspects of "race."

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<sup>93</sup> Andrews, *Back to Black*, 197.

<sup>94</sup> Second Annual Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California (1856: Sacramento, CA), "Proceedings of the Second Annual Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California, held in the City of Sacramento, Dec. 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th, 1856.," *Colored Conventions Project Digital Records*, accessed June 22, 2022, <https://omeka.coloredconventions.org/items/show/266>.

Taking a stance as patriotic “Americans” who were industrious, moral, and law-abiding people, they claimed their citizenship status should be granted based not on their “race” but due to their loyalty to the nation. Stating, “...we have never sworn falsely to the Government; we have never taken up arms against it, –we have never attempted to betray it into the hands of foreign powers. This is what no other race of men can truthfully assert in America. We have prayed for it–fought for it–bled for it, and perished by thousands in its defence [sic].”<sup>95</sup> Like the national conference objectives, the primary purpose of the California Conference caucuses was to create a local state networking system that would compile the issues facing the Black community and, acting on their behalf, submit their grievances to the state legislature for consideration.

Through conferences, attendees sought to demonstrate their loyalty to the nation and legally secure recognition as American citizens through actions such as fighting for access to the right to vote. However, as shown by the American Moral Reform Society and the New York Colored Convention conference delegation, the magnitude of organizing needed to achieve their goals often exceeded the scope of what these conventions achieved. It would take armed conflict during the U.S. Civil War (1861-65) and the ratification of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution before all men were granted the right to vote; in the new State of California, a state constitutional amendment had to be adopted on May 7, 1879, before Black people’s right to vote in California would be instituted across the state. Legally, with the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment, 1868, formally enslaved people were absorbed into the category of

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<sup>95</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, web.

“citizen,” but to socially disparate groups, this classification embodied dissimilar renderings. The postbellum period represented challenges to the idealism of white superiority, and for many white people, it ultimately represented the disintegration of social order. For some Black people, this period represented a renewed sense of hope to be fully included in the nation and exercise the ability to reclaim their personhood. However, for most, it marked a period of intense struggle toward self-determination in a nation in which they routinely encountered abject ambivalence.

Moving forward, in what way would Black political organizing push the nation towards achieving social equality? As noted, *all men* now had legal access to the right to vote, but what did this mean for women? In thinking specifically about Black women, what challenges would they confront in society as racialized beings? Would they join the sisterhood of women’s issues, or would “race” complicate collective efforts to secure social access? Chapter two explores the tactics and strategies used by Black women to gain legal access and shape the nation’s direction. Examining gender discrimination faced by Black women, how did their approaches to inclusion navigate the tumultuous environment of racialized and gendered politics?

## Chapter Two: Realization of the Freedom Dreams they Dared to Dream: Articulating Racial Colorblindness in the Nascence of African American Women’s Political Organizing

### Key Words

African American Womanhood; Morality; National Association of Colored Women (NACW); Racial Colorblindness; Politics of Respectability

### ABSTRACT

Examining Black identity formation through the concept of racial colorblindness, chapter two, “Realization of the Freedom Dreams they Dared to Dream: Articulating Racial Colorblindness in the Nascence of African American Women’s Political Organizing,” explores how organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and individuals such as Mary Ellen Pleasant, Mary Church Terrell, and Anna Pauline “Pauli” Murray espoused philosophies that would build upon the ideas introduced within the Colored Conventions Movements (including the American Moral Reform Society (AMRS)) and build upon the core principles of racial colorblindness. More specifically, this chapter surveys how African American women “asserted agency in the construction and representation of themselves as new subjectivities –as Americans as well as blacks...within the context of an American identity.”<sup>96</sup>

Deploying various modalities and strategies of resistance, although Black women were integral in confronting and dismantling unjust laws and racial inequality, they experienced tenuous support in advancing their social interests. Demonstrated by the public assaults on their characters, chapter two explores how Black Womanist

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<sup>96</sup> Elizabeth McHenry, “Spreading the Word, the Cultural Work of the Black Press” in *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 86.

movements and the strategy of “respectability politics,” which sought to transform Black life by regulating the behaviors of African Americans through adhering to an aspirational bourgeoisie model of being, were re-articulated and molded into the functional concept of racial colorblindness. Taking control to shape their identities beyond the confines of whiteness, their efforts were earnest attempts at challenging pervading logics of a supposed innate biological inferiority of African descendants; however, rather than function in a manner that was beneficial and inclusionary, their identity politics were usurped and reinterpreted from a white perspective and further excluded African Americans access to “Americanism.”

*“...therefore becomes a duty incumbent upon us as women, as daughters of a despised race, to use our utmost endeavors to enlighten the understanding, to cultivate the talents entrusted to our keeping, that by so doing we may in a good measure, break down the strong barrier of prejudices, and raise ourselves to an equality with those of our fellow beings, who differ from us in complexion but who are with ourselves children of one eternal parent, and by his immutable law, we are entitled to the same rights and privileges....”*<sup>97</sup>  
~The Female Literary Association of Philadelphia

*“Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change. I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in all those assumptions underlining our lives.”*<sup>98</sup>  
~Audre Lorde

*“Negro women, historically, have carried the dual burden of Jim Crow and Jane Crow. They have not always carried it graciously, but they have carried it effectively...these women have often carried disproportionate burdens in the Negro family as they strove to keep its integrity intact against the constant onslaught of indignities to which it was subjected.”*<sup>99</sup>  
~Pauli Murray

*“No one color can describe the various and varied complexions in our group. They range from the deep black to the fairest white, with all the colors of the rainbow thrown in for good measure. When twenty or thirty of us meet, it is as hard to find three or four with the same complexion as it would be catch greased lightning in a bottle.”*<sup>100</sup>  
~Mary Church Terrell

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<sup>97</sup> The Female Literary Association of Philadelphia, “Preamble” *The Liberator*, December 3, 1831, 196. Gholnecsar E. Muhammad, 2012. *The Literacy Development and Practices within African American Literary Societies.* Black History Bulletin 75, no. 1. Gale Academic OneFile. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A291497075/AONE?u=calstate&sid=googleScholar&xid=91d961df>.

<sup>98</sup> Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger,” City University of New York, *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 9:3, Fall, 1981, Vol. 509, No. 3, p. 7-10. <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/509/>.

<sup>99</sup> Pauli Murray, “The Negro Woman in the Quest for Equality,” *The Acorn*, publication of Lambda Kappa Mu Sorority, Inc., June 1964.

<sup>100</sup> Mary Church Terrell, “Please Stop Using the Word ‘Negro,’” [Letter to the Editor] *The Washington Post*, May 14, 1949 in *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 544-46.

I.       Articulating Respectability: How Racial Colorblindness Emerged in the Nascence of African American Women’s Club Organizations

Over sixty years, between the 1830s and 1890s, the Colored Conventions Movement transformed Black political organizing across the U.S. Having both a domestic and global reach, the movement generated various, Black-centered political organizing conferences such as the National Civil Rights Convention (Washington, D.C., 1873, 1883) and the National Equal Rights League Convention (Cleveland, OH, 1865). To keep audiences socially and politically informed, with the growth of Black-owned newspapers, the organization often levied the power of print media to demonstrate a mutual relationship of support for the “colored press.” Newspapers operated by conference delegates ran advertisements to solicit involvement in conference gatherings. Increasingly generating public interest, conference attendance grew nationwide. While most states held meetings with generalized organizational topic agendas, of the thirty states that assembled state-level conventions, two-thirds of these conventions developed conference meetings exclusively for “colored men.”

Across the nation, the Convention of Colored Men assembled to “...met merely for the purpose of securing harmony of action...,”<sup>101</sup> “to consider [their] political condition, and to devise measures for [their] elevation and advancement...”<sup>102</sup> and, to

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<sup>101</sup> State Convention of the Colored Men of Alabama (1867: Mobile, AL), “State Convention of the Colored Men of Alabama, Mobile, May 4, 1867,” *Colored Conventions Project Digital Records*, accessed May 13, 2022, <https://omeka.coloredconventions.org/items/show/565>.

<sup>102</sup> Connecticut State Convention of Coloured Men (1849: New Haven, CT), “Proceedings of the Connecticut State Convention of Coloured Men, held at New Haven, On the September 12th and 13th, 1849.,” *Colored Conventions Project Digital Records*, accessed May 13, 2022, <https://omeka.coloredconventions.org/items/show/258>.

fight to remove “the odious and invidious disabilities imposed therein, and to gain equal political rights, ...to give the ear of [the] Legislature no rest till every legal and political disability, with all its depressing and degrading tendencies, shall be swept from the Empire State...”<sup>103</sup> —taking up the charge to speak for all of their “colored fellow-citizens,” these conference meetings excluded the experience, perspectives, and voices of Black women.

In general, sanctioned by religious decrees, most women in the early formation of U.S. society did not have opportunities extended to them to participate in platforms where they publicly vocalized their opinions. For Black women, this was even more apparent; of African descent, Maria Stewart was an exception. Herald as the first American to address a racially diverse, mixed-gendered audience in 1832, similar to the American Moral Reform Society (AMRS), Stewart vehemently opposed colonization schemes that attempted to remove and settle free/d African descendants beyond U.S. borders and was vocal on issues related to racism and sexism. After the death of the Black abolitionist David Walker (whose work inspired her), Stewart stepped into the role of speaking directly to the African descendant community to encourage them to fight for their liberation. Disregarding that society expected women to remain “invisible,” Stewart began delivering public lectures such as “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality” and orations on the need to abolish enslavement. Believing that the presence of Black women’s voices supported the anti-slavery cause and aided the elevation of the “race,”

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<sup>103</sup> Colored Men’s State Convention of New York (1855: Troy, NY), “Colored Men’s State Convention of New York, Troy, September 4, 1855.,” *Colored Conventions Project Digital Records*, accessed May 13, 2022, <https://omeka.coloredconventions.org/items/show/238>.

William Lloyd Garrison often provided space in the abolitionist paper *The Liberator* for their perspectives. In addition to other anti-slavery organizations, Black women such as Stewart contributed essays to *The Liberator* sharing their viewpoints on social and religious issues. However, beyond abolitionist circles, in general, society virtually ignored the voices and presence of Black women in public spaces.

As an example, at the Colored Men's State Convention in Troy, New York, on September 4, 1855, noted in the records of attendees, male delegates went as far as admonishing the presence of Black women. In the minutes from the meeting, "[t]he name of Miss Barbary Anna Stewart was stricken out from the roll, several gentlemen objecting to it on the ground that this is not a Woman's Rights Convention."<sup>104</sup> Black women battled the intersections of racism and sexism (including spaces where Black racial organizing was taking place). They were sidelined on issues that pertained to them, while white women were extended acceptance, welcomed into these spaces, and afforded a particular level of deference.

While Miss Barbary Stewart's presence was dismissed at the Convention of Colored Men in 1855 held in Troy, New York, through organizing taking place within abolitionist circles, women were slowly beginning to advance their rights. Still, white women were afforded a particular level of respect not extended to Black women. At the New York State Convention of Colored Men held on October 16, 1866, in Albany, there was the consideration of extending an honorary convention membership to Susan B. Anthony, a highly regarded white female abolitionist.

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<sup>104</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, web.

Noted in the meeting minutes,

Among those present in the audience, were Miss Susan B. Anthony and Mr. W. W. Broom, a white delegate from Council No. 21 of the Colored Loyal League of New York City...A long discussion took place on the admission of Miss Susan B. Anthony as an honorary member of the Convention. The long-continued services of Miss Anthony in the interests of humanity were acknowledged by the Convention, but the vote to admit her was lost. Although the Convention refused to make Miss Anthony an honorary member, a large number of the delegates expressed a desire to hear her speak at a future time.<sup>105</sup>

From this statement, it is plausible that the honorary membership initially extended to Anthony was introduced in consideration of the relationship formed between Anthony as a supporter of abolition and Frederick Douglass, who was active in abolitionist circles and the New York Chapter of the Colored Conventions Movement.<sup>106</sup> Nonetheless, the mere acknowledgment of Anthony's presence, in addition to the consideration of extending an honorary membership to her at a conference of "colored men," reveals a particular level of intimacy demonstrated between Black men, white women, and social liberation organizing.

Although these relationships were often publicly frowned upon as libidinous, Black men advanced the opportunity to cosign the ideology put forth by Elizabeth Caty Stanton that white women as "[t]he representative women of the nation have done their uttermost for the last thirty years to secure freedom for the negro..."<sup>107</sup> As such, Black

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<sup>105</sup> New York State Convention of Colored Men (1866: Albany, NY), "New York State Convention of Colored Men, Albany, October 16, 1866," *Colored Conventions Project Digital Records*, accessed May 13, 2022, <https://omeka.coloredconventions.org/items/show/529>.

<sup>106</sup> Frederick Douglass was one of thirty-two men and the only person of African descent invited to attend the Woman's Rights Convention held at Seneca Falls in 1848; this convention was organized by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Caty Stanton.

<sup>107</sup> Angela Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 70.

men exhibited esteem for white women's support (and perceived adjacent access to "power") to Black abolitionist causes over Black women. Undervalued, the efforts of Black women would receive little support towards their causes to fight against the inequalities of gender and "race," however, whether it was due to their frustration at the lack of their own rights, white female abolitionist support would soon come into question.

An analysis of white feminist "support" provides further evidence to the essential claims of this research project. As was demonstrated in chapter one with the actions of the American Colonization Society, there are similar tactics within white feminist organizing that operated to maintain the ultimate goal of preserving the hierarchical racial status quo. One reason white female support "sourred" on the codification of Black male rights is that, as this body of research asserts, from the perspective of whiteness, there were duplicitous interpretations of belonging for Black people within the nation as well as self-interested motivations behind white female support of Black racial politics. When white female desires did not materialize as anticipated, no longer having converging interests, their support for the Black abolitionist cause waned, and they disassociated themselves from the Black abolitionist cause and assembled to advocate for their own interests.

Through speeches at the Woman's Rights Convention held at Seneca Falls in 1848, along with Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Caty Stanton lobbied the U.S. Government to grant female suffrage legally. Although in "support" of Black liberation, once the U.S. emancipated African descendant people at the close of the U.S. Civil War

(1865), and the nation began engaging in conversations that would extend the right to vote to Black men and not white women, Black male positionality within the U.S. was viewed as a threat to the racialized social order and, called into question and challenged by white women. As discussed in “Racism in the Suffragist Movement,” Angela Y. Davis conveys how there was an assumption that in exchange for their support of emancipation, white women expected to gain the right to vote. Davis states, “...[a]s soon as the Union Army triumphed over their Confederate opponents, [Elizabeth Caty Stanton] and her co-workers insisted that the Republican party reward them for their wartime efforts. The reward they demanded was woman suffrage—as if a deal had been made; as if women’s rights proponents had fought for the defeat of slavery with the understanding that their prize would be the vote.”<sup>108</sup> Davis goes on to say that the “defense of their own interests as white middle-class women—in a frequently egotistical and elitist fashion—exposed the tenuous and superficial nature of their relationship to the postwar campaign for Black equality.”<sup>109</sup>

Although in a subjugated legal and social status, white women believed their racial categorization and proximal access to white male “power” would grant them voting rights. Once demonstrated to white women that principles of patriarchy would prevail, in an editorial published in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* on December 26, 1865, Stanton queried how the supposition of the hierarchical racial status quo was not upheld. In “This is the Negro’s Hour,” Stanton stated, “it becomes a serious question whether we

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<sup>108</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 74.

<sup>109</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 76.

had better stand aside and see “Sambo” walk into the kingdom first.”<sup>110</sup> Their *quid-pro-quo* desires were unfulfilled, and the superficiality of their support revealed how white women did not want to see Black men receive priority access to voting rights. Invested in upholding the hierarchical racial status quo, white female suffragists would not operate under an umbrella of “sisterhood;” they chose to reject cooperating and including Black women in their arguments on issues of women’s rights. Instead, they would “toe the line” and embody elements of usurpational idealism to co-opt the strategies deployed in the anti-slavery movement to their benefit. Maintaining white racial solidarity and rallying together by making use of the abolitionist strategies white women learned in “advocating” for Black emancipation, it would take fifty-five years before women’s organizing would secure ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, giving them the right to vote. However, as demonstrated by Susan B. Anthony’s presence at the Colored Men’s conference, the presence of white women was continually held in high regard while the plights of Black women were dismissed. Black women contributed to and had similar “interests of humanity” but were rejected from participating in conventions and movements where racial liberation organizing took place. This stark reality catapulted their need to organize and fight injustices on their own accord.

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<sup>110</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “This is the Negro’s Hour” in *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony: In the School of Anti-slavery, 1840 to 1866* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 564.

## II. Mary Ellen Pleasant: The Mother of Civil Rights in California

Although there are some indeterminacies to Mary Ellen (Williams) Pleasant's life story (as is the case with many historiographies of African descendant peoples during this period), it is believed that she was born enslaved in Georgia circa 1814. After her mother "disappeared," a white abolitionist Quaker family, the Hussey-Gardner's, took Pleasant to Massachusetts to work for their family. Exposed to another social world, while working as an apprentice for a tailor/bootmaker in Boston, Pleasant met and married her first husband, James Smith (believed to be bi-racial although posing as white) in the 1840s. Owning a plantation and working as an agent for the anti-slavery newspaper *The Liberator*, Smith participated in and helped people escape enslavement via the Underground Railroad networking system.<sup>111</sup>

Due to unconfirmed reasons, the premature death of Smith led to Pleasant inheriting a financial sum of approximately forty-five thousand dollars. Functioning as a "free" woman, she dedicated her efforts, money, and time to continue the work within underground networks that assisted enslaved people in escaping from the South. Stating, "...[y]ou know my cause well. My cause was the cause of freedom and equality for myself and for my people,"<sup>112</sup> Pleasant committed to Black liberation causes. She

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<sup>111</sup> History.com Editors, "Underground Railroad," *History.com* (A&E Television Networks, October 29, 2009), <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/underground-railroad> Originating within Quaker communities and the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the "Underground Railroad was a network of people, African American as well as white, offering shelter and aid to escaped enslaved people from the South."

<sup>112</sup> Liza Veale, "The Real History behind Mary Ellen Pleasant, San Francisco's 'Voodoo Queen,'" *KALW* (KALW: Public Media, September 9, 2015), <https://www.kalw.org/show/crosscurrents/2015-09-09/the-real-history-behind-mary-ellen-pleasant-san-franciscos-vooodoo-queen#stream/0>.

adopted the motto “I’d rather be a corpse than a coward,”<sup>113</sup> to which she then proceeded to “help her people.” By participating in the “stealing away” of enslaved people from plantations, Pleasant also exposed herself to the risk of re-enslavement under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Remarried, now to John James Pleasant,<sup>114</sup> both Mary and John were forced to flee Georgia due to their anti-slavery involvements. It is believed they traveled first to New Orleans, Louisiana (where John had family), then on to San Francisco, California, where in 1852, she would reinvent herself “as a kind of double agent. While most of San Francisco knew her as white, the black community knew that she was black — and fighting for abolition.”<sup>115</sup> This “in-between” racial status afforded her access to people and places beyond the reach of most people racialized as Black.

The Pleasant’s arrived in California at a time when, as explained in chapter one, although California entered the union as a free holding state, Black people in California faced uphill battles in their ability to exercise their rights. Building coalitions to combat the issues highlighted at the state-level Colored Conventions Movement in California, with Black population numbers less than 6,000 across the state, African descended people in California strategized ways to fight for their equality and inclusion as citizens. There are currently no evidentiary sources that confirm Pleasant’s involvement in the Colored Conventions Movement however, in working with associations similarly focused on Black rights, the Franchise League formed in San Francisco in 1852 by David W.

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<sup>113</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, web.

<sup>114</sup> Originally John James Pleasance, Mary would “Westernize” the name to Pleasant.

<sup>115</sup> Veale, “The Real History behind Mary Ellen Pleasant,” web.

Ruggles and other Black activists, Pleasant focused on winning Black people the right to exercise their civil rights, vote, and testify in California courts. Black liberation activists petitioned the California state legislature to repeal the Black Testimony Exclusion Law<sup>116</sup> and allow Black Californians to give testimony in cases involving white men. However, the California State legislature rejected the petition. It would take a revision to the State Constitution of California in 1879 before African descendants in California would receive legal access to their rights to vote. Steadfast in her commitment to fighting for Black civil rights, Pleasant supported Black causes, which would earn her two monikers—one she embraced, the “Mother of Civil Rights in California,” and the other, “Mammy Pleasant,” she despised, as she understood it was an attempt to denigrate not only her but, the characters of Black women in general.

An ardent businesswoman, from her late husband’s estate, Mary Pleasant invested her inheritance money into expanding the underground networking system to escape enslavement to the West Coast. Having financial means and initially interpreted as racially ambiguous by white people, Pleasant had doors opened for her that may have otherwise been closed if she was socially interpreted solely as a Black woman. Ever the entrepreneur, as described in *The Black West (1987)*, William Loren Katz, details how

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<sup>116</sup> “Black Testimony Exclusion Law.” Equality Before the Law: California Black Convention Activism, 1855-65 California state legislature banning Black testimony was a racially discriminatory, unproductive law that prolonged the path to citizenship for the Black community. This was one of the main legal justice issues that African Americans fought to change through tactics discussed at conventions during the late 1850s. Section 394 of the 3rd Chapter of an Act for regulating proceedings in the Court practice of the Courts of the State of California passed on April 29, 1851. It stated that “persons having one-half or more of negro blood, shall not be witnesses in an action or proceeding, to which a white person is a party.” The California Convention minutes from 1855, 1856, and 1857, all show that the Black community repeatedly came together to strategize on how to repeal this law. Accessed July 15, 2022. <https://coloredconventions.org/california-equality/life-and-politics/black-testimony-exclusion-law/>

during the Gold-Rush era, through services and business, Pleasant and other Black Californians amassed a wealth of over two million dollars in assets in the early 1800s. They used their assets and financial resources to their advantage to make the argument that they were “normal” functioning citizens that should have equal access to the rights and privileges afforded to everyone else.

When she first arrived in California, Pleasant initially worked as a cook catering to California gold-rush era entrepreneurs. Catering dinners for the wealthy, she covertly listened in on dinner conversations and used the information gleaned from these wealthy businessmen to her advantage. After meeting and forming a business relationship with Thomas Bell (who was white), working together, they invested in various business enterprises, including the stock market, gold mining, and Wells Fargo Bank. Pleasant and Bell would accrue wealth estimated at over thirty million dollars, making her part of the wealthy elite Black community in San Francisco, California.

Owning and operating restaurants and boardinghouses, she was financially stable and provided economic and social support to the Black community (it is rumored that Pleasant contributed funding that aided abolitionist causes, including John Brown’s Raid on Harper’s Ferry in 1859). However, as the 1854 California Practice Act<sup>117</sup> prevented Black Californians from serving as witnesses against a white person, legal racial segregation was the catalyst for Black activism. While the bold action of Mrs. Rosa Parks in defying racial segregation on public transportation during the U.S. Civil Rights

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<sup>117</sup> “The Practice Act of California: 1851,” *Berkeley Law* (State Journal Office Print,) Entitled an act to regulate proceedings in civil cases in the courts of justice of the state, as passed April 29, 1851, and amended May 18, 1863, and May 18, 1854: with an appendix contains the act of 1854 in full.

movement of the 1950s is often lauded and referenced as the incident that led to the dismantling of racial segregation on public transit, historical records reveal that Mrs. Parks was not the first to challenge these unjust laws. Approximately one hundred years prior, in California, Black women were attempting to dismantle the inequality of racial segregation by legally confronting unjust laws and demanding equal treatment.

