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BLACK BUSINESS AS ACTIVISM
EBONY MAGAZINE AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT
by
SEON BRITTON

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Seon Britton

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Black Business as Activism: Ebony Magazine and the Civil Rights Movement

by

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In the fight for justice, equality, and true liberation, African American organizations and institutions have often acted as a voice for the African American community at large focusing on common issues and concerns. With the civil rights movement being broadcast across the world, there was no better time for African American community and civil rights organizations to take a role within the movement in combatting the oppression, racism, and discrimination of white supremacy. Often left out of this history of the civil rights movement is an analysis of black-owned private businesses, also giving shape to the African American community. *Black Business as Activism* will highlight the contributions that Johnson Publishing Company (JPC) made for the African American community within the mass media in order to explore the ways that mid-twentieth century black-owned commercial businesses contributed to the larger efforts of the civil rights movement. Publishing a widely popular magazine for African Americans in the twentieth century, *Ebony*, JPC used the medium of print advertising within the media to showcase positive representations of African Americans – uncommon at the time. This piece will analyze the connection that JPC as an organization had with the civil rights movement through its efforts in fighting for the equality and inclusion of African Americans within the field of advertising, as well as its relationship with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization at the forefront of the civil rights movement. This piece will attempt to make the claim that black-owned private businesses should become included alongside community and civil rights organizations to expand our understanding of the civil rights movement.

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INTRODUCTION

Not only for African Americans, not only for the United States, but for the world at large, the North American civil rights movement was and still is an example of what an oppressed and marginalized group of people can achieve. The study of the civil rights movement is still relevant today in order to understand how social change operates within a modern, western context as well as to better comprehend the inner-workings of that social change. Many academics have used the civil rights movement to showcase collective action amongst individuals and how the intersection of different agents and fields culminated into the passage of the Civil Rights Acts. This collective action amongst individuals, communities, and grass-roots groups throughout the civil rights movement often formed formal civil rights organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).¹ And while these players were undoubtedly instrumental in the success of the civil rights movement, there is still much to be understood about another type of organization's role in the civil rights movement – *black-owned commercial businesses*.

While a major focus of the civil rights movement in actualizing social change was securing the political and economic rights of African Americans, another goal was to radically change the way that African Americans were simply viewed and treated in the United States. In his piece, *Black Citizenship and Authenticity in the Civil Rights Movement*, Randolph Hohle wrote of the magnitude that respectability politics had on the civil rights movement. In seeking political and economic rights, African Americans had to prove that they deserved these rights as good American citizens. “The personal ethics of good black citizenship refers to how the liberal

¹ For more on the work of these civil rights organizations as grass-roots efforts, see Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984).

project sculpted the black body's phonology, posture, and style of dress in order to sever 'good character' from race."² It was not enough for African Americans to demand equal rights based on justice and liberty, but rather African Americans had to prove that they were worthy or receiving such rights. This was done through adopting what was considered a normative, western, and middle-class way of life, and adopting racially non-threatening styles and mannerisms.³ African American leaders of the civil rights movement had to adhere to the politics of African American respectability in order to solidify alliances with white actors and institutions. Protestors, students, and other black civil rights agents would also follow suit in order to avoid negative attention from authorities, and to also uphold a respectable image of the African American, for which the civil rights movement was fighting. Repudiating past stereotypes of African Americans as being dangerous, unclean, and lazy, African American proponents of the civil rights movement sought to uphold a more realistic view of the African American as a hard-working citizen rightly claiming the freedoms of full citizenship. And while this image was a depiction that African Americans could see themselves in, this image was also dually used to garner the respect of larger white society. Throughout the civil rights movement's fight for political and economic justice, the measure of African Americans by respectability politics would prove who was deserving of such justice.

While institutions such as the Supreme Court and organizations such as the National Urban League were involved in the political and economic aims of the civil rights movement, other social actors were involved in the larger societal aims of the movement, which was to ameliorate the image and better the lived experience of the twentieth-century African American.

² Randolph Hohle, *Black Citizenship and Authenticity in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 25.

³ Hohle, *Black Citizenship and Authenticity in the Civil Rights Movement*, 42.

By the time the civil rights movement was at its height in the 1950s and 1960s, the modern mass media had already become a solidified full-fledged force for the communication, dissemination, and circulation of culture. One black entrepreneur who tapped into the media for the creation of his business was John H. Johnson, founder of Johnson Publishing Company (JPC). Johnson's company would eventually encompass magazine publications, a book department, and a cosmetics line, but its biggest product would be of its monthly magazine digest started in 1945, *Ebony* magazine. Not only would *Ebony* magazine have incredible popularity among a mass African American audience, but its company, JPC, would also have influence within the sphere of communications and print advertising. Because of this influence, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) often worked with JPC to use its influence as a black-owned publishing company. Though JPC had a larger connection to the civil rights movement by publishing content that would advance the movement's efforts, it also had a specific connection to the civil rights movement by working with the NAACP. As this piece will explore, JPC's relationship with the civil rights movement was contentious and volatile at times. This contention and volatility was due to the image of the African American that JPC chose to promote and its reinforcement of African American respectability politics. The image of the respectable twentieth-century African American, created in part by *Ebony* magazine, often contradicted the integrity of the larger civil rights movement in supplying justice to *all* African Americans, regardless if they were seen as acceptable by white society. However, as the civil rights movement was a large-scale endeavor spanning a continental nation, it took organizations of all kinds to push the mission of the civil rights movement forward across multiple spheres of society. These organizations also included privately black-owned businesses, which possessed their own spheres of influence. As was the case with JPC within the spheres of communications

and advertising, it played a significant role in the creation of a new image of the African American that represented the embodiment of the civil rights movement. The work of JPC and other black-owned businesses was a testament to the contributions of manifold social actors and social institutions working within the civil rights movement.

PART ONE: Johnson Publishing Company's Work within the Civil Rights Movement

From *Ebony's* launch in November of 1945, founder John H. Johnson and other editors at the magazine had a clear and unapologetic aim. Its inaugural editor's column claimed its writers to be "rather jolly folk" looking "at the zesty side of life." Looking to fashion a picture magazine after *Life*, which captured an idealistic way of American life, Johnson wanted a periodical that spoke primarily to an African American audience and tried to "mirror the happier side of the Negro life – the positive, everyday achievements" since "not enough is said about all the swell things we Negroes can do and will accomplish."⁴ As a result, *Ebony* magazine became known for its lavish features on glamorous celebrities such as Lena Horne and Eartha Kitt, and its success stories on iconic figures such as Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis. However, being a black publication launched in 1945, JPC knew the massive task it was undertaking, and understood that it would have to touch upon race to some extent. In almost the same breath that the first *Ebony* issue stated its commitment to being "jolly," having "zest," and remaining "positive," it also declared that "when we talk about race as the No. 1 problem of America, we'll talk turkey" [seriously].⁵ With JPC being the leading – and one of the few black-owned – popular media publications for African Americans throughout the 1950s and 1960s, it would have no choice but to battle the same issues to which the larger civil rights movement spoke. This would become a

⁴ "Editor's Column," *Ebony*, November 1945, 1.