Racially discriminated against and fighting “Jim Crow” in the West, as early as 1863, Black women such as Charlotte Brown<sup>118</sup> filed racial segregation discrimination lawsuits against public transit companies; it was in 1864 that “a decision by Judge C.C. Pratt of the Twelfth District Court abolished segregation on the city’s streetcars. In his ruling, Pratt admitted that railroad companies had a right to manage their own affairs but had no right to manage the affairs of the general public. Preventing African Americans from riding the cars fell under the latter category.”<sup>119</sup> However, conductors ignored the law. In 1866, using Mary as the catalyst, the Pleasant’s fought against legal and political systems of oppression by strategically instigating two incidences to challenge racial segregation laws on streetcars in California. Vowing to test the extent of legal rights to uphold and exercise Black civil rights, the Pleasant’s staged plans to board various

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<sup>118</sup> Rae Alexandra, “A Century before Rosa Parks, She Fought Segregated Transit in SF,” *KQED* (KQED, March 12, 2019), <https://www.kqed.org/pop/108474/rebel-girls-from-bay-area-history-charlotte-l-brown-gold-rush-era-civil-rights-champion>. April 17, 1863. Charlotte Brown filed legal suit against Omnibus Railroad and Cable Company when she was “grabbed by the arm and physically removed” from a streetcar. Brown ultimately won the case and was awarded \$25 and costs, appeals by Omnibus kept her tied up in court for months. The end result saw her award sum reduced to just five cents, the cost of Brown’s original ticket. What’s more, the case did not change Omnibus policy. Just days after the first case was finally over, Charlotte was removed from another Omnibus streetcar.

<sup>119</sup> Lynn M. Hudson, *The Making of “Mammy Pleasant”: A Black Entrepreneur in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 50.

streetcars in San Francisco with the determination to initiate legal action if Mary's civil rights were violated. It would not take long for Mary Pleasant to experience racial discrimination and pursue legal action.

In 1866, as a strategy planned to test the enforcement of the 1866 Civil Rights Act,<sup>120</sup> Mary Pleasant, and two other Black women boarded an Omnibus streetcar but were removed. Pleasant, having financial means, sued the Omnibus Railroad and Cable Company. However, on October 17, 1866, she withdrew her complaint "against the Omnibus Co. after she extracted a promise from its officials to allow "people of color" on their streetcars."<sup>121</sup> On a separate occasion, she enlisted the assistance of Lisette Woodworth, a friend and well-known white female San Francisco socialite. Noted by Kate Kelly in "Mary Ellen Pleasant, Entrepreneur and Abolitionist," Pleasant was able to testify against the transit company on the events that took place on September 27, 1866. Enacting their plan, "Lisette boarded the North Beach and Mission Railroad Company car. One stop later, Mary Ellen hailed the driver to pick her up. The driver looked at her

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<sup>120</sup> Passed April 9, 1866, the "Civil Rights Act of 1866": Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That all persons born in the United States and not subject to any foreign power, excluding Indians not taxed, are hereby declared to be citizens of the United States; and such citizens, of every race and color, without regard to any previous condition of slavery or involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall have the same right, in every State and Territory in the United States, to make and enforce contracts, to sue, be parties, and give evidence, to inherit, purchase, lease, sell, hold, and convey real and personal property, and to full and equal benefit of all laws and proceedings for the security of person and property, as is enjoyed by white citizens, and shall be subject to like punishment, pains, and penalties, and to none other, any law, statute, ordinance, regulation, or custom, to the contrary notwithstanding. <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/the-civil-rights-act-of-1866/>

<sup>121</sup> Nilda Rego, "Days Gone By: In 1866 S.F., 'Mammy' Pleasant Takes a Stand for Civil Rights," *The Mercury News* (The Mercury News, March 27, 2014), <https://www.mercurynews.com/2014/03/27/days-gone-by-in-1866-s-f-mammy-pleasant-takes-a-stand-for-civil-rights/>.

but kept going. Lisette leaned forward in the car to point out that someone needed to be picked up...”<sup>122</sup> but once the conductor noticed Mary’s “race,” he refused to stop, denying her transport. According to the argument outlined in the legal brief submitted on Mary Pleasant’s behalf,

Measure of Damages for Refusing to receive Passenger on Street Car. — Plaintiff, Mary E. Pleasants, who is a person of color, being desirous to take passage on defendant’s street railroad ear in San Francisco, hailed the Conductor, requesting him to take her on board, which he failed to do. The Conductor stated immediately after, in reply to a request of a passenger to take plaintiff up, as requested, that “We don’t take colored people in the cars.”<sup>123</sup>

Outraged at the denial of her civil rights, Mary and John appear as complainants in *Pleasants v. North Beach & Mission Railroad*, 34 Cal. 586 (1868). Except for Woodworth’s participation in the plan to already be aboard the streetcar to witness the events and agree to testify to the outrage that occurred on Mary’s behalf, this incident may have been ignored without recourse, as were other injustices against Black people. Adept at navigating the hierarchical racial status quo — “[t]he positioning of Lisette Woodworth as her witness indicates Pleasant’s understanding of the tenuous position of black San Franciscans in these critical years after the Civil War. It also reveals something of the interracial world in which black women —especially domestics—

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<sup>122</sup> Kate Kelly, “Mary Ellen Pleasant, Entrepreneur and Abolitionist,” *America Comes Alive*, September 14, 2020, <https://americacomesalive.com/mary-ellen-pleasant-entrepreneur-and-abolitionist/>

<sup>123</sup> *Pleasants v. North Beach & Mission Railroad*, 34 Cal. 586 (1868). The Court improperly refused the following instruction, to wit: *u* If the defendant, by its Conductor, refused to receive the female plaintiff on its car, such refusal was merely a violation of «duty on the part of the company, and does not entitle plaintiffs to exemplary damages—that they are only entitled to nominal damages, or the actual damage they sustained. Read Caselaw (*Harvard Law School Library*, August 29, 2019), <https://cite.case.law/cal/34/586/>.

operated.”<sup>124</sup> Hiring attorney George W. Tyler, it would take two years for the case to be heard, but Mary won her lawsuit and was awarded damages totaling five hundred dollars. Although it would be appealed and overturned by the California State Supreme Court when it was decided that Pleasant did not prove that the conductor’s actions were racially motivated, this case set a precedent in California that future civil rights cases employed. It forced the state to concede that there were no laws that allowed public transport to exclude anyone based on “race;” through Black women’s efforts, the legal system was used as a mechanism through which African descendants maneuvered their equality and attempted to function as complete, equal American citizens but, the law did not provide protection from public defamatory social assaults.

Through Pleasant’s determination, efforts to enforce Black civil rights in California were in motion. To Black San Franciscans, Mary E. Pleasant was a civil rights hero who earned their ultimate respect. They referred to her home as the “Black City Hall” and bestowed her the title of *Mother of Civil Rights in California*. However, her life also demonstrated Black women’s vulnerabilities. “[J]ust as black women shaped the discourse and strategies of Reconstruction in their campaigns against the lynching of black male bodies, in their streetcar cases they addressed the safety of black female bodies.”<sup>125</sup> For Black women, their issues of safety and mischaracterizations were seldom addressed. Using press reports from Pleasant’s lawsuit as an example, they exaggerated a term Lisette Woodworth used to reference Pleasant. Adoringly referencing

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<sup>124</sup> Hudson, *The Making of “Mammy Pleasant,”* 53.

<sup>125</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Ibid*, 52.

her as Mama Pleasant, this “...innocent offhand remark by Lisette haunted Mary Ellen the rest of her life...Lisette called Mary Ellen mama. The press used that as a cudgel. Reporters referred to Mammy Pleasant more often than not as a way to put Mary Ellen “in her place.””<sup>126</sup> The defamation of Black womanhood would go on to be a critical issue that Black women would rally around in their attempts to validate their humanity and self-defined identities.

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<sup>126</sup> Kate Kelly, “Mary Ellen Pleasant, Entrepreneur and Abolitionist,” *America Comes Alive*, web.

### III. Racial Colorblind Respectability: The Rise of the Black Bourgeoisie

As Black women never completely surrendered their desires for complete and total freedom, they resisted subjugation by constantly challenging their oppression –this resistance took various forms, ranging from legal action to creating organizations to individualized attempts at self-reclamation. As demonstrated by Mary Pleasant, Black women fought through the courts, forced their issues to be legally recognized (when possible), and challenged their exclusion through individual actions that contested their marginalization. Seldom formally acknowledged or included in public discourses, dissuaded from debating, and admonished for public speaking, traditionally, Black women were actively engaged in Black liberation movements yet limited to religious-oriented community-based projects.

To express their opinions beyond the confines of the church, Black women’s public activism began to emerge initially through the creation of educational-based literary societies and local charitable organizations. Shortly prior to the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865), while white women were gaining a modicum of support for their rights, this period saw an exacerbation of conventional racial prejudice. The fight against their moral and social vilification forced Black women to consolidate their efforts to advocate for the validation of their humanity and further the politicization of their goals –this was achieved in various ways, primarily through the official formation of both community-based and national organizations. These organizations would elevate the issues facing Black women and advance theories that tackled the complex and intersectional nature of Black women’s identities.

Investing in their own “communities,” in 1892, the Colored Women’s League was formed in Washington, D.C., by Mary Church Terrell as a night school to raise the “standard” and unify the objectives for the rights of “Negro” peoples. In the call for participants, the organization stated they wanted to

have a national organization similar to the Federation of clubs of the women of the other race... There is every reason for all who have the interests of the race at heart to associate themselves with the League, so that there may be a vast chain of organizations extending the length and breadth of the land, devising ways and means to advance our cause. We have always been equal to the highest emergencies in the past, and it remains for us now to prove to the world that we are a unit in all matters pertaining to the education and elevation of our race.<sup>127</sup>

Additionally, when the Women’s Pavilion at the 1893 Columbian Exposition denied the participation of Black women’s organizations, two years later, the Federation of Afro-American Women in Boston was formed in 1895 to raise the moral standard of the lower socioeconomic classes. Due to the relentless attacks on their characterizations, Black women were intent on uplifting their public image. They attempted social improvement by cultivating Black middle-class domestic skills and values. Black women viewed these organizations as necessary to elevate the status of Black women and the “race” of African descended peoples.

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<sup>127</sup> Mary C. Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (1940; reis., New York: Humanity Books, 2005), 186.

Character assaults on Black women were often openly accepted and publicly disseminated through the press. As stated by Fannie Barrier Williams, "...[c]ertain it is that colored women have been the least known, and the most ill-favored class of women in this country."<sup>128</sup> John W. Jacks, President of the Missouri Press Association, demonstrated this sentiment on March 19, 1895, when writing commentary to a British society editorial. Jacks published an editorial in response to a call to support anti-lynching efforts by Miss Florence Balgarnie, a British anti-lynching activist. Claiming to know much "about the negroes in America," in Jack's letter to Balgarnie, he stated that because he "...lived for years where Negroes are plentiful," and had no Negro blood, he was a "credible" and "worthy" source to speak on the characters of Black people. Publicly through the press, he specifically targeted and denigrated Black women as iniquitous.

The Negroes in this country are wholly devoid of morality. They know nothing of it except as they learn by being caught for flagrant violations of law and punished therefor. They consider it no disgrace but rather an honor to be sent to prison and to wear striped clothes. The women are prostitutes and are all natural liars and thieves...They are naturally lazy and improvident and exist off the bounty of the whites, who knowing their predilection for thieving very generally overlook their small stealings...Out of some 200 in this vicinity, it is doubtful if there are a dozen virtuous women or that number who are not daily thieving from the white people.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Fannie Barrier Williams, "The New Black Woman" in *A New Negro for a New Century* (Chicago: American Publishing House, 1900), 427.

<sup>129</sup> "John W. Jacks' Letter," from the *Mary Church Terrell Papers* [MS 62-3874], Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington DC.

Many Black women ignored previous verbal abuses to maintain their dignity in public. However, once this specific editorial circulated in print media, outraged by the attacks on their characters, Black women sprang into action. Tapping into their organizing networks, they issued letters to renounce this insult to Black womanhood. Written by Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, “A Charge to be Refuted” describes how Black women challenged their social vilification; they “...wish[ed] to move with discretion, and so not defeat the ultimate aim, which is the confusion of Jack and that host of traducers who are so free in bringing the charge of immorality upon all colored women.”<sup>130</sup> The public assaults directed toward Black women were seldom admonished, nor were these new ways of denigrating Black women –they had experienced this level of degradation since their arrival on American shores. However, taking the reins to be self-determinate over their public representation, Black women collectively

organized local clubs and leagues to aid in the social, economic, and moral progress of African Americans. The 1890s began a period of increased black awareness. It was a time of accommodation, mingled with hopes for racial justice and equality within American society. Black women, frustrated with the inertia of African Americans and the indifference of the white American conscience, formed clubs to ameliorate social conditions. The Clubwomen recognized that it was in their best interest to take the initiative in resolving problems through pragmatic and innovative solutions<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, “A Charge to be Refuted” in *Black Feminist Organizing*, Volume 5, Teresa Zackodnik, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 9. [Figure 2: Image].

<sup>131</sup> Floris Barnett Cash, *African American Women and Social Action: The Clubwomen and Volunteerism from Jim Crow to the New Deal, 1896-1936* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), 29.

As stated by Floris Cash in *African American Women and Social Action: The Clubwomen and Volunteerism from Jim Crow to the New Deal, 1896-1936*, "...Black women would create self-evaluations that challenged externally defined notions of black womanhood. They created their own identity."<sup>132</sup> Strategic in their methods to advance social access, the embodiment of tactically crafted public identities served to reject alleged racially inferior biological justifications circulating as attempts to cement the condition of African descended peoples as a permanent underclass. One way in which the rejection of their social marginalization materialized was through the emergence of the Black bourgeois identity. For Black elite bourgeoisie women, they would strategically form public political platforms and utilize "the tropes of racial uplift, elevation, and respectability as the tools to be used in an assault on white supremacist arguments of black inferiority."<sup>133</sup>

Born into the burgeoning Black middle-class in 1863, Mary Church Terrell's socioeconomic standing contributed to her bold ideological stance. Although her father, Robert Reed Church, was born enslaved, he became a successful entrepreneur and one of the first African American millionaires. Having economic stability, Robert Church provided his daughter with educational opportunities unimaginable for most Black families in this period. Eventually earning a master's degree at Oberlin College, Terrell would go on to teach in the Department of Latin at the M Street Colored High School in

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<sup>132</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 38.

<sup>133</sup> Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway, *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* (Vermont: University of Vermont Press, 2007), 217.

Washington, D.C. –the first public high school established for African descended peoples. Similar to Mary Pleasant, Terrell’s socioeconomic status provided her access to spaces not afforded to most Black women.

Wanting to change the status of women in society, Terrell was actively involved in suffragist circles (through the National Woman’s Suffrage Association, she was acquainted with Susan B. Anthony). However, these spaces offered little consideration for the racialized plights of Black women. Detailed in Terrell’s biography, “[o]n one occasion when the members of the Association were registering their protest against a certain injustice, [she] arose and said, “As a colored woman, I hope this Association will include in the resolution the injustices of various kinds of which colored people are the victims.””<sup>134</sup> Although Black women had longstanding (although unacknowledged) participation in movements centered on undertaking racial and gender issues, it was after experiencing continuous gendered and social racial discrimination that Terrell established the Colored Women’s League of Washington (CWLW). Realizing the possibilities of consolidating the efforts and objectives of the CWLW with other Black female-led organizations, she dedicated her efforts to creating a more unified force. Terrell’s influence and organizing skills were integral to the merger of the CWLW, the National League of Colored Women, and the Federation of Afro-American Women in establishing a new organization –the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), formed in Washington, D.C. in 1896.

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<sup>134</sup> Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, 155.

Elected the first president of the NACW in 1896, Mary Church Terrell led the organization with the intent of facilitating racial unity and pride among African descendant women and redefining how African descendant peoples, as a collective, were socially viewed in the U.S. While local clubs formed as a means of facilitating self-empowerment, organization and community building, the NACW was the first Black female-led organization that was both nationally recognized and secular in nature. Although it is impossible and reductive to position the objectives of *all* Black women into a singular focal point, at the time, what made the NACW unique and attractive was that it provided a space for “all classes and conditions” of Black women to collectively engage in politics and address the issues and needs of black women beyond of the confines of the church sphere.

Guided by Terrell as President and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin as Vice-President, the NACW organization adopted the motto “*Lifting As We Climb*” in an effort to maintain ties to the African descendant community and “elevate and dignify colored American womanhood.”<sup>135</sup> Terrell would go on to say that being labeled colored was “no proof of an individual’s virtue nor of his vice...of one’s intelligence nor of ignorance....”<sup>136</sup> In this instance, by distancing “race” from assumed negative innate biological characteristics, Terrell espouses the rhetoric of racial colorblindness and one of the objectives of the NACW —for Black women to rise above and move beyond the

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<sup>135</sup> Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, “An Open Letter to the Educational League of Georgia (1889)” in *Masterpieces of Negro Eloquence*, Ed. Alice Dunbar (New York: The Bookery Publishing Company, 1914), 173-177.

<sup>136</sup> Beverly Jones, *Quest for Equality: The Life and Writings of Mary Eliza Church Terrell, 1863-1954* (New York: Carlson, 1990), 134.

injustices and indignities levied against them and to work collectively toward a goal of African American equal rights as Americans and inclusion in the larger society. Floris Cash echoes this sentiment by stating,

[t]he primary goal of black women in organized clubs was full acceptance and acculturation into mainstream society. They accepted the American values of liberty, equality, and humanitarianism. The efforts of the black elite to gain equality in American society coincided with the emergence of the American doctrine that required minority ethnic groups to assimilate into the dominant group and repudiate their cultural heritage. [Yet,] the social actions of the club women refutes assertions that the focus on homogeneity in American society motivated middle-class club women to deny their racial identity. Believing that blacks had something to contribute to America's identity, black women struggled to preserve their history, institutions, and cultural heritage.<sup>137</sup>

Black women did not principally deny their African descended heritages –Terrell adamantly stated that she “...was proud of having the continent of Africa part of [her] ancestral background”<sup>138</sup> and boldly claimed that she was an “African-American and ...not ashamed of [her] African descent...” However, social elevation was viewed as achievable only through uplifting the moral virtues of Black women. Tethered to the morals of the dominant class, they perceived the mores of “respectability to be the first step in their communication with white America.”<sup>139</sup> They would lean into an ideology later coined by Evelyn Higginbotham, the politics of respectability, to situate themselves publicly as well-mannered, pious, and deserving of veneration.

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<sup>137</sup> Cash, *African American Women and Social Action*, 12.

<sup>138</sup> Mary Church Terrell, “Please Stop Using the Word “Negro” [Letter to the Editor], *The Washington Post*, May 14, 1949, 548-49.

<sup>139</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), 196.

In their attempts to reject “technologies of power at the everyday level,”<sup>140</sup> socially circulated negative stereotypes which caricatured Black womanhood and their social positioning as unworthy of respect and protection, Black women earnestly directed their efforts towards challenging the pervading logics of a supposed innate biological inferiority. Reiterating the power of linguistic practices conveyed earlier by hooks, aware of the impact of language, Mary Church Terrell wrote an op-ed that questioned the use of the term Negro. In “Please Stop Using the Word “Negro,” Terrell wrote that “Negro assumes women are Negress –“an ugly, repulsive word –virtually a term of degradation and reproach which colored women of this country cannot live down in a thousand years.”<sup>141</sup> To uplift the “race,” they would challenge ideology through restructuring the meaning of language and, through their actions, embrace the rhetoric of racial colorblindness initially articulated by the American Moral Reform Society (focusing on “education, temperance, economy, and *universal liberty*”).

In positioning the actions of Black women activists as embracing tenets of racial colorblindness as a strategy, it is essential to conceptually expand racial colorblindness beyond its contemporary etymological rendering. The contemporary discourse that emerged from the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s/60s situates the practice of racial colorblindness as having been achieved due to legislation that “removed” racialized barriers that once hindered legal and social mobility. However, I suggest that it is necessary to focus on the conceptual semantics of the term and explore the *actions*

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<sup>140</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 189.

<sup>141</sup> Terrell, “Please Stop Using the Word “Negro,” 548-49.

exhibited by Black people that demonstrate a racially colorblind ethos. Seeing themselves as cultural nationalistic beings, Black people adopted, and shaped American cultural practices not ideologically rooted in racial concepts. The expansion to focus on racial colorblindness as incorporating the dominant class ideologies of Victorian bourgeoisie ideals promoted by the Cult of Domesticity (through an investment in the concepts of domesticity, piety, purity, and submission), “[t]he politics of respectability, as conceived by Black Baptist women, formed an integral part of the larger resistance that would eventually nullify unjust laws”<sup>142</sup> and advance Black women to the sociopolitical sphere that facilitated their inclusion into the legal citizenry of the nation.

Embracing the Victorian bourgeois models of ideal femininity and womanhood typically reserved for white women, from the Black female perspective, the politics of respectability “emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations. With regard to the black Baptist women’s movement, such politics did not reduce to an accommodationist stance towards racism or compensatory ideology in the face of powerlessness. Nor did it reduce to a mindless mimicry of white behavior or “front” without substance or constant.”<sup>143</sup> As emphasized by Terrell, Black women were proud of their African descended heritages but culturally reared as Americans. They saw the need to affirm their identities of belonging by asserting agency, disrupting dominant societal ideologies of Black inferiority by rejecting racist discourses, and utilizing

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<sup>142</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 193.

<sup>143</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 187.

modalities of self-determination to demonstrate how they would be positioned and represented within American society. Attempting to find cohesion between the “double-consciousness” of their Blackness and Americanness, “[r]espectability functioned as a “bridge discourse” that mediated relations between black and white reformers.”<sup>144</sup>

For clarity, in examining Black women’s embrace of respectability politics and their interpretations of racial colorblindness, my intent is not to romanticize notions of Black self-representation or their attempts at acts of agency. The aim is to demonstrate that in their attempts to practice agency and fashion self-determined identities, they took control, dictated, and strategically reshaped their social portrayals beyond the liminal white gaze. It is essential to acknowledge that although oppressed, Black women’s resistance functioned to the extent that it could –that is, to recognize the complexities within modalities of their agency without reducing their embrace of concepts such as racial colorblindness (by positioning themselves as *Americans*) or “respectability” as a complete rejection of the existence their African descended heritages. Black women reinterpreted and utilized elements of socially accepted practices to gain access to spaces typically “off-limits.”

Brittney C. Cooper, in *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*, helps support this argument through the theoretical concept of disidentification and how the possibilities of Black women’s agency facilitated their interpolation of identities in maintaining a connection to their “blackness” yet also establishing their belonging as Americans. Cooper defines the concept of disidentification as the process in

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<sup>144</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 197.

which “one identifies with some aspects of an oppressive system and rejects others, in pragmatic ways that allow one to live and thrive.”<sup>145</sup> As it relates to black identity formation, identities are not always personal choices but strategic political positionings of pragmatic surrender offered and practiced as a means of fulfilling the desires of self-determination. Black people, more specifically Black women’s, embrace of racial colorblindness and respectability were functional strategies that rejected individualism and embraced beneficial collective ideologies situated around an organized common struggle. Through aspects of disidentification, they utilized certain socially acceptable behaviors in their attempts to facilitate American citizenship. As the concept of “American” was attached to “free white persons...of good character,”<sup>146</sup> to be included in the concept of Americanism, African descended peoples culturally embraced dominant mores and publicly identified with the “positive” qualities associated with congenial social characteristics. Through these strategies, Black people hoped they “would eventually gain freedom and citizenship in American society *if* they behaved according to the prevailing notions of proper conduct...[t]hus, Black activists carefully crafted a race uplift program that blended the tactical benefits of moral improvement with the power of their deep continuing connection to their African heritage.”<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 100.

<sup>146</sup> “Nationality Act of 1790,” *Immigration History* (Immigration and Ethnic History Society, UT Austin, January 31, 2020), <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/1790-nationality-act/>.

<sup>147</sup> Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American?: Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784-1861* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 2.

If we consider that the overall objective of the nation-state was formed on and is grounded in aspects of anti-Blackness and maintains the hierarchical racial status quo through racial subjugation (complete domination of the racialized “subject”), Black agency has functioned as a countermeasure –operating at a level which attempted to resist the doctrines of anti-Black state violence and function such that they were able to survive the day-to-day trials of their oppression.

Framed through their attempts to humanize and reclaim selfhood through self-empowerment, Black women’s embrace of the concept of disidentification functions in the manner “[w]here Du Bois characterized the Black body as racked with an epic internal struggle over identity, [Black women such as Anna Julia] Cooper, using the black female body as a point of reference, saw intersecting identities –primarily of race and gender, but also of class and nation –as a point of possibility.”<sup>148</sup> Black women such as Terrell attempted to demonstrate how the idea of politicized Black agency is possible within and against systems of anti-Black decimation. Terrell and other Black women validated the possibility of belonging through actions that proved their loyalty and commitment to the nation.

The establishment of alliances, community organizing, self-improvement, and racial uplift social movements were means of thinking through the possibilities of Black agency. For example, when the U.S. Government released a call for extra help during WWI, Americans such as Terrell heeded the call. With an elevated social class status and having merited a college degree, Terrell possessed aptitude beyond the minimum

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<sup>148</sup> Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 6.

requirements, including expert-level linguistic skills (she was fluent in English, French, German, and Italian). Through her experiences, she saw the possibility of American social inclusion when she passed an exam as a U.S. government typist. Receiving a telegram to report to the government state office, during a meeting with General Cozier, who reviewed her initial questionnaire and exam results, she was given a “once overlook,” followed by an inquiry about her “race.” Demonstrating a tactic of the racially colorblind ethos to this inquiry, Terrell replied that when questioned, she “simply wrote “American,” without specifying what particular kind of an American I am.”<sup>149</sup> Here, Terrell is claiming American belonging by rebuffing racialized categorization and rejecting the boundaries of racial marginalization—the central philosophy of the racial colorblind logic. Eventually, Terrell would be offered the job and placed in a racially segregated office setting reserved for white women; once government officials discovered that she was “colored,” she received a notice indicating a dereliction of duties and was suspended.

The notice of suspension read in part, “[i]t has been reported that you have taken action on cases contrary to the rules and regulations of the Bureau and contrary to the regulations of the chief medical adviser. It has been found that you have made numerous mistakes, and when these mistakes were called to your attention, you cause considerable disturbance and tend to deny responsibility. You do not want to understand or cannot understand the requests of your superiors in the matter of properly performing duties

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<sup>149</sup> Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, 292.

assigned to you.”<sup>150</sup> Having an above-average skillset in performing her duties, Terrell understood her suspension as a racially motivated attack. She stated, “[t]here was not a scintilla of truth in any of these charges. It was a case of “framing” a colored woman, so as to remove her from a room in which she had been placed by mistake where they did not want one of her race to work.”<sup>151</sup> She appealed her suspension; however, her efforts were fruitless, and she eventually resigned from the position because she did not want to embarrass her husband, an elected Municipal Court Judge. As a Black woman, she was “unwilling to remain in a government department in which colored women were subjected to such an indignity.”<sup>152</sup>

Terrell’s experience in the U.S. Government’s office functions as an example of the U.S. Government as a provocateur of the usurpational idealism theory. While Terrell understood that “race” as a determining factor in performing her duties was negligible, and she embodied “respectability” in executing her tasks, once the taboo of socially imposed racial segregation was ruptured, the frenzy to reestablish the hierarchical racial status quo was initiated through the action of a malicious suspension. Terrell’s racialization (or lack thereof) was initially interpreted through the white gaze, and the “white” categorization was ascribed to her physicality. Although she embodied respectability and identity as an American, once her “race” was reassessed through an additional filter of whiteness, her identity as an American was usurped and redefined

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<sup>150</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 263.

<sup>151</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 264.

<sup>152</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 259.

beyond her control to maintain the hierarchical racial status quo. This particular demonstration of the usurpation of Black racial politics reveals how, in many ways, Terrell's identity (and that of other Black people) was beyond her control. However, Black club women and successive generations of Black female activists would push the boundaries of identity and the law to demand a more significant commitment from the nation in ways that attempted to transcend the boundaries of "race" and the narrow, negative perceptions of Black women, their identities, and belonging.

#### IV. Pauli Murray: Speaking up for “the Human Race and Just People”

Demonstrated by the examples and actions of Mary Ellen Pleasant and Mary Church Terrell, countless Black women continued to enter the realm of activism. They were at the forefront of initiating revolutionary action on gendered and racial issues. This activism continued through Anna Pauline “Pauli” Murray, the epitome of a forward thinker; U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg stated, “Pauli Murray was *way* ahead of her time.”<sup>153</sup> Born in Durham, NC, in 1910 and orphaned at 12, Pauli Murray was raised by her maternal family (grandparents and aunt), who instilled in Murray a dedication to learning and social advocacy.

Murray’s birthparents “Agnes Fitzgerald and William Murray married in 1903. A mixture of European, African, and Native American ancestors had bestowed on them both striking good looks, set off by wavy black hair and light brown skin. Well educated, healthy, and hard-working, they seemed destined for middle-class success.<sup>154</sup> Agnes Fitzgerald was employed as a nurse, and William Henry Murray was a teacher. Although not wealthy or solidly socially classed as part of the Black bourgeois, the family’s cultural values, education, and homeowner status placed them in the league of the “respectable poor.” Settling the family in William Murray’s hometown of Baltimore, the Murrays were part of a growing community of African American professionals. Guided by industriousness and respectability, initially, they owned two homes and “played an

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<sup>153</sup> Time Magazine. “RBG Wanted People to Know More About One of Her Legal Heroes.” *YouTube* video, 03:52. October 19, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rv838WxQaeQ>

<sup>154</sup> Rosalind Rosenberg, *Jane Crow: The Life of Pauli Murray* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9.

active role in both their black church and interracial civic groups.”<sup>155</sup> William Murray took a position at Hampton Institute to advance his career. Believing in the potentiality of education to positively affect the lives of Black children, he refused to allow Black children to be guided by socially imposed racial limitations. However, he would soon learn that there were ideological differences between what he saw as the learning capabilities of Black children and the limited educable pathologies supported by Hampton Institution founders. Within the Hampton Institution,

Hampton’s white founder and president, Samuel Chapman Armstrong, had developed the school’s approach, based on his belief that blacks were not as highly evolved as whites and therefore not as educable. Armstrong aimed to produce teachers who would train their charges in steady work habits, practical knowledge, and Christian morals. Raised in the Methodist Church, Murray shared Armstrong’s commitment to hard work and moral rectitude, but disagreed strongly with his racial views and educational goals. Convinced that his students were every bit as capable as white children, William taught them poetry and urged them to aspire to a better life. He refused to let them accommodate themselves to their subordinate place in southern society.<sup>156</sup>

The Murray’s were advocates of exercising equality, humanitarianism, liberty, and the rejection of social subordination within the Black community. These qualities were precisely in line with the moral, racial uplift, and respectability values that Black club women promoted, but the fight for equality and resources took its toll. By 1905, the Murray family experienced a series of setbacks that negatively impacted their fate. William Murray was stricken with typhoid fever which led to debilitating depression and raging violent outbursts. By “March 1914, thirty-five years old and pregnant with her

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<sup>155</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 12.

<sup>156</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 12.

seventh child, Agnes collapsed at home one morning and died of a massive cerebral hemorrhage.”<sup>157</sup> Due to William’s lack of steady employment and cognitive instability, he was committed to Crownsville State Hospital for the Negro Insane. Now “orphaned,” one-year-old Pauli was placed in the permanent primary care of her Aunt Pauline; her family’s commitment to “American” values would greatly influence her upbringing.

Reared by righteous, moral uplift values, Pauli Murray’s maternal family, especially her grandfather Robert Fitzgerald, significantly impacted her relationship with her American identity. Written as a “multiracial family history that challenged the ethnocentrism of the 1950s,”<sup>158</sup> in *Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family* (1956), Murray writes about stories shared by her grandfather. Robert Fitzgerald left his educational training at Ashram Institute to join the Union Army and fight for liberation in the U.S. Civil War. He discussed the positive influences of attending Northern-based Quaker schools and anti-slavery meetings “with Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, and the time he had sat on a platform with Susan B. Anthony.”<sup>159</sup> Noted earlier, having a fierce commitment to fighting for freedom and equality, Douglass and Anthony were involved in the Abolitionist and newly developing Feminist movements —the impact of this cadre of anti-slavery and social change makers, affected U.S. society, including the Murray’s in significant ways. These abolitionists strove to hold the U.S. accountable to its credence of liberty for all —a value system in which the Fitzgerald’s heavily invested.

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<sup>157</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 15.

<sup>158</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 203.

<sup>159</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 19.

Pauli Murray was raised with values that taught her that proper actions such as speech etiquette were viewed as a “weapon against race prejudice and a defense of class standing.”<sup>160</sup> She would use these and other “weapons” to fight for American inclusion and change her perspective (initially prioritizing racial equality) to become a staunch advocate of a broader, more inclusive deracialized ideology –that of human rights.

Graduating from New York’s Hunter College in 1933 with a degree in English Literature and working for the Workers’ Education Project (later renamed the Works Progress Administration (WPA)) between 1935-36, Murray went on to publish work in various magazines, including *The Crisis* (the newspaper published by the NAACP). She would embark on countless attempts to challenge and dismantle racial inequality, eventually leading her to adopt a stance of achieving equality through the espousal of the racial colorblind ideology. Launching a campaign to enter graduate school after being denied admission to the racially segregated all-white University of North Carolina in 1938 and “[h]aving laid out the broad principles of her campaign to end discrimination, Murray provided a more specific “code” for day-to-day living. This code, she stressed, would not take the place of organized action or protective legislation, but it could serve as a guide toward a better life. She urged her fellow blacks to see themselves as Americans and thereby make others see them as individuals.”<sup>161</sup> Murray’s fight to be viewed simply as an American and not an “ethnic,” racialized or hyphenated American, to be judged on individual merit, embraces a core ideological philosophy of the racial colorblind edict.

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<sup>160</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 19.

<sup>161</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 143.

Here, I am loosely drawing on the work of Keisha N. Blain's, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom*, in which she discusses the role that the concept of Black Nationalism played in shaping Black identities. Blain implies that the Black Nationalist concept was part of "a range of political strategies and tactics in [the] efforts to secure a universal black liberation."<sup>162</sup> From a Black Nationalist perspective, although African descendants viewed themselves as constituting a separate group, their identities were shaped by shared histories and experiences. Broadly applying this operating logic to an American nationalistic perspective, Black people in the U.S. understood the positioning of Americanness as a shared history and experience shaped through a conceptualization of cultural heteronormativity rooted in American nationalism. Additionally, while I see the concept and theoretical basis of Black Nationalism as an ideology created by African descendants for the purposes of self-determination, "[i]t is wrong to speak of black nationalism as a singular political philosophy. The label black nationalism has been applied to so many different contexts that Hill Collins argues, we should now see it as a 'system of meaning' rather than a cohesive set of ideas."<sup>163</sup> It is also crucial to state that the embrace of American nationalism by Black people is a logic similar to the Jackson Frontier Thesis conveyed by Frederick Jackson Turner.

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<sup>162</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 165.

<sup>163</sup> Kehinde Andrews, *Back to Black: Retelling Black Radicalism for the 21st Century* (London: Zed Books, 2019), 6.

At the 1893 Worlds Colombian Exposition held in Chicago, Frederick Jackson Turner delivered the speech, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” He articulated the Frontier Thesis as a collective process that produced an American culture distinct from that of European society. Turner stated that the progress of settlement, the conquering of the frontier from exploration through urban development, created independence and resourcefulness that formed the basis of the American character. The push by some Black Americans to reject racialization, a minoritized status, and fight for “human rights and demand equal recognition and participation in global civil society”<sup>164</sup> aided their claims to Americanism and lends support to the theory that many African descendants in the U.S. adopted the ethos of the Frontier Thesis and the “E Pluribus Unum” motto of American nationalism. Crafted as a simple means of inclusion, embracing the cultural ideology of the racial colorblind logic was an offshoot, connection, and reinterpretation of the theory of American nationalism.<sup>165</sup>

Blain goes on to state that, similar to other ideologies, cultural nationalism “is neither static nor monolithic. Indeed, it has taken on several forms and manifestations — such as cultural nationalism, economic nationalism, and religious nationalism — at various moments. Notwithstanding its complexity, the term provides a relevant theoretical framework and a crucial starting point for understanding the political ideas

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<sup>164</sup> Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), <sup>4</sup>.

<sup>165</sup> Ray Allen Billington, *The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis: A Study in Historical Creativity* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1971), 125.

and activism.”<sup>166</sup> Further articulated by Kehinde Andrews in *Back to Black: Retelling Black Radicalism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, “[i]n America, it is argued that people of color must build an epistemic coalition to battle against racial injustice. Although there is certainly a place for, and a long history of activism in both nation-states, such politics is limited by mythological nationalism. It is assumed in the strategic essentialism of people of color that all those who are not white in a nation-state or tied together by their experience of racism. However, this ignores the reality that racial inequality works in far more nuanced ways.<sup>167</sup> Through their political and activist ideas, Black people in the U.S. advanced their own social goals to position themselves as Americans. Their identities were shaped by the cultural nationalism of the U.S. —the culture in which they rightfully belonged via *jus soli* birthright.

However, in examining the lack of success in these endeavors, Brittney Cooper makes the point that although adopting an “idiosyncratic political praxis born out of necessity”<sup>168</sup> (I am specifically pointing to the Black American adoption of Americanness and the racial colorblind logic as born out of necessity), Black people such as “Murray had become a victim of a racial ideology that Candice Jenkins refers to as the *salvific*

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<sup>166</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 5.

<sup>167</sup> Andrews, *Back to Black*, 80.

<sup>168</sup> Billington, *The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis*, 6.

wish,<sup>169</sup> an iteration of the politics of respectability, which is “best defined as the desire to rescue the Black community from racist accusations of sexual and domestic pathology through the embrace of bourgeois propriety.”<sup>170</sup> I suggest that one of the reasons multiple concepts envisioned by Black people for cultural and social inclusion have failed is due to the systemic nature of anti-Blackness rooted in the U.S. national identity. Application of the usurpational idealism concept is practical here in that although there are adoptions of ideological practices such as the salvific wish and the politics of respectability, due to systemic practices that maintain and uphold whiteness, the intentional exclusionary nature of racialization and other actions initially conceptualized to exclude Black people, practices and traditions crafted or adopted by Black people have operated such that, rather than challenge and dismantle the hierarchical racial status quo, Black Americans have bought into maintaining structures that contribute to and perpetuate the continued marginalization of racially minoritized groups.

Returning to Murray, although faced with opposition, she would not be deterred by challenges. Continuing the fight for equitable access, Murray joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation in 1940 to work to end segregation in public accommodations after she

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<sup>169</sup> Candice Marie Jenkins, “Queering Black Patriarchy: The Salvific Wish and Masculine Possibility in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*.” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 48, no. 4 (2002): 969-1000. doi:10.1353/mfs.2002.0075. “The salvific wish is best understood as an aspiration, most often but not only middle-class and female, to save or rescue the black community from white racist accusations of sexual and domestic pathology, through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety. Historically, it has been located in social institutions such as the black women’s club movement, which began in large part as a response to moral defamation of black women in the US public sphere.”

<sup>170</sup> Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 106.

was imprisoned for refusing to sit at the back of a bus in Richmond, Virginia.<sup>171</sup> Intent on understanding the law to dismantle racial inequality legally, Murray enrolled in law school at Howard University in 1941 to be trained in civil rights law. Shortly after, beginning to believe that racial equality was a human rights issue, in 1942, she joined James Farmer and Bayard Rustin to form the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), an interracial organization dedicated to improving race relations. By 1944, while studying at Howard, she drafted a legal argument that challenged the concept, purpose, and intent of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Amendments and the “separate but equal” doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896; ten years later, those opinions would provide the basis for the arguments outlined in *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas*, 1954.<sup>172</sup> In 1950, Murray’s book, *States’ Laws on Race and Color*, was “a compilation of the laws of the various states on matters affecting race and color. The compilation includes both the laws which enforce segregation and other racial restrictions and those which establish what is commonly referred to now as civil rights”<sup>173</sup> –it was described by Thurgood Marshall as the “Bible” for civil rights litigators.

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<sup>171</sup> This incident was prior to the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s/60s and the subsequent arrest of Ms. Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955.

<sup>172</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, KS*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954) Opinion; May 17, 1954; Records of the Supreme Court of the United States; Record Group 267; National Archives. On May 17, 1954, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren delivered the unanimous ruling in the landmark civil rights case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. State-sanctioned segregation of public schools was a violation of the 14th amendment and was therefore unconstitutional. This historic decision marked the end of the “separate but equal” precedent set by the Supreme Court nearly 60 years earlier in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and served as a catalyst for the expanding civil rights movement during the decade of the 1950s. <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/brown-v-board-of-education>

<sup>173</sup> John A. Davis, “Book Review: States’ Laws on Race and Color by Pauli Murray, *The Journal of Negro History* 37, no. 3 (1952): 327–29. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2715497>.

Although Murray graduated first in her class at Howard Law School “and was awarded a foundation fellowship to be used for graduate study, that’s when she was turned down by Harvard Law School, but was accepted by the University of California, Berkeley, Boalt Law School, where she earned a master’s degree in law.”<sup>174</sup> Unsure of her next step, in 1960, she was offered a teaching opportunity as a Senior Lecturer at the Ghana School of Law. For Murray, her connection to Africa was fraught. Situating her identity “as an American of mixed ancestry, not as an Afro-American,”<sup>175</sup> she was conflicted and felt little connection to the Continent or African cultures. Murray stated, “I am not African and have little feeling of kinship with things African per se,” she concluded seven months into her stay. The culture was too different from her own.”<sup>176</sup> Immersed in this new African culture, Murray’s identity would be challenged. The trip significantly impacted her self-understanding yet, solidified her commitment to embracing an American identity. A year later, by the time she left her Ghanaian teaching post in 1961, while Murray respected Africa and the efforts and tenacity of African peoples, she realized the commitment necessary to implement the changes that she wanted to see happen in the U.S. Prioritizing an American identity, she stated, “I want you to accept me as an American, as a Negro, but also I want you to respect my African background.” “Having accepted this, I want to get on with the business of being an

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<sup>174</sup> Philippa Strum, “Pauli Murray’s Indelible Mark on the Fight for Equal Rights.” *American Civil Liberties Union*, June 24, 2020. <https://www.aclu.org/issues/womens-rights/pauli-murrays-indelible-mark-fight-equal-rights#:~:text=Murray%20graduated%20first%20in%20the,a%20master's%20degree%20in%20law>.

<sup>175</sup> Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*, 220.

<sup>176</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 235.

American. For if Africans are trying to prove something to the world, so are we. We are trying to prove that an idea is more powerful than blood or race or past achievements.”<sup>177</sup> Here Murray’s perspective transcends boundaries of racialized categories, and operating from a racially colorblind logic, in many ways, she echoes the philosophy of Fannie Barrier Williams,<sup>178</sup> who rejected the sole approach of “racial unity” to dismantle racial inequality. As an educator and social activist,

Williams rejected a notion of “natural” and essentialist racial unity as the basis for black racial affinity. Rather, she believed in what [Cooper] referred to as a cultivated and intentional *racial sociality* born out of love for one’s fellow wo/man and radical empathy for members of one’s race. In multiple places, [Williams] argued that race unity was not an automatic byproduct of the experiences of slavery and racism. Racial identity was not “natural” but rather contingent and conceived through an active process of community organizing and knowledge making.”<sup>179</sup>

While directing her intent to reduce the marginalization of women and the Black community, Murray also rejected investments in essentialist racial identities as the only method of achieving social equality. Murray directed her radical empathy toward social betterment—a perspective that would orient her toward tackling inequality issues by embracing human rights.

After President John F. Kennedy appointed Murray to the Committee on Civil and Political Rights, she worked with A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, and Martin Luther King, Jr., yet, as her theoretical conceptualization of Jane Crow articulated, she realized

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<sup>177</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 235-36.

<sup>178</sup> Principle founding member of the National League of Colored Women (NLCW), 1893 and the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), 1896.

<sup>179</sup> Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 52.

the extent to which Black women continued to face both racial and gendered marginalization. Critiquing Black women's exclusion in leadership roles within male-centered civil rights organizations, Murray would level critique towards the lack of effort to include Black female perspectives in addressing attendees at the 1963 March on Washington event. Frustrated at the lack of female empowerment, Murray joined Betty Friedan and others in founding the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966 but moved away from NOW due to the lack of appropriately addressing or incorporation of the issues of Black and working-class women.

In the aftermath of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, Murray, now teaching at Brandeis University, stayed committed to the viewpoint of furthering human rights. Murray would state, "I speak for my race and my people...the human race and just people,"<sup>180</sup> yet, she would find herself facing a conundrum; while Murray was now focused on human rights, at this time, Black students were demanding inclusion of a distinct Black Studies curriculum that accurately revealed the histories of African descended experiences. Similar to other academics such as Dr. Sterling Stuckey in "traditional" disciplines, Murray viewed the discipline of Black Studies as facilitating racial separatism. With many institutions acquiescing to student demands, at Brandeis, "the administration also agreed to the establishment of a Department of African American Studies and promised the students a voice in the selection of the department's chair, but Abram insisted that the faculty control the new department. Pauli Murray refused to teach there, preferring to stay in American Civilization. Committed to color-

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<sup>180</sup> Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*, 386.

blindness, she refused to accept racial separatism.”<sup>181</sup> Murray’s ideological perspectives on identity and American belonging represent a tangential link between *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896,<sup>182</sup> the ideological underpinning of American belonging proposed within the Colored Conventions Movement, and the espousal and shift towards social adoption of the racial colorblind logic, albeit not interpreted as she had originally envisioned as connected to the ethos of Americanism. While relatively obscured within American history, Murray’s influence was far-reaching. She would receive little to no public credit at the time, yet the vast majority of her life’s work and her perspectives on the universality of human rights were used to support arguments in favor of extending civil rights across the nation.

Although “[e]arlier in her life, Murray had believed with Justice Harland that justice was colorblind...she had come to worry that ignoring these groupings could lead to a too-easy universalism.”<sup>183</sup> As it turns out, Murray was correct in her assessment of the “too-easy universalism.” While Murray’s view of uplifting human rights issues would be echoed through Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s iconic “*Dream*” speech, as she feared, the adoption of the racial colorblind perspective would usher into popular discourse a de-racialized universality that did little to move society towards actually achieving equality.

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<sup>181</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 327.

<sup>182</sup> History.com Editors, “*Plessy v. Ferguson*,” *History.com* (A&E Television Networks, October 29, 2009), <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/plessy-v-ferguson>. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896, was a landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision that upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation under the “separate but equal” doctrine.

<sup>183</sup> Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*, 379.