⁵ "Editor's Column," *Ebony*.

common contradiction that JPC often operated within: covering topics of interest to African Americans in such a way that made the publication “jolly” and “positive,” yet at the same time covering topics of interest to African Americans that were a bit more controversial in regards to the ensuing civil rights movement. Because JPC’s staple publication of *Ebony* spoke to the same audience of the civil rights movement – that of black America – JPC would become connected to the larger movement. JPC’s role within the civil rights movement was its contribution to the creation of a modern and urban black aesthetic that would act as the face of a new black America throughout the civil rights movement.⁶ It was this new face of black America that was on the covers of *Ebony* magazine as well as on the frontlines of protest demanding civil rights. JPC’s connection as an organization to the civil rights movement due to the creation of a new black aesthetic based on racial identity can be analyzed through new social movement theory. As opposed to social movement theory, sociologists of organization studies, Klaus Weber and Brayden King, identify *new* social movement theory as “cultural practices as the point of contention, replacing a previous focus on conflict over the distribution of material resources and political domination.”⁷ Whereas social movements of the past were seen through a strict Marxist lens in which social movements, or revolutions, were theorized solely only on issues of economics and government, such as land ownership and totalitarian rule, *new* social movement theory included movements that challenge issues of culture, such as ethnic identity and discrimination faced because of that ethnic identity. As the civil rights movement took on issues outside of pure economics, such as school desegregation and interracial marriage, it is more

⁶ For more on *Ebony*’s role in the creation of black identity, see Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 143-159.

⁷ Klaus Weber and Brayden King, "Social Movement Theory and Organization Studies," In *Oxford Handbook of Sociology, Social Theory and Organization Studies: Contemporary Currents*, ed. Paul Adler, Paul du Gay, Glenn Morgan and Mike Reed (Oxford University Press, 2014), 487-509.

appropriate to classify the civil rights movement as a *new* social movement. And as a new social movement which revolved around politics of racial identity, JPC played a significant role within it as an organization that connected the rhetoric and imagery of the civil rights movement to the mass media through its popular publication of *Ebony* magazine.

Founded in 1942, parallel to the first seeds of the civil rights movement being planted,⁸ Johnson Publishing Company did not have an immediate tie to the civil rights movement. However, over time it developed an unofficial connection to the initial aims of the civil rights movement in its interest of increasing equity and antidiscrimination for African Americans, especially in employment. While the major work of JPC was its publications of pop culture magazines, JPC was also at the helm of promoting and advancing the efforts of black-owned advertising companies within the advertising industry. The work around diversity and advocacy that JPC led fit into the larger aims of the civil rights movement.

Knowing the power that the mass media had in shaping the thoughts and opinions of the nation,⁹ the NAACP attempted to push the civil rights agenda into the realm of advertising from as early as 1955. On May 21st and 22nd of 1955, for example, branches of the NAACP came together for a New York State Conference in Saratoga Springs. At this conference, one of the topics of discussion that led to a resolution being passed was “Negro integration into industries, television and radio”.¹⁰ Within the resolution passed by a resolutions committee, the NAACP recognized radio and television as “important opinion-making industries” and noted that “the 15-billion dollar Negro market justifies the complete integration of Negro performers in the radio

⁸ For more on the origins of *Ebony* Magazine, see John H. Johnson with Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Succeeding Against the Odds* (New York: Warner Books, 1989).

⁹ For more on the motives of the NAACP to leverage the media, see Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

¹⁰ New York State Conference Resolutions, 16 July 1955, Microfilm, Part 26: Selected Branch Files, 1940-1955, Series B: The Northeast, Series Group II, Series C, Branch Department Files, Geographical File, Reel 8, Box C-134, 225, Papers of the NAACP, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

and television industries.” While the NAACP called out radio and television in this resolution as they were at time newer technologies of media, print advertisements would also be included in the efforts of the NAACP’s work within advertising. Copies of this resolution were sent to radio and television national networks, as well as the American Association of Advertising Agencies (4A’s). The 4A’s was an influential organization within the advertising field comprised of a membership which included the top figures in the advertising field. The 4A’s would eventually control 75% of all advertising within the U.S.¹¹ The NAACP knew that if it wanted to make any traction in diversifying the field of advertising, as well as in increasing representation of African Americans within advertisements themselves, it would need to access influential advertising organizations such as the 4A’s.

The 1955 New York State Conference in Saratoga Springs was not the first time that the NAACP took on the dearth of positive African American representation in advertisements. On March 12, 1952, Edna K. Freeman from the NAACP Department of Public Relations wrote to the Quaker Oats Company disgruntled over “a sizeable number of complaints about the poor taste of window exhibits appearing in various retail stores under your sponsorship. The exhibits feature a Negro woman wearing a bandana and otherwise dressed in "Mammy" fashion, making pancakes. Most of the persons entering complaints specifically mentioned the Whelan drug store in Times Square and the Speedway food market at Schenectady and East New York Avenues, Brooklyn.”¹² Freeman went on with “[b]y perpetuating the offensive stereotype of the "mammy" Quaker Oats is doing our democracy a grave disservice by setting the Negro American aside as

¹¹ Agenda for Executive Committee Meeting, New York, NY, 9 December 1963, Microfilm, Part 16: Supplement, Board of Directors File, 1956-1965, Series Group III, Series A, Administrative File, Board of Directors, Reel 6, Box 26, 0444, Papers of the NAACP, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