## Chapter Three: Usurpational Idealism: How Processes of Usurpation Function to Protect the Hierarchical Nature of Whiteness and Power

### Key Words

Black Racial Politics; “I Have a Dream speech;” Interest Convergence Theory; The March on Washington, 1963; Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; Public Identity; Racial Colorblindness; U.S. Civil Rights Movement, the 1950s/60s; Usurpational Idealism; White Fragility

### ABSTRACT

“Usurpational Idealism: How Processes of Usurpation Function to Protect the Hierarchical Nature of Whiteness and Power” outlines how in the aftermath of social parity demanded by African American activists in the U.S. Civil Rights era, the concept of racial colorblindness was appropriated by white society as a means of maintaining power and privilege. The contemporary practice of racial colorblindness is one example of maintaining social control and inequality while appearing to offer equal access to achievement. Chapter three builds on the original concept initiated by Black people as a means of being included in the idea of Americanness yet explores how the concept was usurped to serve white desire. Beyond the subjectivity of morality, the limitations of American belonging remain the same: whiteness. The primary focus of this chapter examines how the recent deployment of the racial colorblindness concept is connected to other theoretical tenets, such as White Fragility introduced by Robin DiAngelo; is an ideological construct, practice, and derivative of the Interest Convergence theory articulated by Derrick Bell; functions under the scope of the public identity theory examined by Ange-Marie Hancock. Altogether, these theories function to maintain the hierarchical racial status quo by usurping Black racial political organizing through a process termed usurpational idealism.

*“It appears that my worst fears have been realized: we have made progress in everything, yet nothing has changed.”*<sup>184</sup>  
~Derek Bell

*“Every city in our country has this kind of dualism, this schizophrenia, split at so many parts, and so every city ends up being two cities rather than one. There are two Americas. One America is beautiful for situation. In this America, millions of people have the milk of prosperity and the honey of equality flowing before them. This America is the habitat of millions of people who have food and material necessities for their bodies, culture, and education for their minds, freedom, and human dignity for their spirits. In this America, children grow up in the sunlight of opportunity. But there is another America. This other America has a daily ugliness about it that transforms the buoyancy of hope into the fatigue of despair. In this other America, thousands and thousands of people, men, in particular, walk the streets in search for jobs that do not exist. In this other America, millions of people are forced to live in vermin-filled, distressing housing conditions where they do not have the privilege of having wall-to-wall carpeting, but all too often, they end up with wall-to-wall rats and roaches. Almost forty percent of the Negro families of America live in sub-standard housing conditions. In this other America, thousands of young people are deprived of an opportunity to get an adequate education.”*<sup>185</sup>  
~ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

*“...no civil rights campaign can be permanently successful which does not stand foursquare for all human rights.”*<sup>186</sup>  
~Pauli Murry

*“To change our world, to interrogate and to dismantle hierarchical knowledge, institutions, and practices: these are crucial theoretical and practical necessities.”*<sup>187</sup>  
~ João Costa Vargas

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<sup>184</sup> Derek Bell, *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 22.

<sup>185</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Other America*. Katherine Gowman, 2014. <https://the-other-america.com/speech>. Grosse Pointe High School, March 14, 1968

<sup>186</sup> Rosalind Rosenberg, *Jane Crow: The Life of Pauli Murray* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 267.

<sup>187</sup> Joao H. Costa Vargas, *Never Meant to Survive: Genocide and Utopias in Black Diaspora Communities* (United States: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Incorporated, 2010), xxv.

I. *The March: Co-opting the Tenor of Black Outrage*

As early as the 1940s, contemporary strategies gesturing toward racial and social acceptance included the participation of African Americans in the 1939-40 New York World's Fair. African Americans planned and organized Negro Week on the American Commons to unite all Americans and promote the unity of "citizens." Additionally, the efforts of interracialist<sup>188</sup> civil rights organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)<sup>189</sup> contributed to a de-emphasis on the significance of "race" in society. Examination of the social-historical centering of ordinary people and events allows a closer examination of "major issues of public debate" that built the momentum toward racial colorblindness as a race-neutral social ideology and how interracial efforts shaped this ideology through hegemonic "common sense" understandings and practices.

The vast majority of people familiar with the terminology of racial colorblindness learned about the concept as having emanated from the racial and social turbulence of the 1960s. The term and social adoption of the concept of a racially colorblind society in which the society of the United States no longer placed merit or social capital in racial hierarchies are said to have conceptually emerged from the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963, when Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. orated the now revered "I Have a Dream" speech. Coordinated by labor union activist A. Philip Randolph and civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, the 1963 March on Washington event

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<sup>188</sup> Defined as an action or policy for establishing equality and cooperation between different racial groups.

<sup>189</sup> Originally named the Committee of Racial Equality, formed by James Farmer (elected the first national Chairman) and students at the University of Chicago in 1941, CORE appealed to and developed a mostly white Northern-based membership.

was organized to raise the nation's social consciousness regarding employment and racial inequities within the U. S. and make visible across the nation various economic, political, and social inequalities.

The original *March*, conceived in 1940 by Randolph, called for protest due to the exclusion of African Americans in New Deal programs and the defense industry. The rally did not materialize due to Franklin D. Roosevelt instituting the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC). Still, by 1963, Randolph was again concerned over the direction of labor access in the nation. Randolph and Rustin "worried over the deteriorating economic situation for blacks, especially black males,"<sup>190</sup> and decided to revive the idea of assembling Black community leaders to demand access, equal rights, and resources from the U.S. Government.

Although planned as a nonviolent, peaceful protest march to bring attention to U.S. governmental inaction on advancing civil rights at the federal level, the March ultimately accomplished a toned down, purposefully orchestrated rally working in tandem with the legislative civil rights goals of the Kennedy Administration. While the goals and tone of the March had slightly changed and was now an "approved" assembly, speakers delivered several speeches that shed light on the multitude of disparities experienced by primarily African Americans within their communities. Of the many orations delivered that day, the youth presence of frontline activist organizers was profound.

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<sup>190</sup> Rosalind Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*, 268.

Founded in April 1960 and initially established as a temporary collaborative civil rights collective, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was “dedicated to nonviolent, direct-action tactics. The idea for a locally based, student-run organization was conceived when Ella Baker, a veteran civil rights organizer and an SCLC official, invited black college students who had participated in the early 1960 sit-ins to an April 1960 gathering at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina.”<sup>191</sup> As noted previously in chapter one, assembling to organize around objective goals to facilitate Black liberation was a longstanding tactic exercised by Black community activists. Independently led youth organizing, already taking place, continued this practice and was instrumental in shaping the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s/60s to focus on issues of voting rights and endemic poverty within African American communities across the nation.

Documented within SNCC archival records, at the grassroots level, although voting was a legal right, proponents of civil rights were working within communities attempting to inform African Americans about their rights to register to vote and raise their overall quality of life. Young organizers, desiring to reach a broad base group of constituents, wanted to take aggressive actions such as staging sit-ins to bring attention to social inequalities and issues around the lack of protections offered at the state level in exercising the right to vote. However, many also understood the importance of having access to a national stage to convey this message.

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<sup>191</sup> “Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).” *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*. Stanford University, June 5, 2018. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/student-nonviolent-coordinating-committee-sncc>.

Eager to participate in large-scale national events and have their voices heard in any way they could, as Chairmen of SNCC, John Lewis was selected to deliver a speech written by the collective members of SNCC at the March on Washington event. “Radical” in tone, the original address was viewed by March leadership organizers as antagonistic towards the Kennedy Administration. SNCC members highlighted the vulnerabilities of African Americans attempting to exercise their rights to register to vote, the lack of economic parity, issues of police brutality, and various other forms of violence perpetrated against Black communities. They chastised the Kennedy Administration’s civil rights legislation as they interpreted the proposed Civil Rights bill as ineffective in offering substantive protections for African Americans. Excerpted here:

We march today for jobs and freedom, but we have nothing to be proud of, for hundreds and thousands of our brothers are not here. They have no money for their transportation, for they are receiving starvation wages, or no wages at all. In good conscience, we cannot support wholeheartedly the administration’s civil rights bill, for it is too little and too late. There’s not one thing in the bill that will protect our people from police brutality. This bill will not protect young children and old women from police dogs and fire hoses, for engaging in peaceful demonstrations: This bill will not protect the citizens in Danville, Virginia, who must live in constant fear in a police state. This bill will not protect the hundreds of people who have been arrested on trumped up charges. What about the three young men in Americus, Georgia, who face the death penalty for engaging in peaceful protest?<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> John Lewis, “March on Washington Speech,” *SNCC Digital Gateway*, December 1, 2016, <https://snccdigital.org/inside-sncc/policy-statements/march-washington-speech/>

After reading a draft of the proposed speech, March organizers were worried that a militant, radical perspective would alienate even the most liberal supporters of civil rights legislation (after reading a draft of the speech, Archbishop of Washington Patrick O’Boyle, threatened to cancel his appearance at the event). To maintain white liberal support and bring in moderate whites, A. Phillip Randolph and other Black “leaders” counseled SNCC to revise content criticizing the Kennedy Administration. In the modified speech delivered by Lewis, SNCC activists lamented how all U.S. inhabitants could not exercise the pride of the nation and true freedom within the nation.<sup>193</sup>

We march today for jobs and freedom, but we have nothing to be proud of. For hundreds and thousands of our brothers are not here. For they are receiving starvation wages, or no wages at all. While we stand here, there are sharecroppers in the Delta of Mississippi who are out in the fields working for less than three dollars a day, twelve hours a day. While we stand here there are students in jail on trumped-up charges. Our brother James Farmer, along with many others, is also in jail. We come here today with a great sense of misgiving. It is true that we support the administration’s civil rights bill. We support it with great reservations, however.<sup>194</sup>

The original version decried the effectiveness of the Kennedy Administration’s efforts and did not initially lend support to the administration’s proposed legislation. It reads, in part: “In good conscience, we cannot support wholeheartedly the administration’s civil rights bill, for it is too little and too late.”<sup>195</sup> The revised speech

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<sup>193</sup> Adia Robinson, “The Two Versions of John Lewis’ March on Washington Speech Reveal the Complexity of a Young Leader” *ABCNews Go*, July 23, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/versions-john-lewis-march-washington-speech-reveal-complexity/story?id=71880462>

<sup>194</sup> John Lewis, “Text of Speech to be Delivered at Lincoln Memorial.” 28 August 1963. *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, Martin Luther King, Jr. Library and Archives. Voices of Democracy: The U.S. Oratory Project*, 2010. <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/lewis-speech-at-the-march-on-washington-speech-text/>

<sup>195</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, web.

reflects a tempered perspective and shifts toward offering support for Kennedy's proposed legislation with "reservations." Stating, "[i]t is true that we support the administration's civil rights bill. We support it with great reservations, however."<sup>196</sup> While both versions mention the constant fears of African Americans having to live in a "police state," specific language of police brutality as well as continued threats of protest articulated through a reference to William T. Sherman's march through Georgia in the Civil War – "...[t]he time will come when we will not confine our marching to Washington, we will march through the South, through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did. We shall pursue our own "scorched earth" policy and burn Jim Crow to the ground — nonviolently..."<sup>197</sup> —these references and calls to revolutionary actions were removed entirely.

Additionally, the term revolution, used eight times in the original speech and in the revision, was reduced to six. While it can be interpreted as "setting aside any personal grievances...and closing ranks"<sup>198</sup> to achieve what appeared to be in the interest of a greater good, these changes suggest the ways in which the authority of the U.S. Government co-opted the tenor of Black outrage. Although the request to change SNCC's speech was funneled through Black leadership, the Kennedy Administration expressed concerns and levied pressure to change the tone of the march, which signaled that the March needed to be socially palatable. Those "concerns," which stemmed from

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<sup>196</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, web.

<sup>197</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, web.

<sup>198</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, "Close Ranks" in *The Crisis*, Volume 16, No. 3 (1918): 7.

an investment in protecting white privilege and are a functional aspect of “white fragility,”<sup>199</sup> connect to the basis of this research. The preceding example of how SNCC was counseled to revise its original “radical” message demonstrates the usurpation of Black racial politics, or what I term usurpational idealism: the response or action of co-opting efforts or strategies meant to facilitate equality, to maintain and recenter the hierarchical racial status quo to an ideal state of protecting whiteness.<sup>200</sup> Years later, in a memoir detailing Lewis’ life experiences, he would go on to say how incensed he was at the request for changes to the speech yet. However, acquiescing to the pressure to compromise, the efficacy of SNCC’s message remained. While Lewis’ oration was viewed as the most militant rhetoric of the event, another speech delivered at the March on Washington event would usher into popular discourse the social adoption and practice of a dangerous ideology. Gaining mass appeal through an interpretation of a de-racialized idiom that assuaged white fears of continued racial demands and social transformation within the U.S., the impact of the contemporary iteration of racial colorblindness would have long-lasting and devastating effects on the goals of dismantling the hierarchical racial status quo and achieving social equality.

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<sup>199</sup> Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, Vol 3, No. 3 (2011): 57. Popularized by Robin DiAngelo, the concept of white fragility “...is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves...” for white people.

<sup>200</sup> Usurpational Idealism Theory: I define usurpational idealism as an “umbrella theory” which combines various theories and concepts, specifically white fragility, interest convergence, and the public identity, as a series of successive processes that are deployed to recenter whiteness as an idealized standard. Attempting to maintain the pathology of whiteness as the vanguard within the hierarchy of the racialized status quo, usurpational idealism is the process by which the status and privileges of whiteness are utilized to usurp situational politics in an effort to restore the equilibrium of society to a state that maintains the desires of whiteness as an ideal state of being.

## II. Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and “The Speech:” The Usurpation of the Black Racial Politics Through Duplicitous Interpretations of the Racial Colorblind Concept

By 1963, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the most recognizable “face” of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s/60s. Through coalition building, Dr. King worked with various social rights organizations such as the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) and was President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) from 1957 until his assassination in 1968. While conveying to general society the economic, political, and social needs within the African American community “with a reverent understanding of the complex relationship between the secular and the sacred,”<sup>201</sup> early in his social activism, King managed to capitalize on his charisma to generally maintain white liberal social acceptance. King cultivated a relationship with then Massachusetts Senator and the U.S. presidential hopeful, John F. Kennedy (D), that would help expand the scope and trajectory of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s/60s.

Having met previously to discuss African Americans’ plight, “King had urged the senator to take some dramatic action to prove to blacks that his commitment to their cause was genuine.”<sup>202</sup> In the aftermath of King’s October 1960 arrest for staging a desegregation sit-in at Rich’s Department store in Dekalb, Georgia, with SNCC members, upon the urging of Sargent Shriver (Kennedy’s brother-in-law and head of his

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<sup>201</sup> Karen Cook Bell, “Martin Luther King Jr.’s Vision of American Democracy,” *African American Intellectual Historical Society (AAIHS Blog)*, November 14, 2018. <https://www.aaihs.org/martin-luther-king-jr-s-vision-of-american-democracy/>.

<sup>202</sup> Steven Levingston, “John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Call Changed History,” *Time Magazine* (Time, June 20, 2017), <https://time.com/4817240/martin-luther-king-john-kennedy-phone-call/>.

campaign's Civil Rights section), to appear sympathetic and gain political support from the African American community, Senator Kennedy made a phone inquiry to the governor of Georgia, Ernest Vandiver, in support of King's release.<sup>203</sup> This gesture commenced a "relationship" of support between the African American community and the Democratic Party in Kennedy's bid for the U.S. presidency. Leveraging what little voting power they had, Black political support was not unconditional, "[b]efore he even settled into the White House, Jack Kennedy was put on notice that blacks from Harlem to Montgomery expected him to listen to their leader Martin Luther King Jr. and hear their cries for equality."<sup>204</sup> However, in a traditional political fashion, once Kennedy was elected President,<sup>205</sup> he neglected to fulfill his campaign promises to the African American community that aided his political win. Kennedy was "supportive" of social and civil rights, but not wanting to alienate white support, his administration's initial legislative proposals and efforts to pass an effective civil rights bill were lackluster at best. Prompted by pressure from civil rights organizers and threats of protest, Kennedy, looking toward his future bid for reelection, finally gestured towards tackling the "civil rights issue."

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<sup>203</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, web.

<sup>204</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, web.

<sup>205</sup> John F. Kennedy served as the 35<sup>th</sup> president of the United States from January 20, 1961 until his assassination on November 22, 1963.

Kennedy lent support for civil rights legislation after mounting public pressure emerged from Black civil rights leaders and organizations attempting to secure legal equality. Modeled on the Civil Rights Act of 1875,<sup>206</sup> in a speech delivered on June 11, 1963, President John F. Kennedy urged passage of legislation that would give “all Americans the right to be served in facilities which are open to the public—hotels, restaurants, theaters, retail stores, and similar establishments,” as well as “greater protection for the right to vote.”<sup>207</sup> The 1963 March was a strategic political maneuver initiated by African American civil rights activists in an attempt to galvanize public support and urge Kennedy to fulfill his campaign promises that he would commit to supporting substantive civil rights legislation.

Working along with A. Phillip Randolph and other organizers, Bayard Rustin was the principal event organizer. Unsure if one or one million participants would show up, the slow but steady trickling in of participants assured Rustin that his efforts were not in vain –on a national level, the issue of civil rights and economic disparities would take center stage. With over 200,000 people –all class, ethnic and generational backgrounds from across the U.S. represented, “[t]he demonstrators gathered at the Washington Monument for performances from well-known singers such as Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. Celebrities showed their support, for example, Charlton Heston, Marlon Brando, and

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<sup>206</sup> The Civil Rights Act of 1875 (18 Stat. 335–337), passed during the Reconstruction Era ensured African Americans equal treatment in public facilities and prohibited exclusion from jury service. The Supreme Court would declare the act unconstitutional in 1883.

<sup>207</sup> John F. Kennedy, “Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights, June 11, 1963.” *JFK Library*, June 11, 1963, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/civil-rights-radio-and-television-report-19630611>.

Sidney Poitier. This was followed by a rally at the Lincoln Memorial, with speakers from the civil rights organizations.”<sup>208</sup> The lineup of presenters was overtly racially inclusive and religious in tone, and included organizations and speakers such as Rabbi Uri Miller, Synagogue Council of America, Whitney M. Young, Jr., Executive Director, National Urban League, Mathew Ahmann, Executive Director, National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, and Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Of the “Big Ten” speakers to offer remarks during the event, Dr. King’s oration is noted as the most memorable, the highlight of the event. King’s opening remarks point to the signing of the *Emancipation Proclamation* in 1863 and, referencing that era, of a hope invigorated by the promise of what freedom would bring to newly emancipated African descendants who had been held in bondage for over 300 years. He positions the *Proclamation* as offering a “...great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.”<sup>209</sup> However, seeking to call attention to the continuation of disparate experiences of African Americans precisely one hundred years later, in 1963, King’s speech shifts to highlight the failure of that document’s promise

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<sup>208</sup> John Trainer, Lisa Early, and Clare Horrie, “The National Archives Learning Curve: Leaders & Controversies: King & Civil Rights: March on Washington,” *The National Archives* (Birmingham Civil Rights Institute), accessed May 23, 2022, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/leaders-and-controversies/g6/cs3/#:~:text=As%20it%20turned%20out%2C%20the,using%20a%20newly%20launched%20satellite.>

<sup>209</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Read Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘I Have a Dream’ Speech in Its Entirety,” NPR (National Public Radio, January 14, 2022), <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety.>

and the reality of inequalities still faced by African Americans. Stating that “...100 years later, the Negro still is not free,” that “the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land,”<sup>210</sup> King provides a scathing critique on the lack of social equality and economic redress for African Americans from the United States Government.

Intent on creating an ideological argument to support economic redress (more specifically, financial reparations, a topic King would lean toward shortly before his assassination), King highlights how the U.S. Government has essentially continued to ignore the economic status of African Americans — “America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked insufficient funds.”<sup>211</sup> Although King is making an argument that roots wealth disparities in the practices of enslavement and is laying the groundwork to engage in conversations on reparations for African descendants of the enslaved, what gets accentuated and revered in historical memory are the final stanzas of the speech.

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<sup>210</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, web.

<sup>211</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, web.

King states:

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood...I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today...I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, one day right down in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.<sup>212</sup>

The memorialization of this particular passage serves to freeze in time an idealized version of Dr. King palatable for white consumption. Determined not to confront the truth beyond the experiences of whiteness, the compartmentalization of King to this excerpt diminishes the essence of his radical political trajectory. The oversimplification, or more explicitly, the sinuous interpretation of what King articulates in this condensed, selective passage, is noted as the moment when the contemporary iteration of racial colorblindness was borne.

Connecting to the theoretical viewpoint outlined in chapter one, racial colorblindness was a strategy deployed initially by African descendants seeking full access and inclusion into the U.S. as American citizens. Viewing their identities from a culturally nationalistic perspective, African descendants strategically crafted racial colorblindness to find acceptance within the U.S. nation. Similar to the concepts outlined by bell hooks and the American Moral Reform Society, King's speech exhibits an effective use of language that attempts to function as a site of liberation (hooks) and

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<sup>212</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, web.

demonstrate a universality of human rights (AMRS). However, in the aftermath of King's speech, essentially functioning as a scapegoat mechanism for white society, the racial colorblind concept has operated to allow avoidance and eschewal of culpable reckoning with the ways in which the concepts of "race" and anti-Blackness, the hierarchical ranking of access, resources and social status based on phenotype characteristics, has been foundational to the American consciousness.

As an operating logic, racial colorblindness it positions itself to function in three significant ways: ideologically, juridically, and operationally. The contemporary essence of racial colorblindness attempts to ignore racialized experiences in an attempt to erase ethnic and racial identities to promote an agenda of ethnic heteronormativity (read here: whiteness = Americanness). After the legal execution of equality was implemented, as demonstrated by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor in "From Civil Rights to Colorblind" in *From #Blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation*, racial colorblindness served the purpose of further marginalizing already disenfranchised communities. According to Taylor, the contemporary ideological embrace of racial "[c]olorblindness aided politicians in rolling back the welfare state, allowing Congress and the courts to argue that the absence of racism in the law meant that African Americans could not claim racial harm...It was as if the signing of civil rights legislation had wiped the slate clean and African Americans had been given a new start. Only ten years earlier, Lyndon Johnson had given his speech declaring that "freedom is not enough" to achieve racial equality, but now those vying for

the presidency were contending that formal freedom was more than enough.<sup>213</sup> By promoting a “do-it-yourself-boot-strap” ideology and diminishing the saliency of historically ingrained racial inequality, the U.S. Government decided to ignore demands calling for racial justice and focus on other issues.

The drilled-down excerpt and positioning of the “*Dream*” speech as an adoption and embrace of racial-colorblindness obscures “King’s political legacy [and] is almost totally devoid of the confrontational and radical politics that he pursued while he was alive.”<sup>214</sup> The minimization of King’s specific radical agenda, as well as attempts in general from the African American community to hold the U. S. Government accountable for the debts owed to African descendants of the enslaved, is yet another example that demonstrates the usurpation of the tenor Black racial politics. While King highlights the failure of the U.S. to correct past injustices, not only is the totality of this message ignored, the purposeful selection of particular elements of the speech serves as an attempt to usurp political objectives working toward repairing systemic injustice experienced by African Americans. While “the black movement was a conduit for questioning American democracy and capitalism,”<sup>215</sup> by no longer “seeing” or acknowledging the societal effects caused by racialization and duplicitously reinterpreting the intentionality of the message offered by King, the adoption of the racial colorblindness ideology functions as

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<sup>213</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor and Angela Y. Davis, *From #Blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2021), 53.

<sup>214</sup> Kevin Bruyneel, “The King’s Body: The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial and the Politics of Collective Memory.” *History and Memory* 26, no. 1 (2014), 76.