¹² Edna K. Freeman to Stanley Peifer, 12 March 1952, Microfilm, Part 15: Segregation and Discrimination, Complaints and Responses, 1940-1955, Series B: Administrative Files, Series Group II, Series A, General Office File: Publicity Protests, Reel 12, Box A-501, 0752, Papers of the NAACP, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

something "different" and amusing." Freeman continued to make an appeal to the Quaker Oats Company as having a responsibility to fit within the fight for equality – whether they felt they had that responsibility or not. Freeman wrote, "Certainly it does not reflect credit on the Quaker Oats Company to serve as a divisive influence between one group of Americans and another, when we should all be united for the cause of freedom."¹³ Freeman then ended with a simple request of "We hope that you will want to withdraw the offensive displays as soon as possible."¹⁴ Following this letter, on March 28, 1952, the Quaker Oats Company's Public Relations Director, Don R. Cowell, contacted the Executive Secretary of the NAACP, Walter White. Interestingly enough, this was prompted by JPC founder, John H. Johnson. Cowell expressed to White that "I write you at the advice of Mr. Jack [sic] Johnson, publisher of Johnson Publications, Chicago, to express the hope that you will be able to spare the minutes to let us stop in and visit you sometime late next week. The subject we would like to discuss concerns our use of Aunt Jemima demonstrators and is prompted by a letter of March 12 from Mrs. Edna K. Freeman from your Department of Public Relations."¹⁵ As the NAACP targeted the advertising industry as one realm in which to combat the use of black stereotypes, the Quaker Oats Company turning to John H. Johnson on advice of how to handle the situation was one of the first instances that the NAACP saw the influence that John H. Johnson had started to garner within the advertising field. Though Johnson's influence in JPC's early years often meant acting as a corporate consultant and becoming the representative voice for the *entire* African American collective within the United States, Johnson's influence still encouraged Don R. Cowell from the Quaker Oats Company to

¹³ Edna K. Freeman to Stanley Peifer.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Don Cowell to Walter White, Chicago, IL, 28 March 1952, Microfilm, Part 15: Segregation and Discrimination, Complaints and Responses, 1940-1955, Series B: Administrative Files, Series Group II, Series A, General Office File: Publicity Protests, Reel 12, Box A-501, 0752, Papers of the NAACP, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

meet with Henry Lee Moon of the NAACP. In a letter confirming the meeting, Cowell wrote, “I will visit you at your offices at 11:00 a.m. on Wednesday, April 2. [I] look forward to seeing you and to getting your advice on the seeming problem of our use of Aunt Jemima demonstrators.”¹⁶

With the NAACP turning its attention to the advertising field in order to attack damaging stereotypical representations of African Americans, such as the “mammy” figure used in Quaker Oats’ advertising, John H. Johnson, already having navigated the advertising field as founder of JPC, would lend his company’s alliance and support to the NAACP in order to work towards the common goal of eliminating such pejorative images of the African American.

Because JPC’s publications, primarily its flagship *Ebony* magazine, were funded from the advertisements that were placed in it, JPC’s livelihood was not only secured by substantial revenue from paid advertisements, but the editorial content of any given issue was dependent on these advertisements as well, making up a large portion of the magazine’s layout. In order to expand his market and increase his overall revenue, John H. Johnson sought advertisements from white companies to place in his black publications. For this to happen in 1945, however, two things had to first be accomplished. First, John H. Johnson had to break through the prevalent discriminatory racial barriers of the Jim Crow era in order to get white-owned companies to do business with JPC. Second, once this was achieved, the advertisements that were placed in *Ebony* had to then speak to the audience which JPC sought: a black, middle class, which currently did not exist within the realm of advertising in 1945.

To increase the company’s advertising prospects, the initial work of JPC, led by John H. Johnson himself, was that of research on the African American market. This research did not

¹⁶ Don Cowell to Henry Lee Moon, Chicago, IL, 31 March 1952, Microfilm, Part 15: Segregation and Discrimination, Complaints and Responses, 1940-1955, Series B: Administrative Files, Series Group II, Series A, General Office File: Publicity Protests, Reel 12, Box A-501, 0752, Papers of the NAACP, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

only confirm that there was a black middle class in which to sell, but it was also some of the first studies to explore what and how African Americans bought, their income trends, and their spending habits. Historian of the advertising field, Jason Chambers, found in his work, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry*, that the first inklings to recognize an emergent black consumer class dated back to 1928, when the National Negro Business League (NNBL) conducted one of the first studies of blacks' participation in business. "The authors of the study suggested that national advertisers work more diligently to cultivate the black consumer market, a potential source for companies to increase their revenue stream."¹⁷ As African Americans continued to join the Great Migration in ever larger numbers throughout the middle of the twentieth century in search of better education and employment, this emerging black middle class was Johnson Publishing Company's targeted readership as well as the audience that Johnson would make the case to sell to for white advertising companies. JPC's readers also acted as participants for Johnson's research on this new black consumer market. JPC went on to conduct over a dozen research projects in just the 1950s alone, such as *The Urban Negro Market Survey of Liqueurs*, a *Survey of Candy Sales in Urban Negro Market*, *The Urban Negro Market for Cosmetic Advertisers*, *The Urban Negro Market for Personal Care Products*, a survey on *Negro Automobile Ownership*, as well as a *Survey of Silverware. Brand Preferences and Ownership by Urban Negro Families*.¹⁸ Through these research projects, Chambers noted that JPC was able to claim that over "25 percent of *Ebony* readers earned in excess of \$4,000 per year, 36 percent owned their homes, 40 percent owned new cars, and 27 percent had attended

¹⁷ Jason Chambers, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 34.

¹⁸ Claude H. Hall, *The Negro market its location, size and quality-how to reach it*, New York: Printers' Ink Publishing Co., Inc., 1957, Microfilm, Part 20: White Resistance and Reprisals, 1956-1965, Series Group III, Series A, Administrative File: General Office File—Reprisals, Reel 8, Box A-276, 0378, Papers of the NAACP, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

college [proving that] *Ebony* readers had the disposal income and consumer habits that made them a solid target market.”¹⁹ It was this research that was then able to be taken to white advertisement agencies in order to persuade them to advertise in *Ebony* magazine.

The research conducted by Johnson Publishing Company to persuade white advertisement agencies to do business with JPC also had an effect on the advertising industry as a whole. JPC pushed not only for racial diversity within advertisements, but also more racial diversity among advertising agencies’ employees. With a black middle class ready to consume, Chambers also wrote of how “market segmentation” came into the advertising field during this time. Essentially, the idea is that a market is broken up into even smaller segments for a more targeted approach and focus in advertising based off of commonalties and tendencies within that segment. The pioneering work of JPC was not only in creating a popular black publication, but also in presenting to white advertising agencies a viable African American market through its data and research. As a result, new roles and positions within advertising agencies around “market segmentation” were created, and were often filled by African American employees. Chambers noted that in “the early 1950s, over forty blacks worked in a special-markets capacity for American corporations”²⁰ and also that Pabst Brewing and Pepsi-Cola already had specific offices designated for special markets within their corporate structures. Throughout the rest of the decade and into the 1960s, other white-owned companies such as Coca-Cola started to hire more African Americans in white-collar jobs within their own advertising and public relations departments. The effect that JPC had on white companies and organizations within the advertising field to integrate their staff and hire more African American employees followed

¹⁹ Chambers, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line*, 46.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

Johnson's own example in integrating his own editorial staff for *Ebony* magazine.²¹ As its publication of *Ebony* magazine spoke to the woes of Jim Crow discrimination, JPC as its own company, and being owned by a black man, worked to subvert this racial discrimination by becoming a harbinger of one of the aims of the civil rights movement – eradicating workplace discrimination.

Possibly more important than African Americans being hired at white-owned advertising companies, new *black*-owned advertising agencies catering to black audiences came into being throughout the 1950s and especially towards the end of the 1960s. The demand for these black-owned advertising agencies was due to JPC's research on a black consumer market and put black-owned advertising companies in positions to influence the mass media regarding the depiction and representation of the African American. However, the headway that Johnson Publishing Company made in increasing the number of black employees within companies' advertising departments, as well as the number of black-owned advertising agencies, was due to its choice to target a new black, *middle*-class audience with its publication of *Ebony*. It was specifically this audience that Johnson thought would attract white companies as opposed to a broader, working-class African American base. Choosing to cater to a black middle class and to attract white companies to its organization, the aesthetic of the African American that JPC would create and use in its advertisements would fit into a white, middle-class, respectable prototype that was geared towards consumerism eventually benefitting the wealth of white corporations. The message that the black American middle class received from JPC's publications was that racial equality had to be found within a white, middle class schema. It was within a capitalistic framework that this new black aesthetic found in *Ebony* was created. The new image of the

²¹ For more on JPC's anti-discriminatory employment practices, see Green, *Selling the Race*, 160-177.

African American that was crafted was a modern, urban, working professional. For the African American, legitimate middle-class status could only be achieved through (respectable) employment. And after having attained middle-class status, the advertisements in *Ebony* allowed middle-class African Americans to participate in the American consumerist cycle of the purchase of the goods found in *Ebony* advertisements. Advertisements and content found in *Ebony* would therefore not speak to all parts of the African American community such as the working class, but instead focused only on black, *middle*-class families wanting to partake in the fruits of postwar American capitalism.

With employment unions finding themselves on either side of the civil rights movement in support of it or against it, discrimination in employment became intertwined with the civil rights movement throughout the 1950s.²² Civil rights within the realm of business actualized itself as a focus on antidiscrimination in employment. Jennifer Delton wrote of the focus corporations had on antidiscrimination in their employment practices as a way of ensuring civil rights in *Racial Integration in Corporate America: 1940-1990*. Delton spoke not only on the impact large corporations had on larger society, but the influence corporations exerted over the practices of smaller businesses which made up a majority of businesses in the United States.²³ In her research, Delton found a “1944 poll conducted for the National Association of Manufacturers [which] indicated that 65 percent of 2,145 polled white business owners, managers, white-collar, and manual workers favored segregated workplaces.”²⁴ Throughout the course of the civil rights movement, civil rights would be taken up as “Human Relations” spawning HR departments and

²² Robert H. Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America since 1865* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 164-174.

²³ Jennifer Delton, *Racial Integration in Corporate America: 1940-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4.

²⁴ Delton, *Racial Integration in Corporate America*, 31.

their focus on “workplace cultures” which took into consideration the racial identification of its employees.²⁵ A number of the larger companies that instituted offices for diversity such as Pabst Brewing and Pepsi-Cola advertised with *Ebony* magazine. JPC’s focus on employment not only fueled its internal operations and how it influenced its advertising partners, but it especially motivated the conversation it had with its readers around employment and middle-class livelihood through its advertisements. With employment being seen as a marker of middle-class achievement, many of the advertisements shown in *Ebony* magazine were of white-collar African American workers. Being that a major focus of the civil rights movement was the right to gain employment without facing discrimination, *Ebony* attached their image of the middle-class African American to respectable employment. For *Ebony* readers, the image of the modern African American that they saw as worthy of securing civil rights was an image of an African American that was successful and acceptable through occupational employment. The professional white-collar employment that came with middle-class status amalgamated with the identity of middle-class black America in the image of the new respectable African American used in *Ebony* advertisements.

Alongside the creation of a modern image of a professional African American middle-class by Johnson Publishing Company, there was the coinciding black arts movement that James Edward Smethurst wrote about in his book *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*. Throughout the 1960s, black artists used popular culture and politics to create an authentic African American aesthetic. While the goal was to bring about a new image that could speak to black America as a population with a unique American identity and experience, a common rift found within the discourse of the black arts movement and the

²⁵ Ibid., 108-120.

creation of a black aesthetic was around authenticity. Juxtaposed against past movements such as the Harlem Renaissance in which past aesthetics were “derived largely from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European nationalism, in which “folk” culture would provide material for nationalist “high” artists to transform into a “high” national culture,”²⁶ what was sought from the black arts movement was a new aesthetic that could be purely African American without the interference of white American ideologies and centrism. W.D. Wright also wrote on the modern black aesthetic advocated amongst postmodern thinkers as an aesthetic that had to be centered on race. Wright distinguished a difference between race and *racism*, and “understood, fully, that a Black Aesthetic [sic] had to grow out of Black history, culture, and social life, and had to be related to Black political behavior, and...needed a strong Black community from which to function and form which to draw support.”²⁷ Although the aesthetic found in *Ebony*’s editorial content and advertisements was very much centered on black people, culture, and politics, in order to sustain its image as a symbol of the African American middle class, the image of the African American that *Ebony* put forth actually converged with white middle-class respectable culture. A result of the new image of the African American found in *Ebony* being centered around professional middle-class employment was that the right to work and a middle-class status was conflated with civil rights. With the culmination of the Civil Rights Act and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the Office of Federal Contract Compliance (OFCC) establishing the Labor Department in 1965, civil rights became the right to work in which over 1,200 class-action lawsuits around fair treatment in employment reached courts

²⁶ James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 25.

²⁷ W.D. Wright, *Black Intellectuals, Black Cognition, and a Black Aesthetic* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997), 144.

between 1965 and 1971.²⁸ The modern black aesthetic that was created by JPC and featured in the advertisements of *Ebony* magazine coalesced freedom and citizenry with work and middle-class attainment through employment. While a modern image of the African American was created by JPC that centered on the African American's culture and history within the United States, this image would only allow African Americans to see themselves as workers and buttressed the idea that attaining civil rights could only be achieved in earning the respect of a larger white society.