<sup>215</sup> Taylor, *From #Blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation*, 53.

a compromise towards minimal effort to visibly allow a small number of African Americans to enter into the mainstream while at the same time, maintaining white privilege and pacifying the fragile ego of white American society. Through hyper-Black visibility, the façade of Black inclusion and equality suppressed the true overall material conditions for African Americans.

Instrumental to unpacking the reasoning behind reducing King's message to this liminal narrative, there are a series of concepts, processes and theoretical perspectives that are each important to discuss in detail: white fragility, interest convergence, and the public identity—each theoretical concept is discussed as they contribute to how Black racial politics are usurped in the efforts to maintain the hierarchical racial status quo. Condensed to what I have termed usurpational idealism (the process by which the status and privileges of whiteness are utilized to usurp situational politics in an effort to restore the equilibrium of society to a state that maintains the desires of whiteness as an ideal state of being), these theories demonstrate the intentional manufacturing and manipulation of King's image, narrative and Black demands in general, to fit the objectives of public policy goals defined by the U.S. Government that were crafted during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s/60s.

### III. Protecting the Fragile Ego: The Politics Behind Robin DiAngelo’s White Fragility Theory

Within the field of Whiteness Studies and Critical Discourse Analysis, in 2011, Dr. Robin DiAngelo popularized the theory of White Fragility. Published as “White Fragility” in the *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, the concept traces how whiteness is maintained and reproduced in everyday discourse. The theory of white fragility attempts to explain the social pacification of white racial comfort and how an “insulated environment of racial privilege builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress.”<sup>216</sup> According to John McWhorter in “The Dehumanizing Condescension of ‘White Fragility,’” DiAngelo calls upon “white Americans [to] embark on a self-critical project of looking inward to examine and work against racist biases that many have barely known they had.”<sup>217</sup> While a state of anti-racist idealism may not be fully achieved (nor is it the intent in acknowledging white fragility), highlighting the concept, DiAngelo goes on to rationalize how the racialized concept and identity of whiteness operates such that it is socialized into protecting and reproducing notions of white “supremacy.”

Situations that challenge the “supremacy” of whiteness create a level of cognitive dissonance for white people resulting in a series of defense mechanisms. As disequilibrium arises, whiteness attempts to make meaning of new experiences, ideas,

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<sup>216</sup> Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, Vol 3, No. 3 (2011): 55.

<sup>217</sup> John McWhorter, “The Dehumanizing Condescension of ‘White Fragility,’” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, July 15, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/dehumanizing-condescension-white-fragility/614146/>.

and understandings about the self. As these new experiences challenge the hierarchical white status quo, defense mechanisms materialize through expressive forms including, but not limited to, combativeness, defiance, reticence, etc. Tapping into forms of social and cultural “capital”— positive “self-image, control, and white solidarity”<sup>218</sup> helps in the restoration of white racial comfort.

DiAngelo’s claim of understanding predictable behavioral reactions when the perceived hierarchical white racial status quo is challenged is supported by the concept of “habitus,” theorized by Anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu. DiAngelo, referencing Bourdieu, states how the rote habit and repetitive practices of “whiteness,” upheld within social environments, reinscribes the responses to perceived challenges. DiAngelo states

habitus is the result of socialization, the repetitive practices of actors and their interactions with each other and with the rest of the social environment. Because it is repetitive, our socialization produces and reproduces thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions. Thus, habitus can be thought of as a person’s familiar way of perceiving, interpreting, and responding to the social cues around him or her.<sup>219</sup>

Habitus attempts to explain the systemization of privilege afforded to whiteness through the socialization of a racial worldview that posits that there are natural racial hierarchies that illuminate differences between human groups. This explanation of habitus ties into and supports the basis of this body of research about how whiteness functions to usurp the equity objectives of Black racial politics. Although concepts, policies, and tactics are introduced into the society that attempts to achieve equality for

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<sup>218</sup> Robin DiAngelo and Michael Eric Dyson, *White Fragility: Why it’s so Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 106.

<sup>219</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 101.

everyone, that whiteness has repetitively been positioned as the operative norm, the white hermeneutical perspective engages these concepts and tactics in such a way that it interprets the intention of Black racial politics as a challenge and threat to the hierarchical racial status quo.

From the perspective of whiteness, through repetitive practices, a reinterpretation of the “equality concept” is necessary to refocus the political objectives to a status that reproduces white racial comfort. Exploring how the concept of racial colorblindness was introduced into society versus how it is actualized in society demonstrates how the reinterpreted inscription of meaning “produces and reproduces thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions” such that these actions function to protect the status quo. Often limited to people of color, through racialization and its subsequent effects, we see how “racially coded language reproduces racist images and perspectives while it simultaneously reproduces the comfortable illusion that race and its problems are what “they” have, not us.”<sup>220</sup> This ideology allows many white people to exempt themselves from racialization and claim to “not see color” because “whites are taught to see their interests and perspectives as universal, ...and to see themselves as individuals rather than as part of a racially socialized group. Individualism serves to detach white people from the racialized intergenerational historical benefits and hides the ways in which wealth (and various other social and political resources) has been distributed and accumulated over generations to benefit whites today.”<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” 55.

<sup>221</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 59.

Through this perspective of individuality, which suggests an ability to ignore the effects and benefits of racialization, DiAngelo further claims that the habit of performing whiteness is so intrinsically embedded in society that it functions at the level of the unconscious.

When there is disequilibrium in the habitus –when social cues are unfamiliar and/or when they challenge our capital –we use strategies to regain our balance. Habitus maintains our social comfort and helps us regain it when those around us do not act unfamiliar in acceptable ways. We don’t respond consciously to disequilibrium in the habitus; we respond unconsciously.<sup>222</sup>

While I agree that challenges to the perceived superiority of whiteness create environments of disequilibrium followed by responses that attempt to recenter the white identity as dominant, the belief that the performance of whiteness does not “respond consciously to disequilibrium in the habitus”<sup>223</sup> –that it responds automatically and from the position that the “corrective behavior” functions at the level of the unconscious, is where this research offers a different perspective.

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<sup>222</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 103.

<sup>223</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 103.

John McWhorter’s critique of DiAngelo’s white fragility theory in “The Dehumanizing Condescension of ‘White Fragility,’” lends support to my claim. As stated by McWhorter:

DiAngelo’s depiction of white psychology shape-shifts according to what her dogma requires. On the one hand, she argues in Chapter 1 that white people do not see themselves in racial terms; therefore, they must be taught by experts like her of their whiteness. But for individuals who harbor so little sense of themselves as a group, the white people whom DiAngelo describes are oddly tribalist when it suits her narrative. “White solidarity,” she writes in Chapter 4, “requires both silence about anything that exposes the advantages of the white population and tacit agreement to remain racially united in the protection of white supremacy.” But if these people don’t even know whiteness is a category, just what are they now suddenly defending?<sup>224</sup>

I believe that whiteness operates such that it constantly attempts to reinscribe its perspectives and ideologies as the status quo. However, I take the position that ideological whiteness actively and consciously performs sets of actions and intentionally makes decisions to protect the interest of whiteness. With racially ingrained social practices, there is a necessary conversation around the idea of why racial ideologies have remained static. If we consider the idea that “race” is not inherently biological but a socially constructed mechanism, we have to understand that its function serves to delineate positions of power –whiteness and “white supremacy” are upheld through applications of anti-Black ideologies. Charles Mills provides and references the definition of white supremacy (as defined by Frances Lee), which is also useful when

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<sup>224</sup> John McWhorter, “The Dehumanizing Condescension of ‘White Fragility,’” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, July 15, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/dehumanizing-condescension-white-fragility/614146/>.

applied to the argument of these actions as conscious in attempting to maintain whiteness as “superior.” Mills states that white supremacy functions as:

a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.<sup>225</sup>

As discussed throughout this body of research, as one example, events such as the March on Washington, in which African Americans were calling for a reevaluation of access and social resources –their demands caused disequilibrium to whiteness. These requests were followed by active strategies and a series of intentional “corrections” in the effort to regain balance and return to white racial comfort. Fulfilling the objectives of public policy goals, as stated by Taylor, “Nixon turned to color blindness and racial code words as a way to conceal, or at least obscure, later efforts to undo aspects of the Johnson welfare state....”<sup>226</sup> The critical element needed for this to function was “to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to.”<sup>227</sup> This can be seen through the actions of whiteness in taking control of the objectives of the March as a means of not offending white participation or lending support to proposed civil rights legislation.

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<sup>225</sup> Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 144.

<sup>226</sup> Taylor, *From #Blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation*, 60.

<sup>227</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. *Ibid.*, 56.

Examples that demonstrate support for this perspective are as follows:

1. Archbishop of Washington Patrick O’Boule threatened to cancel his participation in the March on Washington event if SNCC was allowed to deliver the speech as originally written. O’Boule took offense to the original content of the speech and perceived it as too militant. Through this action, O’Boule displays white fragility by consciously and intentionally choosing not to participate in the March due to his internalized perception of Black militancy.
2. Kennedy’s Administration took control of setting the tone of the march. President Kennedy wanted the objectives of the March to work alongside his administration in support of proposed legislation. Again, Kennedy’s support (or lack thereof) of the March was based on an intentional and conscious act that organizers fulfill *his* administration’s directive and political desires.
3. With the intent of the March being to highlight issues experienced within the Black community, participant involvement was limited such that no militant or separatist groups, specifically Black Muslims, were invited to participate. This action, at the behest of the Kennedy Administration and other white participants, was a conscious action designed to disassociate this group of Black Americans (who experienced similar racialized issues) from participating and having their experiences included in the overall objectives of the March.
4. On the day of the March, Kennedy deployed a standby of Army troops, paratroopers, and police force (estimated that law enforcement totaled approximately 20,000). Here we see an intimidation tactic used to quell Black outrage. The very issue SNCC attempted to highlight within the original speech, —police violence against the Black community—is demonstrated here. While it can be suggested that police presence was for “safety,” to have approximately 20,000 at the event was a conscious terrorization tactic.

These actions reference all conscious decisions and point out the possibility that positioning white behavioral responses as “unconscious” acts is an oversight of DiAngelo’s white fragility theoretical perspective. However, DiAngelo’s white fragility theory is helpful in that it exposes the fragile white ego. It represents a proportional step in the overall process towards the progress of co-opting Black strategies for American inclusion and the maintenance of the hierarchical racial status quo. Examined further in the next section, the focus of this research project shifts to explore how the interests of

whiteness are maintained through the theoretical concept articulated by Derrick Bell, interest convergence. While Bell focuses primarily on the legal case of *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, KS, 1954*, his assessment of how society is slow to change unless it converges with the interests of whiteness helps support my overall argument of usurpational idealism.

IV. Interest Convergence: What's Privilege Got to Do with It? Hint: Everything!

While white fragility protects and reproduces notions of white “supremacy,” additional steps are needed to codify whiteness to remain at the top of the hierarchical racial structure. Within the broad field of Critical Race Studies, originating from Legal Studies, Critical Race Theory (CRT) examines how “race” and racial hierarchies are foundational to laws, policies, and systems; CRT attempts to explain how and why systemic racism endures. Extending from the CRT disciplinary field of study, a theory coined by legal scholar Derrick Bell, the Interest Convergence Theory, offers further clarity on how a concept such as interest convergence is connected and foundational to racial colorblindness. Unpacking interest convergence helps us understand why racial colorblindness was ineffective in remedying inequality, how laws act as tools of legitimization, and further, why the creation of statutes and decrees do little towards the actualization of fostering equality.

Through the examination of various laws, most notably *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, KS, 1954*,<sup>228</sup> which, at the federal level, made segregation illegal in public schools across the nation, in “Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma,” Derrick Bell concluded that laws did not provide a judicial remedy or “effective racial equality for blacks where the remedy sought threatens the

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<sup>228</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, KS*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954) Opinion; May 17, 1954; Records of the Supreme Court of the United States; Record Group 267; National Archives. On May 17, 1954, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren delivered the unanimous ruling in the landmark civil rights case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. State-sanctioned segregation of public schools was a violation of the 14th amendment and was therefore unconstitutional. This historic decision marked the end of the “separate but equal” precedent set by the Supreme Court nearly 60 years earlier in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and served as a catalyst for the expanding civil rights movement during the decade of the 1950s. <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/brown-v-board-of-education>

superior societal status of middle and upper-class whites....”<sup>229</sup> Contending that change only comes to fruition when there is something beneficial, something to be gained (primarily economically and politically) by whites in the dominant status, according to Bell’s theory, effectively, *Brown* was actualized only because those in policymaking positions began to see the economic and political advantages of abandoning school segregation. Juridical support of school desegregation afforded the U.S. a moral high ground and provided a level of credibility to American efforts in the fight against the spread of Communism. In an attempt to demonstrate the notion of American Exceptionalism to “developing nations” (specifically against the Soviet Union), *Brown* justified the status of the U.S. within the ranks of a superpower nation.

Viewed from the perspective that living up to and providing support for the decree of legal civil and human rights across the nation was politically beneficial, the U.S. was situated as possessing an honorable morality in its attempts to impose its might on other nations, yet, the supposed morality of the nation was, at best, superficial. Evidenced across the nation, public schools that opted not to implement *Brown* or racially integrate their institutions simply shut down. Although *Brown* was now the law across the nation, it was not enforced because “true” school equality was not the overall objective or goal.

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<sup>229</sup> Derrick A. Bell, “Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma.” *Harvard Law Review* 93, no. 3 (1980): 523.

*Brown* signaled an appearance towards equality but was mainly a symbolic gesture that served as a greater means of demonstrating the might of American superiority and being able to dictate and interfere in the political directions of other nations. To that end, Bell once lamented, "...it appears that my worst fears have been realized: we have made progress in everything yet nothing has changed..."<sup>230</sup> –the "delay" of implementing change directly connects to his concept of the interest convergence theory. It is helpful towards understanding the basis for the adaptation (i.e., usurpation) of racial colorblindness as an operating logic as it relates to race relations in the U.S.

The progress proposed through a racially colorblind society did not materialize in the way it was initially conceived by African descendants for several reasons, primarily because its original objectives were not beneficial to whiteness. Within the Nixon Administration, "officials worked to narrow the definition of racism to the intentions of individual actors while countering the idea of institutional racism by focusing on "freedom of choice" as a way to explain differential outcomes."<sup>231</sup> Returning to the March on Washington, 1963, and King's speech, through the process of usurpational idealism, the co-opting and reinterpretation of King's speech was enacted by whiteness to appropriate the objectives of racial colorblindness and refashion it to maintain the beneficial interests of white desire.

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<sup>230</sup> Derek Bell, *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 22.

<sup>231</sup> Taylor, *From #Blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation*, 63.

A more accurate interpretation of the ideology of racial colorblindness (after connecting to the inclusionary values originally conceived by African descendants *and* providing vital redress) would provide everyone in society with equal opportunities for success. “Race” would no longer determine “social capital,” and society would deliver a clean slate. For once, the U.S. would live up to the promises of its ideals, and society would operate from a place of true meritocracy –something many white people credit as the reason for their success in this country. However, “Nixon never mentioned any repair to or improvement in the conditions of urban dwellers, including African Americans.”<sup>232</sup> Nevertheless, from a racially dominant perspective, “Nixon was most interested in turning the page. He was not naïvely thinking that the urban problems were now a thing of the past; he was extracting the federal government from its responsibility to resolve them.”<sup>233</sup> From the perspective of whiteness, the issue with the original concept of racial colorblindness is that it removes the shroud of the supposed superiority of “whiteness.” The original tenets of racial colorblindness had to be appropriated to fit a dominant white narrative and maintain racial “superiority.” As such, the concept’s inclusive nature, initially intended to grant access to Americanness, was hijacked to maintain the hierarchical nature of the racial status quo. The process of Black political usurpation would continue to play out through manipulating the public imaginary and deploying the identities of high-profile figures crafted explicitly with the intent of swaying public opinion towards supporting U.S. governmental public policies.

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<sup>232</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 63.

<sup>233</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 63.

V. Public Identity: Stages of a Strategically Crafted Narrative

As the interest conversion theory articulates, social change is only actualized when it is in line with furthering the goals of whiteness. In the final process of fulfilling the goals of usurpational idealism, the theory of the public identity is outlined as a way to complete the cycle of maintaining whiteness as a standardized norm. The public identity theory relies upon the framing of familiar social cues or tropes that have been developed and shaped to further political goals. As discussed by Ange-Marie Hancock, the public identity theory functions as a bridge between macro and micro ideological discourses and operates to shape public-level analysis and political engagement.

i. Stage 1: The use of Media to Create and Popularize Public Discourse

The concept of the public identity is a theory articulated by Ange-Marie Hancock in “Contemporary Welfare Reform and the Public Identity of the ‘Welfare Queen.’” While Hancock deploys the public identity theory to underscore how media-driven imagery relied upon negative social beliefs to uphold familiar tropes of African American women as lazy and undeserving “welfare queens” (a concept with roots in the Nixon Administration), the public perception derived from the imagery was relied upon to shape public sentiment on whether or not to support the expansion of economic and social

government services and subsequently, legislation on welfare reform.<sup>234</sup> In the U.S., while historically and statistically, the vast majority of social welfare benefits have been afforded and distributed to white people, shaped by years of American propagandist history that positions Black people as “unfit,” the projection of African American women as the primary beneficiaries of social welfare support services, played a key role towards increased public demands to overhaul eligibility requirements for social welfare benefits. As it relates to investments in welfare spending, the public identities formulated of Black women demonstrate the power of imagery in shaping ideology “generally based upon non-group members’ perceptions specifically for the advancement of facially neutral public policy goals.”<sup>235</sup>

Although “[p]ublic identities represent a constellation of stereotypes and moral judgments of various group identities ascribed to and at times adopted by individuals,”<sup>236</sup> the concept goes beyond generalizing or simply holding beliefs about particular groups.

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<sup>234</sup> It is important to note that the concept of the public identity theory is tangentially related to what Antonio Gramsci articulated as hegemony in *Prison Notebooks* (1992-2007) in that there exists a dominate group that obscures the nature of domination and “leads” or coerces subordinate or subaltern social groups into adopting a singular concept of ideological reality promoted by the ruling class. Stated by Gramsci, “[i]n the hegemonic system, there exists democracy between the ‘leading’ group and the groups which are ‘led’, in so far as the development of the economy and thus the legislation which expresses such development favour the (molecular) passage from the ‘led’ groups to the ‘leading’ group.” (pg. 56) How I think these concepts slightly differ is that while hegemony implies domination of one group over another in an effort to force the subaltern to adopt the belief systems of the ruling class through coercion and consent, through the public identity, the role of imagery as propaganda relies on commonly held racial tropes and is used to shape public ideology which then contributes and influences legislation that maintains the hierarchical racial status quo. The subaltern is not necessarily consenting to a new unassumed “worldview,” the public identity concept allows the subsummation of demands proposed by the “subaltern” such that their demands appear to be embraced yet, are absorbed and transformed in such a way as to simply maintain the pervading systemic power of those already dominant within society.

<sup>235</sup> Ange-Marie Hancock, “Contemporary Welfare Reform and the Public Identity of the ‘Welfare Queen.’” *Race, Gender & Class* 10, no. 1 (2003): 31–59. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41675059>.

<sup>236</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. *Ibid*, 33.

Hancock goes on to say that these beliefs transform and influence how policies are formed –“the creation and dissemination of public identities are a critical part of political culture’s role in democratic deliberation and political outcomes.”<sup>237</sup> More saliently, the manufacture and framing of particular public identities, which are then promoted through the “hegemonic apparatus” of the media, contribute to shaping public ideological perspectives by imparting a crafted politicized objective into political discourse in such an effortless manner to the effect, that ordinary citizens are encouraged to lend their voice and perspectives as if it has a bearing on the outcome. Often, once an intentionally crafted narrative is circulated through mainstream channels, public sentience takes hold rather than engaging in an exchange of objective discourse, and “sympathetic citizens are encouraged to participate in the issue debate at hand by political leaders presenting their way of framing the argument.”<sup>238</sup>

As Hancock describes, the concept of the public identity theory is multilayered –it goes beyond simply positioning a subject image as a mere stereotype. We have to understand how the media is functioning in tandem with political entities to shape what is being communicated. The objective goal is to shape how the public thinks about specific issues; public identities play out before the public in various stages.

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<sup>237</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 33.

<sup>238</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 33.

According to Hancock, through the public identity theory, there is strategic maneuvering, various interactions, and stages that facilitate the larger objective of gaining public support for proposed public policy goals. This begins with governmental desire to introduce and gain support of said public policy goal. After the narrative of the goal is crafted, there are government to citizen interactions that convey governmental perspectives. The citizen is exposed to public discourse through various entities — academe, media sources and political discourse. Ultimately, the public identity:

1. **is created and popularized in public discourse through various forms of media.** It is a “collection of stereotypes [that] involves a multiplicity of cognitive behaviors: the assignment of specific traits and behaviors to an individual, and moral judgments about said traits and behaviors.”<sup>239</sup>
2. **plays a role in shaping the goals and justifications for public policy.** “...[P]ublic identities function more dynamically in the goal-oriented context of politics. While stereotypes are learned passively, through exposure and observation, public identities are developed and shaped for political goals —as ideological justifications for public policy —and disseminated as such.”<sup>240</sup>
3. **conditions political thinking which contributes to how laws are implemented.** The “public identity is designed to be a concept that bridges the macro- and micro-levels of analysis. Thus, public identity can be characterized by its salience, centrality, affective orientation, and level of exposure in both individual citizens and the political culture...[m]oreover, via its priming effect public identity, as a phenomenon created in the public discourse, ultimately conditions the political thinking of American citizen at the micro-level in the self-categorization process and political thinking. Public identities can become chronically accessible, as the filter through which all related information is interpreted.”<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 33.

<sup>240</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 33.

<sup>241</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 34.

These steps result in citizen-to-citizen interactions that act as public forums to debate and appear as a democratic process of civic engagement. Constructive in unpacking the public identity theory and how it connects to the embrace, subsummation, and reinterpretation of the racial colorblindness doctrine (usurpation of the intended objectives of racial colorblindness), it is essential to examine the March and the intentional crafting of King's public identity to illustrate connections between the ideological impact of imagery and the fulfillment of public policies.

The primary phase of the public identity theory outlines how desired public policy outcomes are initially created and popularized in public discourse. Disseminated initially through various media outlets, desired public policy outcomes are conveyed and shaped through the projections of visual imagery, which has been intentionally crafted to convey a particular ideology. While it is understood to be the case that the Kennedy Administration had to be "forced" into initiating support for civil rights legislation, to achieve the desired legislative outcome, the administration took control of the first stage of crafting representation through idealized visual imagery. To this end, the rally was globally broadcast on live television, which meant identifying the specific type of participants that would be allowed to be involved in The March.<sup>242</sup>

Although over 200,000 participants would show up to attend to shed light on issues faced within the Black community, not all Black "leaders" or organizations were included or encouraged to contribute their efforts to the rally. For instance, Black

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<sup>242</sup> It is noted that J. Edgar Hoover, head of the F.B.I, understood the importance that imagery played in shaping the narrative for the March. In the lead up to The March, he ran an undercover campaign to try to ruin King's reputation and wreck plans for the event.

Muslims and other “separatist” groups were urged not to participate. The rejection of Muslim participation led Malcolm X to refer to the demonstration as the “Farce on Washington,” and Stokely Carmichael, also a member of SNCC, stated the March was “only a sanitized, middle-class version of the real black movement.”<sup>243</sup> Rather than display the ire of defiance, the tone of the event projected a controlled, respectable middle-class ethos through a jubilant atmosphere –most March participants were composed, well-dressed, and sang lively songs in unison of “overcoming” the obstacles to inequality.<sup>244</sup> Outward appearances attempted to connect the “sense of propriety that linked manhood and attire”<sup>245</sup> however, there was a reinforcement of the respectable objective. As a backup plan, purported as an attempt to mitigate violence, all police leave, and vacation requests were canceled days leading up to the March to allow preparation for riot training. On the day of the event, in addition to the Washington, D.C. police force, 4,000 Army troops and 15,000 paratroopers were on standby.