The aesthetic of African American respectability politics can be found in JPC's 1954 short film, *The Secret of Selling the Negro*. Just one year before the New York State Conference in which the NAACP determined that a focus on advertising and the media was an important goal for the NAACP, John H. Johnson, under JPC's film studio, produced a 20-minute informational film titled, *The Secret of Selling the Negro* in July of 1954. This film was shown at the Joseph Schlitz Brewing Company in Milwaukee, Wisconsin²⁹ for an audience of advertising and other media executives – some part of the 4A's, no doubt – to get them to become keen on the promise of a “new Negro market,” as well as to be persuaded to advertise in JPC publications. Narrated by CBS radio announcer, Bob Trout, *The Secret of Selling the Negro* began with a story the film framed as having the potential to have a terrific impact on business. Trout went on to tell the story of a “new Negro market” that was worth \$15 billion (he assured the audience that they had heard correctly, once again – \$15 billion). The film then introduced its audience to “the Andrews, the Browns, the Youngs, the Joneses, and the Greens...living in Chicago, Atlanta, or New York, in Detroit, Los Angeles, and St. Louis” all “enjoying a new

²⁸ Nancy MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 76-113.

²⁹ “The Negro Market,” *Time*, 5 July 1954, 74.

prosperity” and having “new interests,” “new standards of living,” and “a buying power that they have never enjoyed before.”³⁰ All decent-looking and seemingly well-to-do black families, the film showcased these black families as “typical.” In full technicolor the film showed these families living an idyllic, middle-class, modern American life which included children playing with toys, a car in the driveway to be washed, and much shopping to be done. Narrator, Bob Trout, continued on to tell the audience that though African Americans were “good prospects for practically all types of goods and services,” they were “overlooked because of mistaken ideas, because of out-of-date ideas of how the Negro lives, and how he buys.” Trout then assured his audience that the “truth of the matter is that the Negro lives pretty much the same as other folks. He buys pretty much the same way, too.” The film began to address some those out-of-date ideas on how the Negro lived with perceptions that were common at the time of African Americans: “I don’t like to do business with Negroes,” “They’re drifters, you can’t keep track of them,” “Negroes are a poor credit risk,” and “Negroes buy shoddy, poor quality merchandise.” In these common misperceptions brought up in the short film, JPC was addressing what was mentioned in its first *Ebony* editor’s column – that “when [JPC] talk[ed] about race as the No. 1 problem of America, [it’ll] talk turkey.”³¹ In persuading white advertising companies to do business with JPC, *The Secret of Selling the Negro* would have to address the racist and discriminatory notions that were undergirded in the Jim Crow policies which did not allow for black employees to integrate into white businesses, including black models to appear in advertisements. JPC countered these notions by presenting a respectable, black middle-class as an answer to white advertising companies. For JPC, as was the case in its short film, the answer to black integration during the

³⁰ *The Secret of Selling the Negro*, directed by Wayne A. Langston (1954: Sarra), video, 21:22, reelblack, published on December 19, 2016, accessed on December 13, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8PBrhFN35c>.

³¹ “Editor’s Column,” *Ebony*.

civil rights movement was an integration of consumerism. For John H. Johnson in particular, one final civil rights barrier to dismantle was for African Americans to be able to buy as freely as their white counterparts. To make this case in his short film, Johnson propelled only the imagery of a respectable black-middle class to act as beneficiaries for a type of consumerist civil rights.

To the twenty-first century eye and ear, *The Secret of Selling the Negro* can seem a bit appalling and even insensitive at many points (if not throughout the entire film). Even the phrasing of the title, *The Secret of Selling the Negro*, rather than *The Secret of Selling to the Negro*, suggested that the “Negro market” JPC presented was not one that would control its own fate within a consumerist economy, but would merely be a ploy within it, being capable of being “sold.” However, looking at the film within the context of 1954 and its purpose of staking the claim that African Americans deserved to see themselves represented in the advertisements of the products that they bought, *The Secret of Selling the Negro* was something that was unprecedented. Coming off as didactic and paternalistic at times, *The Secret of Selling the Negro* instructed an entire field of advertising on how to sell products to middle-class African Americans living in conventional nuclear families who were not only ready to buy, but were well beyond ready to be seen as equal to purchase the American dream within a capitalist twentieth-century framework.

The Secret of Selling the Negro also had support from the United States Department of Commerce. The U.S. Secretary of Commerce, Sinclair Weeks, made an appearance in the film to help the audience “take a look at the real facts” shared about this “new Negro market.” The film went on to report that “1 out of 3 Negroes living in cities today owns its own home (a figure coming directly from the United States Bureau of Census),” and that the National Association of Real Estate Board’s confirmed that African American were “not more of a credit risk than any

other group” and that African Americans did “meet home payments faithfully, sometimes more so than other race groups at the same economic level.” Weeks mentioned that “[the U.S. Department of Commerce was] constantly alert to trends that mean a healthier national economy, better business for the nation as a whole.”³² To explain more on what he meant, Weeks spoke of the attention that the Department of Commerce paid to African American’s “tremendous buying power” and “increased earning power.” Weeks shared that the Department of Commerce had seen that the “average Negro family’s income is at a record high, in fact, since 1939 it has increased more than the average income of all other Americans.”³³ After reiterating a few more facts mentioned earlier in the short film, Weeks closed his cameo with a hope for the future that surely played into the wishes of white businesses. Weeks claimed that the “new Negro market” “is a buying power that cannot help but have a tremendous effect on our national economy and on business prosperity in general. When these dollars are spent for a wide range of goods, services, and employment, businesses everywhere are bound to feel the impact.”³⁴ While the short film *The Secret of Selling the Negro* was intended to make the case for African American integration for the sake of equality, Weeks’ stance on the case for African American integration in the short film was for the sake of national business productivity, which meant primarily white businesses.

Making a strong case that a black, middle-class could help boost national business productivity, *The Secret of Selling the Negro* more so specifically presented *Ebony*’s readers, who fit within this class, as the answer to increase business productivity for white businesses. Giving more information on *Ebony* readers “as a profitable, above-average income group of

³² *The Secret of Selling the Negro*, 1954.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

consumers,”³⁵ which could be validated from the research projects that JPC had started earlier in the decade, the short film stated that “more than fifty-one percent of the readers of *Ebony* magazine have a record player in their home. Almost sixty-four percent own a television set. And almost seventy-eight percent enjoy the convenience of an electric refrigerator.”³⁶ Other pieces of data were given on *Ebony* readers which revealed that they spent “almost \$3 billion dollars a year for food alone. Per capita, they buy more cosmetics, drugs, and toiletries than anyone else in the county. And their children are better educated, too, because since 1930 enrollment in Negro colleges is up 2500%.”³⁷ Narrator, Bob Trout, then mentioned that in order to “recognize the importance of the class Negro market,” we must first recognize that “something has been happening economically in our county, people are on the move – the population is shifting. The makeup of metropolitan population today is different than it was just a few short years ago.”³⁸

Making the point that the twentieth-century American metropole was changing due to the increase of African Americans moving to northern and western cities, Trout mentioned the impact that this had on how businesses sold their products. One example mentioned was of one “shoe store in Chicago’s loop [which had] report that more than fifty percent of its customers are Negro,” and another example was a drugstore located in a “non-Negro” neighborhood which had found “that its Negro customers totaled twenty-five percent.” Giving more credence to this speculation, it was revealed that since 1940 the “Negro market” had seen an increase of 89% in San Francisco, 81% in Chicago, 50% in Philadelphia, and 45% in Houston.³⁹ The numbers

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

shown in *The Secret of Selling the Negro* of a new, growing black market across American cities was more of a proposition to white companies to sell to African Americans based on rational decision-making, rather than a plea that spoke to the humanity of advertising executives. Not only through the short film, but in its operations of its publication of *Ebony*, JPC's case for African American equality within advertising was not so much for white companies to respond directly to civil rights, but to respond to the very real demographic shifts that took place in the country as a result of the victories of the civil rights movement in regards to the increased opportunities in employment and education for a new black, middle class, which could eventually help the business of white companies.

The Secret of Selling the Negro asked its audience of advertising executives, "What do you have to sell? Chewing gum or a car? Toothpaste or transportation?" Narrator Bob Trout made the audience rest assured in that "whatever it is, here are millions of prospects, and these prospects are everywhere."⁴⁰ These images of a desirable middle-class African American market which were perfected for this short film then became the basis of the aesthetic of the advertisements found in *Ebony* throughout the civil rights movement. The success of *Ebony* (as well as the black middle-class in general) became dependent on how well its readers could fit and function within a white, bourgeois, consumerist mentality and lifestyle. JPC was not necessarily interested in overturning a white, bourgeois, consumerist mold, but more so on allowing his readers – black middle-class consumers – to be welcomed into this mold. The second half of the short film, *The Secret of Selling the Negro*, started to reveal "the secret" to its viewers of advertising executives. Bob Trout continued with "Negro customers can no longer be pigeon-holed. They cannot be classified as prospects who trade only at certain stores, certain

⁴⁰ Ibid.

neighborhoods. Today, Negroes shop downtown, they shop in supermarts [sic], they shop in small neighborhood stores.”⁴¹ While the first part of the short film laid out the common racist and discriminatory misconceptions that many white businesses held of African Americans, the second half of the film instructed its audience on how these misconceptions could then be leveraged, maybe even exploited, to “sell the Negro.” Bob Trout attested that African Americans would “buy from anyone who wants to sell to them,” but “before you can sell to customers, you’ve got to get to know them...What do the Negro customers buy? Why do they buy? How do you sell to them?”⁴² Using a lens of “sales psychology,” the secret of selling to the Negro was expressed in one word: recognition. The short film went on to state that though there was nothing unusual about this as recognition was a basic need for all people, “because he’s had so little of it, the Negro needs even more. He needs to feel important and appreciated.”⁴³

While the short film called out (or “talked turkey”) the simple and plain truth of past discrimination and current racism faced by African Americans, there was a patronizing and paternalistic tone in how JPC communicated with white advertising companies of how to “sell the Negro.” Surely, for as clear of instructions as possible, *The Secret of Selling the Negro* laid out three buying habits of African Americans that “[a]nyone who wants to sell to the Negro customer should know about...”⁴⁴ The first habit of African Americans according to JPC is “buying by brand.” The film rightfully stated that “for a long time, the Negro has been sold a lot of shoddy, second-class merchandise.” Because of this, the audience was shown a polished African American man in a suit and tie buying a hat in the film who “now...asks for name

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

brands to make sure that he gets his money's worth."⁴⁵ The second habit of African American consumers according to JPC was that "the Negro buys quality merchandise." As an African American lady with diamond earrings and white gloves shopped for fine crystal ware, the audience was told that "symbols of quality and prestige are very important to the Negro customer" and that "Negro customers are influenced by the opinions of others." This lady shopping on screen was not only buying crystal ware, but was "also buying the admiration and approval of her friends and relatives" through the purchase of goods. The third habit of African Americans as seen by JPC was not wanting to be sold something else. Seeing another well-to-do African American male in a fedora and overcoat, the audience was told that "because he's had experience with cheap merchandise, the Negro resents being offered a substitute. He wants to be sold on quality, not price."⁴⁶ With these three habits being presented almost as rules for white advertising companies to essentially follow when having sold to African Americans, JPC did in fact lay a groundwork for African Americans to be included within the advertising industry as employees, models, and consumers. The groundwork laid, however, was within a very narrow paradigm of a professional black middle class. This paradigm reinforced the aesthetic of respectability and professional employment found in the advertisements of *Ebony* magazine. And while this paradigm would nonetheless increase the amount of representation that African Americans received in national advertisements, it had to do so on such narrow terms.

The short film, *The Secret of Selling the Negro*, also mentioned that "the Negro family does things together, as a group. The family works as a unit, it lives as a unit, and it buys as a unit. When you sell to one member, you many times sell to all."⁴⁷ Fitting into a bourgeois

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

capitalistic prototype, JPC often emulated within its depictions of African American families, the traditional nuclear American family. The point made of how American families often acted as an economic unit for companies in which goods and services were purchased by one person for multiple people would not only make the case of the “new Negro market” stronger for JPC to present to white companies, but it also sent a stronger message around the normativity of the nuclear family to readers of *Ebony*. The film also referenced Jim Crow policies, but not outright, when it mentioned that “[i]t’s also true that many places of entertainment are still closed to the Negro. So, he spends more of his money to the things that are available to him, often for items that are considered luxuries.”⁴⁸ The film did not attack these racist and discriminatory Jim Crow policies head on, rather it used these unfortunate circumstances to make a case for how the “need for African Americans to be recognized” could help benefit the revenue of those businesses willing to do away with discriminatory policies and sell to African Americans. *The Secret of Selling the Negro* went on to make the case that a “direct and sure route of reaching the Negro customer” was *Ebony* magazine and its “two-and-half million audience in every issue.” Early advertisers then gave testimonies in the film about their ads in *Ebony* magazine including the Gruen Watch Company, Remington Rand, and Alaga Syrup on the effectiveness in advertising with *Ebony* magazine in contributing to the growth of their business. The audience returned to narrator Bob Tout who then asked a successful white salesman in the “Negro community,” ‘How do you go about getting the order [of African Americans]?’ The advice that the audience of white advertising executives then heard was that “the Negro wants to be treated just like everybody else” and that “a little friendliness and courtesy help a lot.” The audience was even given a