By controlling participant involvement, what is really at play here is how the Kennedy Administration deployed aspects of social control through the concept of the politics of respectability to ensure white support of civil rights legislation. Making sure the controlling image of the March was a “safe,” respectable crowd facilitated the first stage of the public identity process. The visual representation shaped the cognitive

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<sup>243</sup> “What Was the March on Washington?,” *UK Government Web Archive* (The National Archives), accessed June 12, 2022, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/+https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/heroes-villains/g6/cs3/default.htm>.

<sup>244</sup> See Figure 2: Figure 2: National Archives Photo no. 542044 (Unrestricted)

<sup>245</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “The Metalanguage of Race,” Then and Now” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 3 (2017): 630.

behavioral processing necessary for white people to assign moral judgment and assess if African Americans deserved civil rights. Through imagery, African Americans were “humanized” via their civilized behavior in an attempt to convey that they were “deserving” of public policy legislation in support of civil rights, albeit civil rights legislation that lacked leveling the playing field.

In a Universal International Newsreel, broadcaster Ed Herlihy can be heard reciting over the newsreel of the march that “[a]rrest in Washington were below normal. Police attribute this to the fact that for the first time in thirty years, you couldn’t even buy a beer in Washington; the Civil Rights marches needed no stimulant like that. They provided their own with songs that ranged from the sacred to the hillbilly, but with one recurring theme, the cause of 20 million Negroes.”<sup>246</sup> Visual depictions and social control were needed to make sure “hiccups” in this initial stage did not block or threaten the ability of whites to construct favorable moral judgments and, to be able to continue to the next step in the facilitation of the public identity concept; the merging and dissemination of the ideological justifications for public policy were paramount towards the support of the proposed civil rights legislation.

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<sup>246</sup> Anonymous, “March on Washington Event Footage.” *Universal Newsreel, Release 71*, August 29, 1963. Los Angeles, CA - Hollywood: Universal Pictures Company.  
[https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic\\_entity%7Cvideo\\_work%7C1789603](https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C1789603).



Figure 2: National Archives Photo no. 542044 (Unrestricted)

Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C., 08/28/1963; *Civil Rights History*

Photographer, Rowland Scherman

Credit National Archives (photo no. 306-SSM-4D-73-10)

NAIL Control Number: NWDNS-306-SSM-4D(73)10

Courtesy National Archives, photo no. 542044

National Archives (306-SSM-4D-73-10)

ARC Identifier: 542044

<https://catalog.archives.gov/OpaAPI/media/542044/content/arcmedia/media/images/27/4/27-0309a.gif>

ii. Stage 2: Shaping the Goals and Justifications for Public Policy

As stated previously, in the second stage towards deploying the concept of the public identity theory to shape public policy, “in the goal-oriented context of politics...through exposure and observation, public identities are developed and shaped for political goals –as ideological justifications for public policy –and disseminated as such.”<sup>247</sup> Observed through the memorialized image and the selected elements of the speech delivered by King at the March, the positioning and intentional mischaracterization of King’s politics in this particular moment acts to lock King into a “leader”<sup>248</sup> demanding nothing more from society than to judge African Americans by the content of their character. As “public identities are developed and shaped for political goals,” positioned as a racially colorblind leader, white interpretation of King’s speech cements the ideology that there was little in the way of redress needed or being demanded –white society latched onto the racially colorblind public identity concept of King to assuage their “white guilt” and for American society to be able to ignore and move beyond having to acknowledge responsibility for the economic, political and social conditions of African Americans (the Nixon Administration would echo this sentiment).

The *Dream* speech, interpreted as and reduced to simply asking to be judged by the content of one’s character, creates the mythologization of King’s message and can be construed as not demanding “tangibles.” This translates into whiteness not needing to atone for the past, and, as the theory of the public identity outlines, the imagery

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<sup>247</sup> Hancock, “*Contemporary Welfare Reform*,” 33.

<sup>248</sup> Reference to page 11: “Jack Kennedy was put on notice that blacks from Harlem to Montgomery expected him to listen to their leader Martin Luther King Jr.”

intentionally crafted of King played a crucial role in shaping public opinion on issues related to civil rights. Sympathetic acts of support gesturing toward racial equality were beginning to be replaced by white fatigue on racial matters. Rather than confront and dismantle systemic racial inequality, which provides white people in U.S. society the benefits of economic, political, and social advantage, as a way to move beyond social strife, as demonstrated in *Colorblind: Barack Obama, Post-Racial Liberalism and the Retreat from Racial Equity*, Tim Wise states that “[a]s whites became increasingly agitated about urban riots during the middle and latter part of the sixties, these voices began to argue that in order for the nation to move forward on an agenda of opportunity for all, it would be necessary to de-emphasize the issue of racism and discrimination, and focus instead on other concerns.”<sup>249</sup> Wise points to the impact of The Moynihan Report on the Black Family (officially titled: *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*)<sup>250</sup> to demonstrate how “the problems of the black community could no longer be solved by way of social policies aimed at addressing racism.”<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Tim J. Wise, *Colorblind: Barack Obama, Post-racial Liberalism and the Retreat from Racial Equity* (San Francisco, Calif: City Lights, 2010), 27.

<sup>250</sup> Daniel P. Moynihan, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” *United States Department of Labor*. Office of Policy Planning and Research United States Department of Labor, March 1965. <https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/webid-moynihan>. Although the Moynihan Report suggested that because post-enslavement, the U.S. Government failed to support a solid transition for African Americans in society, the black community did not meet baseline success due to unemployment, educational failure, criminality and fatherlessness. Due to a ghetto cultural pathology, the Black family was situated as abnormal, a deviation from heteronormative values. The unraveling of the black family was associated with increasing rates of teenage pregnancy, that gender roles between Blk men and women were reversed and Black fathers were largely absent from the home as a result of domineering Black woman who emasculated Black men resulting in Black single mothers who often became welfare dependents.

<sup>251</sup> Wise, *Colorblind*, 28.

According to the Moynihan Report, Black people were inherently unable to conform to heteronormative values. The causality of Black “issues” was not traced to centuries of intentional, systemic inequality. Instead, these issues were deemed innate and could not be solved through implementing race-based policies; public policies were then critiqued as not effective enough to change what were viewed as intrinsic flaws in the characteristics of Black people. Connecting this to Bell’s interest convergence theory which suggests that social or legal change only happens when there is something to be gained by dominant white society, because the idea was publicly promoted that race-based policies were ineffective in changing social outcomes for Black people, the shift, and adoption of racially colorblind policies to benefit “everyone” was accepted as a better choice because extending resources to assist those incapable of being helped was viewed as a waste.

The inability to confront the impact of centuries-long racial advantages codified through de jure and de facto practices aided the perception and assumption that race-neutral, colorblind universalism was advantageous and beneficial to society because it “uplift[ed] all in need.”<sup>252</sup> Through the recrafted narrative and rescripted philosophy of the “*Dream*” speech, King’s image and message served as “a constructed identity designed for the explicit purpose of justifying specific forms of public policy ideologically. The process of public identity creation and dissemination, while subject to challenge and intervention, is largely out of the hands of those who are characterized by

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<sup>252</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 29.

it.”<sup>253</sup> Once King’s message is co-opted through processes of usurpational idealism and “...developed and shaped for political goals,”<sup>254</sup> what he actually stated was deemed irrelevant, leading to the ideological justification for public policies, which would be actualized through racial colorblind policies. Playing out as crafted, this approach –race-neutral, colorblind universalism (racial colorblindness), failed to acknowledge the need for a commitment to generate substantive policies or address America’s racialized past to bring everyone in society to the same level of access. Once King’s narrative conveyed to the public a message that would effectively maintain existing conditions by treating everyone the same and ignoring the consequences of “race,” the next step in fulfilling the usurpation of Black racial politics –fulfilling and maintaining the hierarchical racial status quo through juridical implementations, followed.

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<sup>253</sup> Hancock, “*Contemporary Welfare Reform*,” 36.

<sup>254</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 33.

iii. Stage 3: White Racial Subsumption of the Racial Colorblind Objectives

As noted, throughout the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s/60s, African Americans called for accountability from the U.S. Government by protesting economic, political, and social inequities and by dissenting against their continued marginalization and treatment as second-class citizens; this sociopolitical movement attempted to upend the hierarchical racial status quo. Due to the efforts of organizers to keep these issues in the public eye, civil rights legislation was on the national consciousness. Within this period, the juridical phase of fulfilling the true intent underlining racial colorblindness began (filtered through aspects of the public identity concept).

After the assassination of John F. Kennedy in November 1963, the nation, stunned by the murder of a sitting president, wanted to move past the social conflict occurring across the nation. As a means of “honoring” Kennedy’s legacy and diminishing racial strife, legislation he introduced was revisited and debated –most notably, the Civil Rights Act, 1964,<sup>255</sup> which prohibits discrimination on the basis of “race,” and the Voting Rights Act, 1965,<sup>256</sup> which aims to eliminate discriminatory voting registration practices. Assuming office of the presidency and having inherited the

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<sup>255</sup> Public Law 88-352 (78 Stat. 241). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin. Provisions of this civil rights act forbade discrimination on the basis of sex, as well as, race in hiring, promoting, and firing. The Act prohibited discrimination in public accommodations and federally funded programs. It also strengthened the enforcement of voting rights and the desegregation of schools. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasam/civil-rights-center/statutes/civil-rights-act-of-1964>

<sup>256</sup> Public Law 89-110 (79 Stat. 437). Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which aimed to increase the number of people registered to vote in areas where there was a record of previous discrimination. The legislation outlawed literacy tests and provided for the appointment of Federal examiners (with the power to register qualified citizens to vote) in certain jurisdictions with a history of voting discrimination. <https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/voting-rights-1965>

responsibility to lead the nation, Lyndon Baines Johnson's Administration stepped in and passed what some view as the most progressive laws to ensure civil rights across the nation legally. This occurred through the ability to convey to the entire nation the benefits of civil rights legislation.

While legislation was necessary to implement the exercise of civil rights as a means of gaining broad-based public support, the U.S. polity learned from the *Brown* decision that the dominant society had to "buy into" the idea that civil rights legislation was valuable to the nation. Centering the objectives of the Johnson Administration through a reconstructed narrative of the desires of the Black community (co-opting the objective of King's "Dream" speech) and the visual representation of a "few" white people as aggressive "lone bad actors" (redefining racism as the actions of individual actors), juxtaposed with the controlled participation of March attendees, we see how the use of the public identity concept is utilized in support of civil rights legislation in that it:

acts as a bridge between the public sphere and the individual citizen. Figure 3 details the dissemination points for public identities. Within the public sphere, the discourse within the media, the academy, and politics develops specific public identities as part of a common language for talking across disciplines in areas of expertise. Yet the dissemination also occurs at the micro-macro level, when citizens interact with their government and learn the impact of the public identity ascribed to them (see Soss, 1999; Tyler, 1991), and at the micro level, through citizen-to-citizen interaction (Taylor, 1994; Young, 1990).<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Hancock, "Contemporary Welfare Reform," 34.

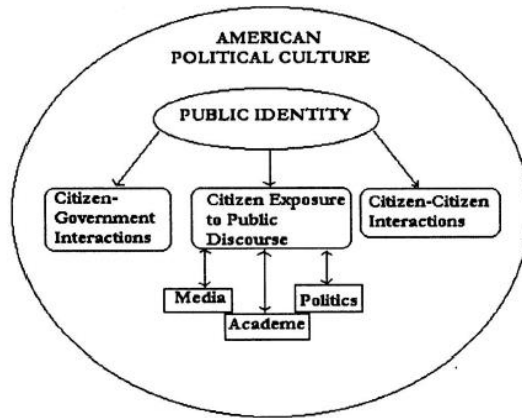


Figure 3: Hancock, Dissemination Channels of Public Identity<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 35.

To offer one perspective, through public identities, there is a level of manipulation deployed onto the public that attempts to expose them to a crafted political discourse detailing the benefits of civil rights legislation. “[A]t the micro level, through citizen-to-citizen interaction...,”<sup>259</sup> images from the March functioned to shape an ideology representing harmonious interactions between “respectable” African Americans and “benevolent and compassionate” white people in an attempt to signal cooperation visually –these groups have the ability to coexist peacefully and perspectives that do not accept this new outlook, now operate outside of the new norm. As the public identity suggests, as the cognitive behavior of the public is shaped by exposure through various media platforms, visual imagery is used to convey to the public what can be interpreted as the origins of the duplicitous interpretations of civil rights legislation in the efforts to maintain the hierarchical racial status quo.

Taking control of the message from the *March* and using it to shape a narrative that positioned civil rights legislation as ambiguous and beneficial for everyone, the concept of racial colorblindness offered a way for whites to accept this new logic because it did not attempt to hold whiteness accountable for past transgressions, nor did it call upon retreat from the hierarchical racialized status quo. The benefits of whiteness were maintained through being able to ignore the embedded historical advantages afforded to whiteness. In this instance, usurpational idealism manifested through the resistance to confront the effects “race” has had in shaping the experiences of ethnically racialized peoples. Ignoring the bi-directional consequences of “race” from the privileged position

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<sup>259</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 34.

afforded through whiteness maintains the privilege already in place. Through upholding the values of ideological whiteness, white people are able to maintain beneficial social statuses and resources while racialized people struggle to escape the entrapment of historical legacies.

Masked by the “race-neutral” discourse, the reduction of racism to an individual level obscures the history of how racial categories were fundamentally constructed to maintain systematic racial inequality. Although the racial worldview logics of racial colorblindness attempt to move society beyond perspectives emphasizing “race,” “race” operates by shaping day-to-day social interactions and experiences and functions as “the marker of entitlement or dispossession, civilization or barbarism, normative inclusion or normative exclusion, full or diminished personhood.”<sup>260</sup> This connects to a critical tenet outlined by Bell’s interest convergence theory.

As a concept, the reinterpreted concept of racial colorblindness converged with the interests of whiteness because it did not disempower white privilege; it only strengthened it by white people being able to retain the accumulated benefits of whiteness. Social programs specifically targeting Black people were not implemented to repair centuries-long damage caused by structural racism, and whiteness did not have to acknowledge the past because by now demonstrating blindness to “race,” the consequences of structural inequality were reduced to abstract concepts that continued to place whiteness at an advantage. This is supported by the argument put forth by Ian Haney-López in the article “How Conservatives Hijacked “Colorblindness” and Set Civil

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<sup>260</sup> Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*, 127.

Rights Back Decades,” in that as Haney-López states, “... [t]oday the dominant etiquette around race is colorblindness. It has a strong moral appeal, for it laudably envisions an ideal world in which race is no longer relevant to how we perceive or treat each other. It also has an intuitive, practical appeal: to get beyond race, colorblindness urges, the best strategy is to immediately stop recognizing and talking about race.”<sup>261</sup> After swaying public opinion to accept this new operating logic which called upon them to continue to ignore the effects of “race,” society simply moves forward on the idea that the institutionalization of the law was now enough.

From the juridical perspective, the legislation passed during the Civil Rights Movement was surface-level politics –without action behind remedy, civil rights legislation was a superficial gesture. Taking a long perspective of “equitable legislation,” Kehinde Andrews states “that the motivation behind the 14th amendment, which guaranteed citizenship to the formally enslaved, was not equality, but for the northern states to prevent the self from exploiting the labor of African-Americans, by paying them inhumane wages. But the implications are far worse than simply empty legislation; the law is used to provide the illusion of equality, and therefore discrimination becomes more effective, because it is covert, and harder to prove..... It is a regeneration of the problem in a particularly perverse form.”<sup>262</sup> Supporting this, as Charles Mills argued, “[t]he

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<sup>261</sup> Ian F. Haney-López, “How Conservatives Hijacked Colorblindness and Set Civil Rights Back Decades” *Salon.com*, 2014, [http://www.salon.com/2014/01/20/how\\_conservatives\\_hijacked\\_colorblindness\\_and\\_set\\_civil\\_rights\\_back\\_decades/](http://www.salon.com/2014/01/20/how_conservatives_hijacked_colorblindness_and_set_civil_rights_back_decades/).

<sup>262</sup> Kehinde Andrews, *Back to Black: Retelling Black Radicalism for the 21st Century* (London: Zed Books, 2019), 239-240.

original and continuing intent has been to establish and maintain white privilege. Some manifestations of this privilege are given up while the crucial ones are retained, and progress comes largely through contingent convergence of white elite or majoritarian interest with black interest rather than independent white moral awakening.”<sup>263</sup>

Whiteness did not have to give up accumulated benefits of advantage. With newly established laws, without having to do anything, the economic, political and social playing fields were “accessible.” Social equality was conveyed and interpreted as having been finally achieved –everyone now had access to be able to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” and succeed on their own merits as whites have claimed to have done.

Nevertheless, how did U.S. society progress from a society built on structural racialized inequality, where racial violence visually unfolded in living rooms across the U.S. during the social protest of the 1950s/60s, to a society which now promoted the notion that it had finally embraced ideologies of racial colorblindness and post-raciality as its central social operating logic?

Examining what is termed the racial progress narrative, Michael W. Kraus et al. discusses in “The Misperception of Racial Economic Inequality” how the collective consciousness within the national identity of Americanness is predisposed to ignoring the effects of its racial past. Kraus et al. state,

[a] firm belief in our nation’s commitment to racial egalitarianism is a part of the collective consciousness of the United States of America. Indeed, we have a strong and persistent belief that our national disgrace of racial oppression has been overcome, albeit through struggle, and that racial equality has largely already been achieved (Pinkney, 1986; Seamster & Ray, 2018). Take, for instance, how relatively easy it is to conjure

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<sup>263</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, 199.

bellwether moments of racial progress, such as the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, and the election of Barack Obama as the first Black President of the United States in 2008. By contrast, periods of retrenchment of the racial hierarchy, such as racial terror in the form of lynchings throughout the 19th century and much of the 20th, the rise of Jim Crow laws in 1877 and continuing through the 1960s, and the 1985 bombing of Black liberation activists (i.e., MOVE) by the Philadelphia police, or even the racial injustices of the present political moment (e.g., voter suppression; police-involved shootings of unarmed Black and Latinx citizens) that are often glossed over or minimized (Anderson, 2016)...When it comes to race relations in the United States, in other words, most Americans hold an unyielding belief in a specific, optimistic narrative regarding racial progress that is robust to counterexamples: that society has come a very long way already and is moving rapidly and perhaps naturally toward full racial equality (Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006; Hur & Ruttan, 2019).<sup>264</sup>

The aftermath and effects of the racial colorblind logic have proven to be another mythology of the American ethos of perceived equality. The optimism of racial “progress” is a false ideology promoted by whiteness in an attempt to cover up the past, continue to reap the benefits afforded through white privilege, and move on without having to atone or offer redress for a history from which it benefits. There has been little in the way of racial progress achieved within the U.S. As stated by Malcolm X during a March 1964 interview, “[i]f you stick a knife in my back nine inches and pull it out six inches, there’s no progress. If you pull it all the way out, that is not progress. Progress is healing the wound that the blow made. And they haven’t even begun to pull the knife out, much less heal the wound. They won’t even admit the knife is there.”<sup>265</sup> As the U.S. nation-state has been unwilling to engage in transparent conversations on racial equity, a

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<sup>264</sup> Michael W. Kraus, Onyeador, I. N., Daumeyer, N. M., Rucker, J. M., & Richeson, J. A. (2019). The Misperception of Racial Economic Inequality. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 14(6), 1-2.

<sup>265</sup> Malcolm X, “If You Stick a Knife in My Back Nine Inches...,” YouTube (Malcolm Shabazz, February 13, 2018) Interview, March 1964. <https://youtu.be/DlfjmZw72bo>.

much larger question looms, by what and who's measure are we quantifying our "progress" of racial equity? If progress continues to be determined by or limited to the lens of whiteness, the full encapsulation of the racialized experience is a missed opportunity to achieve equality.

Reconnecting to foundational theories outlined in this research, we see how whiteness is systemized to maintain the hierarchical racial status quo. As long as society continues to hide behind concepts such as white fragility, which has functioned such that whiteness maintains and reproduces white desire in everyday discourse, only gestures toward equality when it is in the interests of maintaining the benefits already afforded to whiteness as conveyed through the interest convergence theory, and functions such that the public is manipulated into fulfilling public policies that have not been designed to ensure equality as outlined by the public identity theory, U.S. society will never achieve social progress that leads to actual parity, and the efforts of African Americans to push the nation towards fairness and egalitarianism will continue to be usurped to uphold whiteness as an idealized standard.

A racial animus rooted in beliefs and practices of anti-Blackness dates to the early formation of the nation in which racialized categorizations predetermined the extension of citizenship. The lack of racial progress within U.S. society has been impeded by the reality that equality and equity through acts of legislation were never indeed intended. While the rhetoric of the *March* highlighted the gross neglect and disparities of racialized inequality, invisible structures subsumed Black political strategies. As such, "[c]ivil rights, race relations, and so-called independence have blinded us to the totality of our

oppression.... We are seeking to relieve the symptoms and not treat the disease of racism. We are trapped in a paradox, where we see no prospect for liberation and so cling to an illusion of false hope offered by our improved access to the system, and those who have benefited from it. In this limiting framework, we are left with recognizing the 'historical limitation of the "new" black petite bourgeoisie' but arguing that they 'play a crucial role' in the Black struggle.<sup>266</sup> Yet, it is important to remember that this is a game in which we, the subaltern, must continue to resist and push the pathways towards our own desires.

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<sup>266</sup> Andrews, *Back to Black*, 251.

*“Colorblindness does not do away with color, but rather reinforces whiteness as the unmarked norm against which difference is measured... Colorblindness thus survives and thrives not because of what it produces but because of what it prevents: that is, exposure, analysis, and remediation of the skewing of social opportunities and life chances by race. Rather than a recipe for a just society, colorblindness constitutes a core component of a long-standing historical whiteness protection program.”*<sup>267</sup>

~ George Lipsitz

*“We can’t equate what is happening now to what was happening 50 years ago...and if you talk to your parents, grandparents, uncles, they’ll tell you that things are better, not good in some places, but better.”*<sup>268</sup>

~ Barack H. Obama

*“... I got to thinking about how some of us choose to remember, and why, and how: why we do not forget. And I got to thinking about the moral meaning of memory, per se. And what it means to forget, what it means to fail to find and preserve the connection with the dead whose lives you, or I, want or need to honor with our own.”*<sup>269</sup>

~ June Jordan

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<sup>267</sup> George Lipsitz, “The Sounds of Silence: How Race Neutrality Preserves White Supremacy,” in *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness Across the Disciplines* (Oakland California: University of California Press, 2019), 24.

<sup>268</sup> Jeff Johnson, “Transcript: BET’s Exclusive Interview with President Obama,” *Black Entertainment Television* (BET), December 12, 2014), <https://www.bet.com/article/cqro4z/transcript-bet-exclusive-interview-with-president-obama>.

<sup>269</sup> June Jordan, *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays of June Jordan*, New York: Basic/Civitas Books, 2002, 5.