⁴⁸ Ibid.

helpful tip to call an African American “Mr. Brown, Mr. Smith, or Mr. - whatever his name is” as well as to stray away from talk about “what good prize fighters and singers the Negroes are.”⁴⁹

In addition to revealing a respectable, black middle-class as more than mere myth, but a consumer reality, JPC’s short film *The Secret of Selling the Negro* also served as somewhat of a training tool for white advertising companies on how to approach African Americans as consumers (albeit with some faulty information). This new depiction of a black, middle-class that was to be found more commonly in the mass media as the 1950s and 1960s progressed was due to the work of JPC within the field of advertising. JPC was able to circulate a new image and aesthetic of the African American by replacing outdated and racist stereotypes historically found in advertisements, and influenced white corporations to advertise in *Ebony* magazine with realistic and modern representations of African Americans – though narrowly focused on a professional black middle-class. In the larger fight of equality and economic opportunity for the African American, JPC used its publication of *Ebony* to create a new image of a modern, middle-class African American ready to purchase.

While economic rights from the consumer’s standpoint were indeed a part of the civil rights movement, it would not be until later in the 1960s when black business empowerment and community economic development would be promoted more within the movement. Looking at the evolution of black business empowerment and community economic development in their book, *Business in Black and White: American Presidents and Black Entrepreneurs in the Twentieth Century*, Robert E. Weems and Lewis A. Randolph noted the course that the promotion of black business took throughout the civil rights movement leading to the black power movement of the 1970s. Weems and Randolph focused on the attention to which the

⁴⁹ Ibid.

federal government paid to black business as a scale of the effect that black business had on the civil rights movement by studying the efforts of the U.S. Department of Commerce – the same department that lent its support to the 1954 short film, *The Secret of Selling the Negro* – in promoting black business. One of the efforts of the U.S. Department of Commerce in initiating support for black businesses was its Conference on the Negro in Business. The Conference on the Negro in Business was initially headed by Emmer Lancaster, who eventually headed the U.S. Commerce Department’s Division of Negro Affairs, and was orchestrated in the years of 1941, 1946, and 1948.⁵⁰ By 1949, the U.S. Commerce Department took more of an active role in the Conference on the Negro in Business and saw to its happening every year from 1949 to 1953. The seventh Conference on the Negro in Business was held on April 17-19, 1952 by the U.S. Department of Commerce and also welcomed Johnson Publishing Company’s founder, John H. Johnson.

Just two years before making his short film, *The Secret of Selling the Negro*, John H. Johnson was invited to deliver the address for the seventh Conference on the Negro in Business. “An all-day plenary session on the subject of reaching the Negro market marked the second day of the seventh conference. Some of the topics discussed were “Public Relations and Small Business,” “Public Relations and the Negro in Business,” “Market Surveys and Small Business,” “Research Surveys and the Negro,” and “Selling the Negro Market.”⁵¹ It was very likely that this seventh Conference on the Negro in Business had a hand in the inspiration for the short film, *The Secret of Selling the Negro*, released two years later. As the civil rights movement continued into the 1960s and as its exposure expanded its influence across the nation, U.S. presidents soon

⁵⁰ Robert E. Weems and Lewis A. Randolph, *Business in Black and White: American Presidents and Black Entrepreneurs in the Twentieth Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 53.

⁵¹ Weems and Randolph, *Business in Black and White*, 56.

included black business as part of their policies and agendas. During the brief years of the Kennedy administration, Luther Hodges, secretary of commerce to John F. Kennedy, would also hold a conference on black business from November 30 to December 2, 1961 “focused on the role of black business in a changing social, political, and economic environment both nationally and internationally.”⁵² During his time in office, President Kennedy would also appoint Eugene Foley to direct the Small Business Administration on August of 1963, whose “quest to link the civil rights movement with black business development materialized in March 1964 when he convinced Congress to add a loan provision for small businesses to Title IV of the Economic Opportunity Act.”⁵³ As civil rights was adopted into U.S. legislation throughout the 1960s, black business as a civil right was also put into the spotlight.

While John H. Johnson fought for the survival of his organization by influencing the advertising industry to integrate African American employees and models, these contributions also went along with the fight for increased representation of African Americans within the advertising field and advertisements themselves, as pushed by the NAACP. Even though JPC was a private-owned business, it crossed organization boundaries by intimately connecting its work to the mission of the civil rights movement around a black aesthetic in which it brought about a new image of the modern African American. This national image projected by JPC would be a superficial one, however, focused only on class and showcasing only a respectable, professional African American population. It was JPC’s work of promoting diversity within the advertising field that was emblematic of the larger struggle for equal participation of black business in general during the civil rights movements. This particular struggle towards black integration and black business ownership became solidified as a civil right only later into the

⁵² Ibid., 68.

⁵³ Ibid., 74.

1960s towards the end of the movement. Up until this time however, JPC's position throughout the 1950s and 1960s had already negotiated itself between that of a private, commercial enterprise, and that of a voice and advocate of cultural issues for the African American public at large, fitting into the larger civil rights movement.

PART TWO: Johnson Publishing Company's Work alongside the NAACP

As John H. Johnson positioned Johnson Publishing Company (JPC) as a representative of the African American community through its publication of *Ebony* magazine, leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) attempted to use *Ebony* as a mouthpiece. Becoming a publication to garner a vast African American audience, *Ebony* magazine was already an established vehicle to reach a wide African American audience by the height of the civil right movement. This proved very useful for the NAACP. From a 1959 report from its Public Relations Department, the NAACP knew the value of the mass media for organizing and building its image as an organization. In the 1959 report titled, 'Problems and Goals of NAACP Public Relations Activities,' Director of Public Relations, Henry Lee Moon, made clear that his aims were to "enhance the public image of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People as to gain popular acceptance and support of the Association's program, methods and goals." Knowing the power of the media in telling the stories of African Americans suffering from racism and discrimination and civil rights leaders fighting for the movement, Moon set the tactics of the NAACP's public relations department through "planned presentation[s] of our point of view and of factual information; and full utilization of all media of communication." Moon believed that "more information about the NAACP and its goals is needed. But also there is a need for a greater utilization of the techniques of meeting our public

relations problems both at the national and local levels.”⁵⁴ For Moon, the image of the NAACP was one in the same with the image of the African American. In his report, he stated that “[i]nevitably, the NAACP is visualized in terms of the Negro. Not only is the image which white people entertain of [the NAACP] conditioned by what they think of the Negro; but the Negro's self-image is a vital factor in his attitude toward the Association. We cannot divorce the image of the NAACP from that of the Negro.”⁵⁵ As the NAACP created its own vision of the civil rights movement in the form of a respectable African American middle class, it ensured that it would be able to interject this image throughout the mass media. An important strategy applied by the NAACP was putting its leaders at the forefront of the movement, giving them the opportunity to connect with a larger audience, both black and white.