## Conclusion

Twelve years after the formalization of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s/60s, Dr. King's status within the nation had soured. By 1967, expressing what was socially interpreted by white society as a more "militant" tone, King critiqued U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War<sup>270</sup> and lamented that the "thingification" of African Americans had remained within American culture. The "Dream" he envisioned and conveyed at the March on Washington event in 1963 had, four years later, turned into a nightmare.<sup>271</sup>

Although African Americans put forth valiant efforts, their actions within the U.S. Civil Rights Movement did not necessarily materialize advantageous "gains" for the African American community. King argued that integrated lunch counters and access to public accommodations were achieved at a "bargain rate" and had strengthened the U.S. nation's economy. Beyond that, the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s/60s did little to resolve Black disenfranchisement. As this body of research has demonstrated through the concept of usurpational idealism, from the perspective of whiteness, the recognition, inclusion, and empowerment of American descendants of those formally enslaved within the U.S. nation was never the intended outcome. Placing greater emphasis on Black community economics, King stated that the African American community did not experience beneficial economic reciprocation from desegregation and

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<sup>270</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. and Walter Dean Myers. *A Time to Break Silence: The Essential Works of Martin Luther King Jr. for Students*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2013.

<sup>271</sup> "MLK Talks 'New Phase' Of Civil Rights Struggle, 11 Months Before His Assassination: NBC News." *YouTube*. NBC News Channel, April 4, 2018. <https://youtu.be/2xsbt3a7K-8>.

that the U.S. nation was broaching issues that would not “be solved without it costing the nation billions of dollars.”<sup>272</sup> The linkage to economics is significant because King is indirectly commentating on the white conscious gaze by verbalizing the symbiosis of white America’s historical relationship with Black bodies and economic capital.

Viewed through the lens of economic capital, the relationship between Black bodies and capital represents the long-standing practice of a “racial project.” As Michael Omi and Howard Winant discuss, “[a] racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect what race *means* in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially *organized*, based upon that meaning.”<sup>273</sup> Historically, through the dominant perspective within the U.S., Black people’s existence has been recognized through and tethered to capitalist regimes representing yet, another example through which the hierarchal racial status quo is maintained.

Flashing forward to the 2008 election of Barack Hussein Obama (the first U.S. President of African and American descent), as racial turmoil exploded across the nation, it reaffirmed the concept of white racial angst. Despite promoting ideologies of having achieved racial colorblindness, throughout Obama’s presidency, racial violence and membership within U.S. hate groups grew “by 54 percent.” According to Mark Potok, an

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<sup>272</sup> “MLK Talks ‘New Phase’ Of Civil Rights Struggle, 11 Months Before His Assassination: NBC News.” *YouTube*. NBC News Channel, April 4, 2018. <https://youtu.be/2xsbt3a7K-8>. (26:16)

<sup>273</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, “Racial Formation,” in *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge Publishers, 2002), 123-139.

editor of the *Intelligence Report* (a Southern Poverty Law Center journal that monitors right-wing radicalism), Obama's election "inflamed racist extremists who [saw] it as another sign that *their* country is under siege by nonwhites."<sup>274</sup> The 2017 presidential inauguration of Donald J. Trump would follow Obama's presidency. Across the U.S., throughout Trump's presidency, emboldened white nationalist groups emerged from the "shadows" to openly exercise racial hatred and acts of public racial terrorism. Organizations such as the Klu Klux Klan, Proud Boys, and Oath Keepers rallied public support of racism through marches and rallies such as the "Unite the Right" rally held in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017. As if witnessing racial terrorism was not enough, additionally, the infectious global respiratory disease of the Coronavirus-19 pandemic affected almost everyone somehow –it is an understatement to say that there reverberated anxiety and uncertainty throughout U.S. society.

Although by May 2020, much of the world was locked down in quarantine, there was an incessant overwhelming barrage of imagery of Black death at the hands of police officers that dominated media outlets. In particular, after the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, protests against Black death consumed public media; the visualization of police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on Floyd's neck as Floyd struggled to breathe and subsequently died aroused a national consciousness to the realities of Black life. Serving as a global wake-up call, across the world, societies marched and protested for social change and for nations to confront the effects of anti-Blackness and racialization.

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<sup>274</sup> "Hate Group Numbers Up By 54% Since 2000," *splcenter.org*. <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/news/hate-group-numbers-up>

Corporations jumped on the racial awareness bandwagon to placate consumers by participating in actions that pandered to public demands for “racial reckoning.” The corporate response to addressing anti-Blackness resulted in companies announcing financial investments in underserved communities and businesses curating professional development opportunities for employees to reflect on and learn about the histories of racialization through diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. Quick to promote “woke” brand messaging, corporations demonstrated “racial awareness and tolerance” through financial pledges; “America’s 50 biggest public companies and their foundations collectively committed at least \$49.5 billion since Floyd’s murder last May to addressing racial inequality.”<sup>275</sup> However, taking a deeper look, more than ninety percent of proposed corporate support “is allocated as loans or investments they could stand to profit from—more than half in the form of mortgages. Two banks—JP Morgan Chase and Bank of America—accounted for nearly all of those commitments. The \$4.2 billion in grants, to be disbursed over as long as a decade in some cases, represents less than 1 percent of the \$525.6 billion in net income earned by the 50 companies in the most recent year, according to data from S&P Global Market Intelligence.”<sup>276</sup> As corporations have no legal responsibility to report how or if they fulfilled their funding pledges, until otherwise proven, these financial “commitments” should be viewed skeptically as superfluous attempts to shield business models that yield little beyond, as King

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<sup>275</sup> Jena McGregor and Tracy Jan, “Big Business Pledged Nearly \$50 Billion for Racial Justice after George Floyd’s Death. Where Did the Money Go?,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, August 23, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/interactive/2021/george-floyd-corporate-america-racial-justice/>.

<sup>276</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. Ibid, web.

elucidated, a “bargain rate” stunt to protect their financial investments and maintain their consumer base. In actuality, for many corporations, their promoted narratives of racial equity operate as hollow, thinly veiled attempts to appease the social demands of justice oriented conscious consumers.

Although Black activists have forced dialogues to recognize the importance of Black lives, as the main argument of this research has proposed, attempts initiated through Black philosophical thought and actions to create inclusion within the context of Americanism—these actions are ultimately usurped to maintain the efforts of white desire. Given enough time, symbols of radicalism are often mainstreamed and subsumed by the dominant culture to satiate *its* desires. As stated by Daryl Michael Scott, “[i]n America, nothing popular escapes either commercialization or eventual trivialization.”<sup>277</sup>

Approximately one hundred years after Carter G. Woodson created Negro History Week in 1926 to enrich the study and scholarship of African American histories, Black histories continue to be trivialized as commodities reduced for kitsch public consumption. Corporations and businesses attempt to financially capitalize on Black Americans’ desire to see themselves included in “brand” recognition. Through the commodification of the Black experience by companies such as Nike, selling Black history month shoes stylized with African Kente cloth, or Target coaxing consumers with “Black” themed products – curly afros on t-shirts, drinking cups with African American vernacular statements or collaborations with popular “Hotep” branded Black influencers, the goal remains the

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<sup>277</sup> Daryl Michael Scott, “Feb. 7, 1926: Carter G. Woodson Launched Negro History Week,” *Zinn Education Project*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/carter-woodson-black-history-month/>.

same, supporting and upholding the ideals of capitalism albeit through the trivialization and subsumption of Black racial politics that assist in maintaining the hierarchical racial status quo.

The 2020 “racial reckoning” also witnessed a federal proclamation in recognition of June 19, 2022, as Juneteenth Day of Observance. Originating in Texas in 1865 as a jubilee celebration to mark the legal end of enslavement, African descendants firmly ensconced their identities as legally recognized Americans. Symbolically demonstrating their legalized status by donning the colors of Americanness at a public celebration, as reported in the *Tri-Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, Texas), “[t]he marshals or directors of the procession rode on horseback and wore sashes, some red, some of white, and some are blue.”<sup>278</sup> To these newly emancipated people, this moment must have seemed that the mission and objectives that Black people had fought to make real, such as the efforts put forth by organizers of the Colored Conventions Movement, had legally come to fruition. By 1868, through amendments to the U.S. Constitution, now legally Americans, the long battle Black people had fought for and won, their identities legally codified through birthright citizenship, was now a reality. Little did they realize that their efforts would be usurped and replaced with symbolic gestures of recognition and equality.

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<sup>278</sup> C. C. Gillespie, *Tri-Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, Tex.), Vol. 32, No. 41, Ed. 1 Wednesday, June 20, 1866, newspaper, June 20, 1866; Houston, Texas. (<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph236340/>; accessed June 10, 2022), University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, <https://texashistory.unt.edu>; crediting The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History.

President Joseph Biden signed legislation in 2022 that made Juneteenth a federally recognized holiday that called “upon the people of the United States to acknowledge and condemn the history of slavery in our Nation and recognize how the impact of America’s original sin remains.”<sup>279</sup> On cue, the reductive corporate response that only views Black people and their experiences as commodities to profit from, the Walmart corporation promoted Juneteenth celebration products. Ranging from alcohol products to red-velvet flavored ice cream, party supplies to t-shirts with the slogan “it’s the freedom for me,” Walmart rolled out its attempt at “woke” conscious branding. The backlash on social media platforms was swift and prompted Walmart to remove the products and issue a boilerplate “we missed the mark” corporate response.

Facing a firestorm of criticism, Walmart pulled its Juneteenth-themed ice cream from shelves on Tuesday and issued an apology. The company had introduced a “Celebration Edition: Juneteenth Ice Cream” recently to commemorate next month’s celebration marking the end of slavery in the U.S. The ice cream came with a label that said, “Share and celebrate African-American culture, emancipation, and enduring hope.” The ice cream flavor is not the only Juneteenth-themed item in Walmart stores. One Twitter user found that the company has also sold Juneteenth-inspired party supplies, wine bottles, water bottles, glasses, banners, and T-shirts.<sup>280</sup>

Walmart’s response demonstrates another example of how there is often a lack of genuine intent behind corporate actions; Walmart did not create these products to resolve present issues stemming from historical injustice within the Black community. The “celebratory” commodities were designed to entice the sentimentality of consumers who

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<sup>279</sup> “A Proclamation on Juneteenth Day of Observance, 2022,” *The White House* (The United States Government, June 17, 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/06/17/a-proclamation-on-juneteenth-day-of-observance-2022/>.

<sup>280</sup> Tristan Bove, “Walmart Apologizes for Offensive Juneteenth Ice Cream,” *Fortune* (Fortune, May 24, 2022), <https://fortune.com/2022/05/24/walmart-juneteenth-ice-cream-backlash-apology/>.

want to see themselves purchasing representative identity products to commercialize, extract, and yield a positive financial outcome. As was true in 1619 when the “first” “20 and odd Negroes” arrived on western shores, Black people have sustained industrial capitalism. Yet, we must continue to resist until the meanings and implications of racialization are altered. Until that point, radicalized binaries will continue to function, and concepts such as usurpational idealism will operate to maintain the hierarchal racial status quo that upholds whiteness as the ultimate vanguard.

This research study set out to explore how African-descended people in the U.S. facilitated their inclusion and forced redefinition of what it meant to be a U.S. American citizen—investigating the strategies deployed by African descendant peoples in the United States at a time in the U.S. when there existed both enslaved and free/d Black peoples (albeit free and in an indeterminate legal status) how did they force recognition to be legally included in the idea of America? What influences shaped how they formed their identities as a people ripped away from their historical lineages? Due to acts of kidnapping and violence of the Maafa, how did African descendants in the U.S. reconstruct their identities on their own terms to demonstrate what they saw as their birthright access to U.S. citizenship, reshape the social perceptions of African descendant people within the U.S. to force acceptance into American identity and through their understandings of American nationalism, how did they conceptualize concepts such as racial colorblindness as a means asserting legal identities?

Within this body of research, chapter one explored the uses and reinterpretations of language. Rethinking language is essential because, thinking beyond the limited scope of semantical interpretation, we get an understanding of what African descendant people were attempting to accomplish by examining their actions. While they may not have explicitly used the terminology of racial colorblindness in conveying their intent, their efforts reimaged language to express *their* interpretations of community, identity, of belonging.

Although not formally embraced by mainstream society until the mid-1960s, as this research posits, the ideology of racial colorblindness predated mainstream adoption and originated within the arena of Black political organizing throughout the 1800s. Through the organizing efforts of the Colored Conventions Movement, this study has demonstrated how through one strategy, embodying a deracialized cultural nationalistic perspective, African-descended people in the U.S. shaped their identity and organized to redefine Americanness. As an offshoot organization of the Colored Conventions Movement, if we take a closer examination, this is exemplified in how the American Moral Reform Society put in motion the genesis aspects of racial colorblindness. Focusing on “education, temperance, economy, and *universal liberty*,” the objectives of the AMRS were rooted in philosophies of universalism. The organization promoted the value of human rights. Recognizing the humanity of African descended people, this research project demonstrated how the AMRS provided the origins of the racial colorblind ideology that was deployed initially by African descendants who rejected racial designations as a strategy to find acceptance within the nation. Unable to legally

exercise Americanness, they embraced a deracialized concept rooted in American nationalism as an act of resistance, a strategy, and a pathway toward accessing U.S. citizenship.

Continuing to explore the theme of identity formation and the embrace of racial colorblindness as a strategy, chapter two examined how Black clubwomen created self-evaluations that challenged external interpretations of Black womanhood. With numerous public attacks levied against them that demeaned their womanhood, Black women fashioned their own public identities to reject their social marginalization. In their attempts to “uplift the race,” Black clubwomen demonstrated the shared capacity to exercise well-mannered, pious, and respectable mores of the dominant class. Restructuring the meaning of language through their actions, Black clubwomen incorporated the ideologies and rhetoric of racial colorblindness by leaning into a doctrine later coined by Evelyn Higginbotham, the politics of respectability, to situate themselves publicly as virtuous beings.

Strategically exemplifying the concept of disidentification in which “one identifies with some aspects of an oppressive system and rejects others, in pragmatic ways that allow one to live and thrive,”<sup>281</sup> Black clubwomen embraced functional strategies that rejected individualism and incorporated beneficial collective ideologies situated around an organized common struggle. Bringing light to the issues facing the Black community, women such as Mary Ellen Pleasant sued the Omnibus Railroad and

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<sup>281</sup> Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 100.

Cable Company in 1866 and the North Beach and Mission Railroad company in 1868 when railroad companies disregarded the 1866 Civil Rights Act; her bold actions disregarded the limitations of racialization to ensure the exercise of rights of Black Americans in California against desegregation. Mary Church Terrell organized one of the largest social organizations centered on Black women's rights, social access, and recognition. Legally and culturally reared as Americans, Black women validated the possibility of belonging through actions that proved their loyalty and commitment to the nation. In chapter two, we learn how Anna Pauline "Pauli" Murray strove to hold the U.S. accountable to its credence of liberty for all and became a staunch advocate of a broader, more inclusive deracialized ideology –that of human rights. Fighting to be viewed as Americans and judged on their merits, the actions of Black women demonstrate the core ideological philosophy of the racial colorblind edict. Their efforts demonstrate the original logic of racial colorblindness as was adopted as a strategy for American inclusion at a time when African Americans were fighting to hold the U.S. accountable for providing equality of the law.

Lastly, chapter three centered on how the U.S. usurped aspects of Black political organizing to maintain the hierarchical racial status quo. Now legally Americans, the ongoing issues faced within the Black community led Black Americans to come together to rally for U.S. governmental enforcement of rights through the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s/60s. The aftermath of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom event would reveal duplicitous intentions behind the mainstream adoption of the racial colorblind logic. Avoiding the ways in which anti-Blackness and the

hierarchical racial ranking of access, resources, and social status based on phenotype characteristics have been foundational to the American consciousness, contemporary racial colorblindness projects a logic that treats everyone the “same.” Yet, it ignores historical racialized experiences in an attempt to erase ethnic and racial identities and promote an agenda of cultural heteronormativity; this research has demonstrated how the contemporary adaptation of racial colorblindness has operated to marginalize the Black community further.

Conceptualized as usurpational idealism, the process by which the status and privileges of whiteness are utilized to usurp situational politics in an effort to restore the equilibrium of society to a state that maintains the desires of whiteness as an ideal state of being, the adoption of the de-racialized idiom of contemporary racial colorblindness intentionally ignored historical and systemic marginalization through embracing concepts such as white fragility, interest convergence and the formation of the public identity; each represents systematic attempts at reproducing the normalization of white desire in everyday discourse and more importantly, these concepts remove U.S. Government accountability in resolving these issues it helped facilitate.

I began this project thinking about my own identity formation and how heavily influenced I was by my family –my sixth-generation American-born Black father and my first-generation American-born mixed-raced grandmother, this research project has helped me understand how their dichotomous perspectives shaped how I see and represent myself as a Black American. I set out to explore the historical trajectory of African American identity formation and to establish racial colorblindness as a concept

and strategy that was generated by African Americans for U.S. American inclusion. Knowing that equality under the law was not automatically extended to African Americans, this body of research investigated various strategies and tactics Black Americans utilized to force their acceptance and recognition within the U.S. nation-state. It turns out identities are complex characteristics; they are shaped by place and time and often shaped through an acute political positioning for survival. In the journey towards Americanness, African Americans sacrificed everything to hold the U.S. nation accountable to its ideals of “liberty and justice for all.” Yet the fight remains, and we must continue to “stand again to look America squarely in the face and call a spade a spade. We sing: This country of ours, despite all its better souls have done and dreamed, is yet a shameful land.”<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> W.E.B Du Bois, “Returning Soldiers,” *The Crisis*, Vol. 18—No. 1 (May 1919). Whole No. 103, 14.



To the honourable, the general Court of the common  
wealth of the Massachusetts Bay, the petition of the sub-  
scribers, a number of African Blacks, humbly sheweth.  
That we, or our ancestors have been taken from all  
our dear connections, and brought from Africa, and put into  
a state of slavery in this country; from which unhappy situation  
we have been lately in some measure delivered by the  
merciful resolution which has been adopted by the State, or by the  
free act of our former masters. But we yet find ourselves in  
many respects, in very disagreeable and disadvantageous circum-  
stances, most of which must attend us, so long as we and our  
children live in America.  
That and other considerations which we need not here particu-  
larly mention, induce us earnestly to desire to return to Africa,  
our native country, which warm climate is much more natu-  
ral and agreeable to us, and for which the Lord of nature has  
has form'd us; and where we shall live among our equals,  
and be more comfortable and happy than we can be in our  
present situation; and, at the same time, may have a prospect  
of usefulness to our brethren there.  
This leads us humbly to propose the following plan to the  
consideration of this honourable Court. The soil of our native  
country is good, and produces the necessaries of life in great  
abundance. There are large tracts of uncultivated lands  
which if proper application were made for them, it is presumed  
might be obtained, and would be freely given for those to settle  
upon who shall be disposed to return to them. When this shall  
be effected by a number of Blacks, sent there ~~to~~ for this pur-  
pose, who shall be thought most capable of making such an appli-  
cation, and transacting this business; then they who are dispos-  
ed to go and settle there shall form themselves into a civil soci-  
ety, united by a political constitution, in which they shall agree.  
And those who are disposed, and shall be thought qualified,  
shall unite, and be formed into a religious society, or Christian  
church; and have one or more blacks ordained as their pastors

Figure 5: The Boston Plan <sup>284</sup>

<sup>284</sup> Massachusetts State Archives, "Africans in America/Part 2/the Boston Plan Close-Up," PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), accessed June 24, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h59b.html>.

Sierra Leone is a country on the west coast of Africa. Its situation is inviting, and its soil generally very productive. A river of the same name passes through the country, and the land for a great extent on each side is peculiarly fertile, and with the climate well calculated for the cultivation of West-India and other tropical productions. In the year 1791 an act passed the British parliament incorporating a company called the Sierra Leone Company, whose object was to settle and cultivate these lands, and open a trade with other countries in the products of the soil. The first settlers amounted to about 200 white persons, and a number of free blacks or people of colour from North America; and their experiments in sugar, cotton, &c. soon convinced them that they would be abundantly rewarded for their labour. The promising appearance of the settlement soon attracted the attention of the neighbouring chiefs, who with their subjects generally, became very friendly. The colony is now considerably increased, and continues to be in a flourishing situation. The population at present as taken by order of Governor Columbine in the 4th mo. 1811, is as follows, viz.

Europeans, . . . . .	22	4	2
Nova-Scotians, . . . . .	188	295	499
Maroons, . . . . .	165	195	447
Africans, . . . . .	20	43	37
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	395	537	985
			537
			395
			<hr/>
Making together, . . . . .			1917
			<hr/>

Figure 6: Paul Cuffe, *A Brief Account of the Settlement and Present Situation of the Colony of Sierra Leone, in Africa.*<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Paul Cuffe, *A Brief Account of the Settlement and Present Situation of the Colony of Sierra Leone, in Africa.* New York: Printed by Samuel Wood, no. 357, Pearl Street, 1812. Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/24017195/>.

CHAP. III.—*An Act to establish an uniform Rule of Naturalization.*(a)

SECTION 1. *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That any alien, being a free white person, who shall have resided within the limits and under the jurisdiction of the United States for the term of two years, may be admitted to become a citizen thereof, on application to any common law court of record, in any one of the states wherein he shall have resided for the term of one year at least, and making proof to the satisfaction of such court, that he is a person of good character, and taking the oath or affirmation prescribed by law, to support the constitution of the United States, which oath or affirmation such court shall administer;*

Figure 7: *1790 Naturalization Act; An Act to Establish an Uniform Rule of Naturalization*<sup>286</sup>

Chap. III.-An Act to establish an uniform Rule of Naturalization. (a)

SECTION 1. Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That any alien, being a free white person, who shall have resided within the limits and under the jurisdiction of the United States for the term of two years, may be admitted to become a citizen thereof, on application to any common law court of record, in any one of the states wherein he shall have resided for the term of one year at least, and making proof to the satisfaction of such court, that he is a person of good character, and taking the oath or affirmation prescribed by law, to support the constitution of the United States, which oath or affirmation such court shall administer;

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<sup>286</sup> Marian L. Smith, "INS Administration of Racial Provisions in U.S. Immigration and Nationality Law Since 1898," *Race, Nationality, and Reality*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Summer 2002): web.

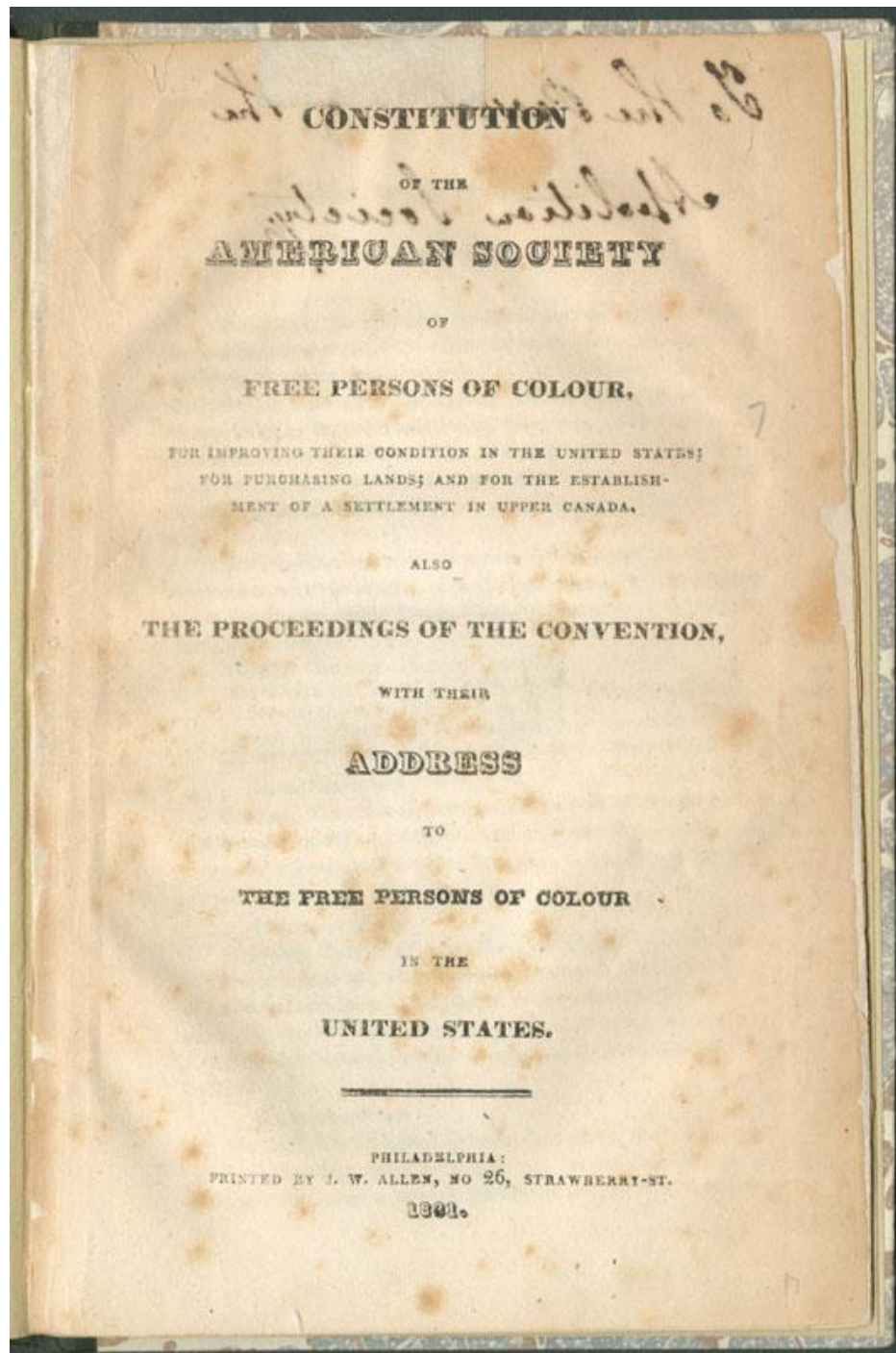


Figure 8: "The Title." *The Meeting That Launched a Movement: The First National Convention*<sup>287</sup>

<sup>287</sup> "The Title." *The Meeting That Launched a Movement: The First National Convention* - Accessed June 30, 2022. <https://coloredconventions.org/first-convention/is-1830-first-convention/the-title/>

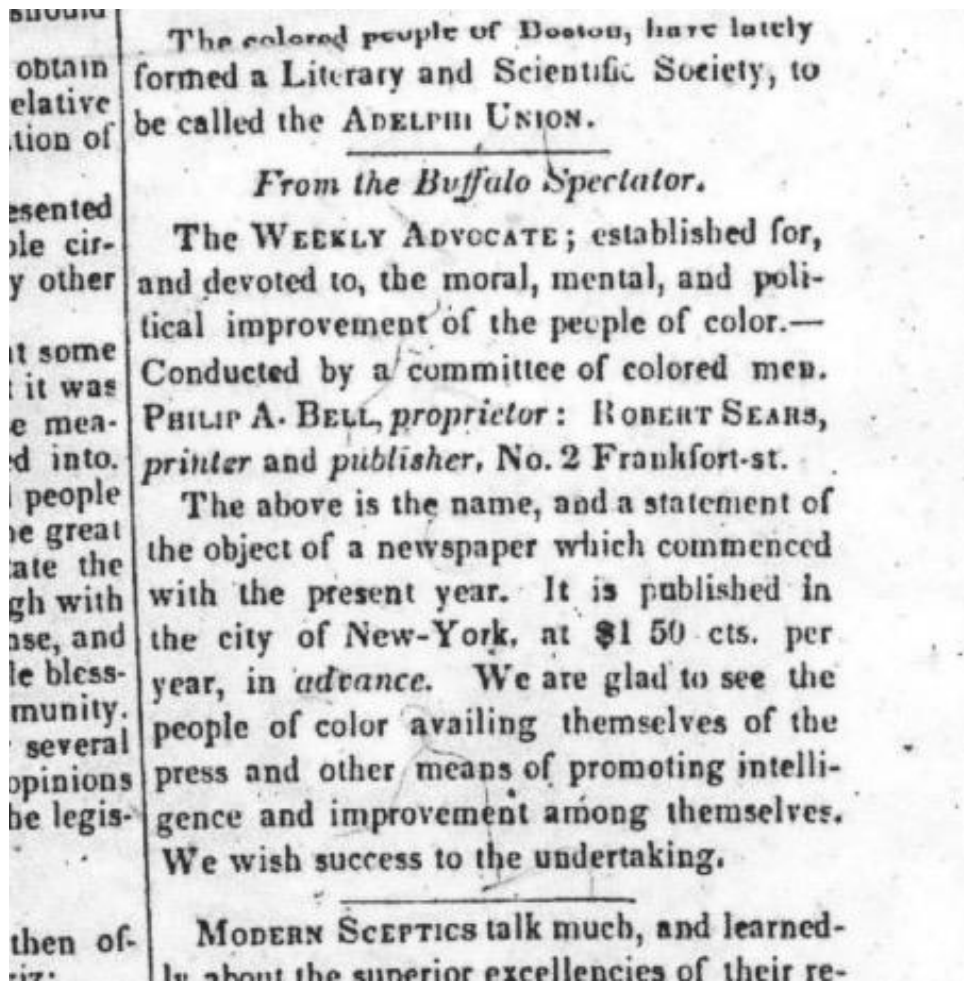


Figure 9: *The Weekly Advocate Newspaper*<sup>288</sup>

From The Buffalo Spectator.

The Weekly Advocate; established for, and devoted to, the moral, mental, and political improvement of the people of color. – Conducted by a committee of colored men, Philip A. Bell, proprietor: Robert Sears, printer and publisher, No. 2 Frankfort St.

The above is the name, and a statement of the object of a newspaper which commenced with the present year. It is published in the city of New-York, at \$1 50 cts. per year, in advance. We are glad to see the people of color availing themselves of the press and other means of promoting intelligence and improvement among themselves. We wish success to the undertaking.

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<sup>288</sup> Buffalo Spectator, “The WEEKLY ADVOCATE; established for, and devoted to, the moral, mental, and political improvement of the people of color,” *Weekly Advocate* (New York, NY, United States), Vol.1, Issue: 8, Feb. 25, 1837: 3.

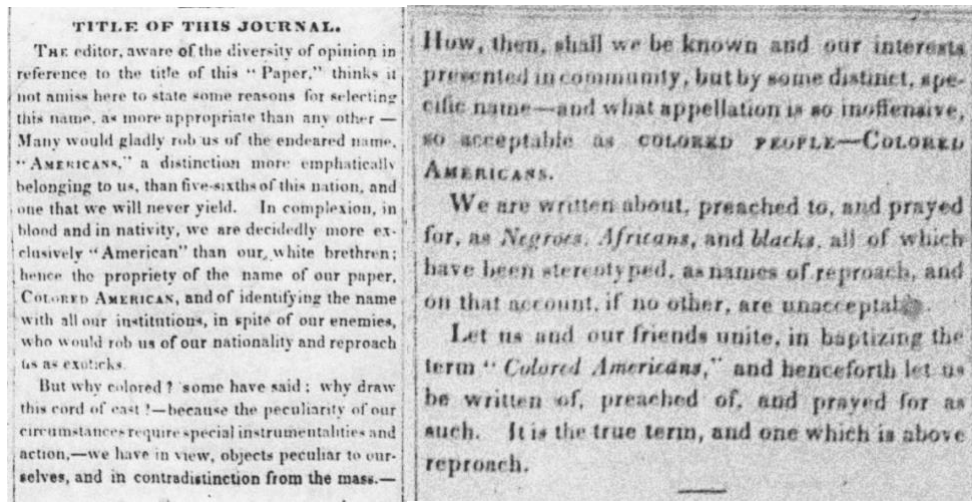


Figure 10: *The Colored American* — "Title of This Journal"<sup>289</sup>

The editor, aware of the diversity of opinion in reference to the title of "Paper," thinks it not amiss here to state some reasons for selecting this name, as more appropriate than any other — many would gladly rob us of the endeared name, "AMERICANS," extinction more emphatically belonging to us, then five-sixths of this nation, and one that we will never yield. In complexion, in blood and in Nativity, we are decidedly more exclusively "Americans" that are white brother in; hence the propriety of the name of our paper, COLORED AMERICAN, and of identifying the name with all our institutions, and in spite of our enemies, who would rob us of our nationality and recruit us as exotics.

But why colored? Some have said: why draw this cord of east? — because the peculiarity of our circumstances require special instrumentalities and action, — we have in view, objects particular to ourselves, and in contradistinction from the mass. —

How, then, shall we be known and our interest presented in community, but by some distinct, specific name — and what appellation is so inoffensive, so acceptable as COLORED PEOPLE — COLORED AMERICANS.

We are written about, preach to, and prayed for, as *Negroes, Africans, and blacks*, all of which have been stereotyped as names of reproach, and on that account, if no other, are unacceptable.

Let us and our friends unite, in baptizing the term "Colored Americans," and henceforth let us be written of, preached of, and prayed for as such. It is the true term, and one which is above reproach.

<sup>289</sup> Editor, "Title of This Journal," *The Colored American Newspaper*, March 4, 1837.

*Letter from Jno. W. Jacks, President of Missouri Press Association to Miss Florence Balgarnie.*

MISSOURI PRESS ASSOCIATION,  
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT,  
MONTGOMERY CITY, MO., March 19th, 1895.

MISS FLORENCE BALGARNIE, Hon. Sec'y,

LONDON, W. C., ENGLAND.

Miss:— I presume your favor of the 4th inst. was intended for some negro, although addressed to the editor of the "Standard."

Having been reared in the "wild and woolly" west and grown up in Missouri where there are numerous negroes, it is barely possible that I may know as much about the negroes in America, as the larger number of the members of your Anti-Lynching Society in England.

I was Enrolling Clerk of the Senate of the 35th General Assembly of Missouri, Chief Clerk of the House of Representatives of the 37th General Assembly of the State of Missouri, and am now President of the Missouri Press Association, and have no African or Negro blood in my veins. This is written to show that my statements may be to some extent credible and worthy of belief.

Having lived for years where negroes are plentiful, I have observed their habits and know whereof I speak so far as they are concerned, and desire to mention some of the characteristics of the "down-trodden" race to which you seem so much devoted. 1st.—The negroes in this country are wholly devoid of morality. They know nothing of it except as they learn by being caught for flagrant violations of law and punished therefor. They consider it no disgrace, but rather an honor to be sent to prison and to wear striped clothes. The women are prostitutes and all are natural liars and thieves. It is characteristic of their race, and we who know them do not blame them. They are naturally lazy and improvident and exist off the bounty of the whites, who knowing their predilection for thieving very generally overlook their small stealings. There are exceptions occasionally found, but they are rare. Out of some 200 in this vicinity it is doubtful if there are a dozen virtuous women or that number who are not daily thieving from the white people. To illustrate how they regard virtue in a woman: one of them, a negro woman, was asked who a certain negro woman who had lately moved into the neighborhood was. She turned up her nose and said, "the negroes will have nothing to do with 'dat nigger,' she won't let any man, except her husband sleep with her, and we don't 'scotiate with her.'" This is an illustration, but it is a fact, and is written to show you what sort of people you are taking so much interest in. The people of the south who have grown up where the negroes are and where they are kept as servants know their peculiarities and short comings and overlook their faults and frailties much oftener than do their northern neighbors who come among us and exact service from these negroes such as they are accustomed to receive from the whites of their own section. Our laws mete the same punishment to both white and colored people for the same crimes—there is no respecter of persons by the law—and no discrimination on account of color.

2nd.—The white people of the west and south protect the purity of their women. Until such literature as your society sends out made an impression and until the northern people came among us with their degraded views of the chastity of women, it was as much as a man's life was worth to rob a woman of her virtue by seduction, and the crime of rape was as surely punished by death as that the criminal was caught. It has been the chivalry of the men of the south and west that has made it possible for a woman to travel alone all over our broad country with none to molest or make afraid. No such crime as the ravishing of a young lady, as was done in a car on the railroad in England some years ago, by a so-called Nobleman, could have gone unpunished in Missouri or any of the southern states of our Union. If such a crime had been committed here the miscreant would have been hung if he had been the Prince of Wales or the President of the U. S. For be it known that we are each and every one sovereigns here, and we protect our women in their purity and virtue. It will be a sad day for our people when your peculiar ideas of virtue and morality among women prevail here.

Your plea seems to us to take the form of asking us to make associates for our families of prostitutes, liars, thieves, and law-breakers generally, and to especially condone the crime of rape if committed by a negro. Respectable people in this country not only decline to form such associates, but naturally infer that those who ask them to do so and place themselves on a level with such characters must either be of the same moral status themselves, or else wholly ignorant of the condition of affairs here, and consequently do not know what they are talking about. In either case your efforts, to those who are familiar with the situation, can be considered only as gratuitous insults to people of respectability and standing as honorable men and women.

I have written thus plainly in order to disaluse your mind of its wrong impressions of both white and colored people in America, and have the honor to subscribe myself

Your most obedient servant,

JNO. W. JACKS.

From Mary Church Terrell papers [MS 62-3874], Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington DC.

Figure 11: Letter from John W. Jacks, President of the Missouri Press Association, to Miss Florence Balgarnie<sup>290</sup>

<sup>290</sup> "John W. Jack's Letter," from the *Mary Church Terrell Papers* [MS 62-3874], Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington DC.

#### A CHARGE TO BE REFUTED.

The editors of the WOMAN'S ERA are in receipt of a letter from Miss Florence Belgarnic, Honorable Secretary of the Anti-Lynching Society of England, in which she encloses a letter from Mr. James W. Jack, president of the Missouri Press Association. The letter of Mr. Jack to Miss Belgarnic is a denouncement of the morality of the colored women of America, and also a criticism of the peculiar ideas of virtue and morality held by everybody but the people of the south and west. Miss Belgarnic forwards the letter for publication in the ERA, with an expression of sympathy and indignation for the slurs we, as colored women, are subjected to. As the charges in this letter are so sweeping and so base, we have decided not to act hastily upon it, but to be very careful in our method of bringing it before the public. Our line of action has already begun; the letter will be printed and forwarded to leading men and women and heads of educational institutions, particularly in the south, people of reputation and standing, whose words carry weight; and in the next issue it is hoped to print the charge, with these signed replies.

The matter is a solemn one, and one upon which we shall call all our women all over the country to act. In the meantime we wish to move with discretion, and so not defeat the ultimate aim, which is the confusion of Jack and that host of traducers who are so free in bringing the charge of immorality upon all colored women.

Figure 12: A Charge to be Refuted (1895) by Ms. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, "A Charge to be Refuted" in *Black Feminist Organizing*, Volume 5, Teresa Zackodnik, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 9.  
<https://www.routledgehistoricalresources.com/feminism/sets/african-american-feminisms-1828-1923/volumes/black-feminist-organizing>. Routledge Historical Resources: History of Feminism.

The map shows a route starting at the Lincoln Memorial, heading north on Independence Ave. to the Reflecting Pool, then east on Constitution Ave. to the Washington Administration Building. From there, it goes south on Constitution Ave. to the Reflecting Pool, then west on Constitution Ave. to the Lincoln Memorial. Bus parking zones are marked: Zone 1 (west of Reflecting Pool), Zone 2 (east of Reflecting Pool), Zone 3 (west of Constitution Ave.), and Zone 4 (east of Constitution Ave.).

## MARCH ON WASHINGTON FOR JOBS AND FREEDOM

AUGUST 28, 1963

### LINCOLN MEMORIAL PROGRAM

1. The National Anthem. *Led by Marian Anderson.*
2. Invocation. *The Very Rev. Patrick O'Boyle, Archbishop of Washington.*
3. Opening Remarks. *A. Philip Randolph, Director March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.*
4. Remarks. *Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, Special Clerk, United Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A., Vice Chairman, Commission on Race Relations of the National Council of Churches of Christ in America.*
5. Tribute to Negro Women. *Mrs. Medgar Evers.*  
*Daisy Bates, Diane Nash, Rev. Mrs. Medgar Evers, Mrs. Herbert Lee, Rosa Parks, Gloria Richardson.*
6. Remarks. *John Lewis, National Chairman, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.*
7. Remarks. *Walter Reuther, President, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, AFL-CIO, Chairman, Industrial Union Department, AFL-CIO.*
8. Remarks. *James Farmer, National Director, Congress of Racial Equality.*
9. Selection. *Eva James Clay.*
10. Prayer. *Rabbi Uri Miller, President Synagogue Council of America.*
11. Remarks. *Whitney M. Young, Jr., Executive Director, National Urban League.*
12. Remarks. *Mathew Ahmann, Executive Director, National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice.*
13. Remarks. *Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.*
14. Selection. *Miss Mahalia Jackson.*
15. Remarks. *Rabbi Joachim Prinz, President American Jewish Congress.*
16. Remarks. *The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., President, Southern Christian Leadership Conference.*
17. The Pledge. *A. Philip Randolph.*
18. Benediction. *Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, President, Morehouse College.*

**"WE SHALL OVERCOME"**

*Statement by the heads of the ten organizations calling for discipline in connection with the Washington March of August 28, 1963:*

"The Washington March of August 28th is more than just a demonstration. It is an outpouring of the deep feeling of millions of white and colored American citizens that the time has come for the government of the United States of America, and particularly for the Congress of that government, to grant and guarantee complete equality in citizenship to the Negro minority of our population."

"As such, the Washington March is a living petition—in the flesh—of the scores of thousands of citizens of both races who will be present from all parts of our country."

"It will be orderly, but not subservient. It will be proud, but not arrogant. It will be non-violent, but not timid. It will be unified in purposes and behavior, not splintered into groups and individual competitors. It will be outspoken, but not raucous."

"It will have the dignity befitting a demonstration in behalf of the human rights of twenty millions of people, with the eye and the judgment of the world focused upon Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963."

"In a neighborhood dispute there may be words, rough words and even hot insults; but when a whole people speaks to its government, the dialogue and the action must be on a level reflecting the worth of that people and the responsibility of that government."

"We, the undersigned, who see the Washington March as wrapping up the dreams, hopes, ambition, tears, and prayers of millions who have lived for this day, call upon the members, followers and well-wishers of our several organizations to make the March a disciplined and purposeful demonstration."

"We call upon them all, black and white, to resist provocations to disorder and to violence."

"We ask them to remember that evil persons are determined to smear this March and to discredit the cause of equality by deliberate efforts to stir disorder."

"We call for self-discipline, so that no one in our own ranks, however enthusiastic, shall be the spark for disorder."

"We call for resistance to the efforts of those who, while not enemies of the March as such, might seek to use it to advance causes not dedicated primarily to civil rights or to the welfare of our country."

"We ask each and every one in attendance in Washington or in spiritual attendance back home to place the Cause above all else."

"Do not permit a few irresponsible people to have a new problem around our necks as we return home. Let's do what we came to do—place the national human rights problem squarely on the doorstep of the national Congress and of the Federal Government."

"Let's win at Washington."

SIGNED:

<p>Mathew Ahmann, Executive Director of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice.</p> <p>Reverend Eugene Carson Blake, Vice Chairman of the Commission on Race Relations of the National Council of Churches of Christ in America.</p>	<p>James Farmer, National Director of the Congress of Racial Equality.</p> <p>Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.</p> <p>John Lewis, Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.</p>
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*Rabbi Joachim Prinz, President of the American Jewish Congress.*

*A. Philip Randolph, President of the Negro American Labor Council.*

*Walter Reuther, President of the United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, AFL-CIO, and Chairman, Industrial Union Department, AFL-CIO.*

*Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.*

*Whitney M. Young, Jr., Executive Director of the National Urban League.*

*In addition, the March has been endorsed by major religious, fraternal, labor and civil rights organizations. A full list, too long to include here, will be published.*

**WHAT WE DEMAND\***

1. Comprehensive and effective civil rights legislation from the present Congress—without compromise or filibuster—to give access to all public accommodations, decent housing, adequate and integrated education, the right to vote.
2. Withholding of Federal funds from all programs in which discrimination exists.
3. Desegregation of all school districts in 1963.
4. Enforcement of the Fourteenth Amendment—reducing Congressional representation of states where citizens are disfranchised.
5. A new Executive Order banning discrimination in all housing supported by federal funds.
6. Authority for the Attorney General to institute injunctive suits when any constitutional right is violated.
7. A massive federal program to train and place all unemployed workers—Negro and white—in meaningful and dignified jobs of decent wages.
8. A national minimum wage act that will give all Americans a decent standard of living. (Government surveys show that anything less than \$2.00 an hour fails to do this.)
9. A broadened Fair Labor Standards Act to include all areas of employment which are presently excluded.
10. A Federal Fair Employment Practices Act barring discrimination by federal, state, and municipal government, and by employers, contractors, employment agencies, and trade unions.

\*Support of the March does not necessarily indicate endorsement of every demand listed. Some organizations have not had an opportunity to take an official position on all of the demands enumerated here.

Figure 13: National Archives Photo no. 80-G-32500 (Unrestricted)  
Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C. Program, 08/28/1963; *Civil Rights History*  
Credit National Archives (photo no. 306-NT-186000)  
NAIL Control Number: 09045  
Courtesy National Archives, Photo no. 26-G-3422  
National Archives (111-SC-202199)  
ARC Identifier: 26080947  
<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/26080947>

— The negro celebration of the anniversary of their freedom yesterday, turned out to be, as everybody expected, a very big thing. The various processions must have numbered in all at least some thousands. They were passing Main street from quite an early hour of the morning until after ten o'clock. The marshals or directors of the procession rode on horse back and wore sashes, some of red, some of white, and some of blue. A great number of United States banners from the size of a pocket handkerchief up to a bedquilt, supplied no doubt for the occasion by the military, floated above them and added not a little to the imposing appearance of the scene. The darkies were nearly all dressed pretty well, and the women particularly shone in all their finery. We never saw such a multitude of smiling and happy faces all at once.

They proceeded to the place selected for the occasion, and passed nearly the entire day in festivities and rejoicings.

We were not present, but understand from some whites who were, that everything passed off in a most pleasant and agreeable manner to those concerned. The darkies behaved themselves in a most proper manner, avoiding all drinking, all spreeing, all boisterous behavior.

We presume they will long remember with pleasure their Houston celebration, and talk of it for years to come.

Figure 14: Editorial. C. C. Gillespie, *Tri-Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, Tex.), Vol. 32, No. 41, Ed. 1 Wednesday, June 20, 1866

The Negro celebration of the anniversary of their freedom yesterday, turned out to be, as everybody expected, a very big thing. The various processions must have numbered in all at least some thousands. They were passing Main Street from quite an early hour of the morning until ten o'clock. The marshals or directors of the procession rode on horseback and wore sashes, some red, some of white, and some are blue. A great number of United States banners from the size of a pocket handkerchief up to a bed quilt, supplied no doubt for the occasion by the military, floated above them and added not a little to the imposing appearance of the scene. The darkies were nearly all dressed pretty well, and the women particularly shown in all their refinery. We never saw such a multitude of smiling and happy faces all at once.

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<sup>292</sup> C. C. Gillespie, *Tri-Weekly Telegraph* (Houston, Tex.), Vol. 32, No. 41, Ed. 1 Wednesday, June 20, 1866, newspaper, June 20, 1866; Houston, Texas.

(<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph236340/>: accessed June 10, 2022), University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/>; crediting The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History.

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