The strategy of placing NAACP leaders in the public eyes was employed a year before the public relations report when on May 26, 1958, by way of Western Union Telegram, Roy Wilkins, President of the NAACP, approved *Ebony* magazine to do a feature on the Mississippi field secretary, Medgar Evers, and suggested his “full cooperation.”⁵⁶ With profiles of influential African Americans being a staple of *Ebony* magazine, the NAACP had a prime opportunity to give one of its young leaders a national platform to gain some attention for the growing civil rights movement. The article titled, ‘Why I Live in Mississippi,’ published in the November 1958 issue was part biography of the civil rights leader, but was also a platform for the NAACP

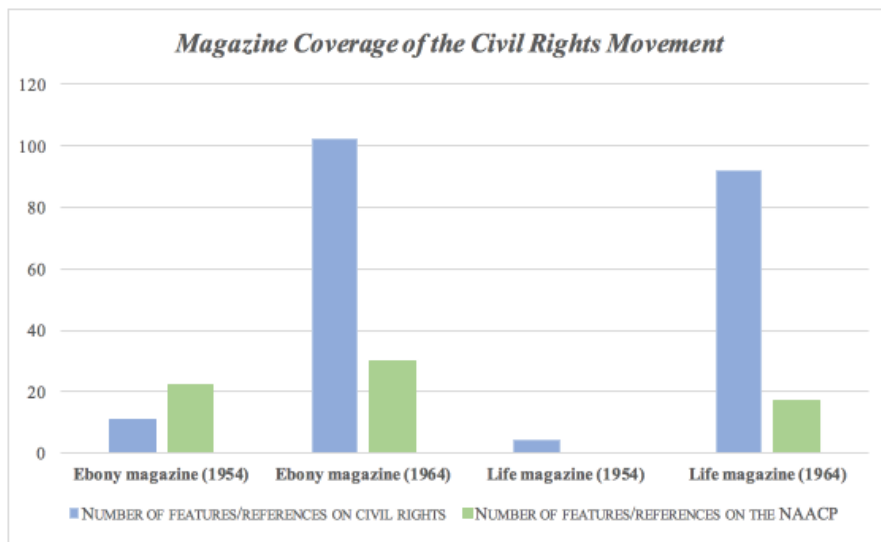
⁵⁴ Henry Lee Moon, “Problems and Goals of NAACP Public Relations Activities” (Report of the Department of Public Relations at the 49th NAACP Annual Meeting), 5 January 1959, Microfilm, Part 24: Special Subjects, 1956-1965, Series B: Foreign Affairs-Leagues and Organizations, Series Group III, Series A, Administrative File, General Office File, Reel 23, Box A-151, 0175, Papers of the NAACP, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

⁵⁵ Henry Lee Moon, “Problems and Goals of NAACP Public Relations Activities.”

⁵⁶ Roy Wilkins to Medgar Evers, New York, NY, 26 May 1958, Microfilm, Part 25: Branch Department Files, Series D: Branch Department General Department Files, 1956-1965, Series Group III, Series C, Branch Department Files, General Department File, Reel 15, Box C-244, 0082, Papers of the NAACP, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

as an organization through the eyes of Evers. The organization became the center of the piece, in which it was written that “[i]ncreasing the organization's ranks is a job [Evers] tackles in a manner which is frequently embarrassing to non-voters and non-NAACP members.”⁵⁷ This would not be the only occurrence of *Ebony* magazine doing a feature on an NAACP leader or an article on the organization. In 1954, the earlier years of the civil rights movement, *Ebony* had 22 features on the NAACP as an organization. This was double the amount of references the magazine mentioned that year on civil rights in general – when it was just starting to resonate as a movement within American society. The NAACP leveraged JPC’s magazine publication as an avenue of communication to a large middle-class, African American audience. In comparison, looking at the year 1954 alone to *Life* magazine, there was no mention of the NAACP and only four mentions of civil rights (see fig. 1). *Ebony* featuring articles such as “Why I Live in Mississippi,” fit into what Henry Lee Moon recommended to be done in his 1959 public relations report in order to further the image of the NAACP as an organization through respectable figures such as Medgar Evers, and consequently further the work of the civil rights movement.

Figure 1 Magazine Coverage of the Civil Rights Movement



Sources: *Ebony* magazine digital archives and *Life* magazine digital archives.

⁵⁷ “Why I Live in Mississippi,” *Ebony*, November 1958, 65-70.

The NAACP would not be the only entity to deploy the resources of Johnson Publishing Company in order to reach a mass African American base for the sake of civil rights. Recognizing the influence that *Ebony* magazine had within African American communities, presidential administrations tapped JPC and its publications as a means for public relations. A reporter of *Ebony*, Simeon Booker, recalled JPC's relationship with different presidential administrations throughout the civil rights movement in his book, *Shocking the Conscience*. By 1960 *Ebony* magazine was "printing more than 800,000 copies, [and] read by about four million people around the world."⁵⁸ Because of this, presidential administrations sought out JPC, its publications, and its founder. One instance Booker recalled in detail was a trip to Ghana with then Vice-President, Richard Nixon. Under the Republican party, Booker recalled Nixon as "the GOP's civil rights workhorse" after having campaigned amongst African Americans for Eisenhower and having claimed to have regained "some 22 percent of the Negro vote that year."⁵⁹ According to Booker, any public opportunity for Nixon to be seen with an African American and as a champion of civil rights was an opportunity for Nixon to change parties or votes among African Americans. Nixon took this opportunity when he invited Simeon Booker to accompany him and cover a "U.S. delegation to Ghana's independence celebration in 1957, [where Nixon] happily posed for news photos with African leaders as the delegation crossed the content."⁶⁰ Also on the trip was the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

When thinking of King's influence on the larger civil rights movement, particularly in regards to black economic and business concerns, historian Thomas F. Jackson documented King's thoughts on how capitalism did – or did not – fit into the civil rights movement in *From*

⁵⁸ Simeon Booker and Carol McCabe Booker, *Shocking the Conscience: A Reporter's Account of the Civil Rights Movement* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 162.

⁵⁹ Booker and Booker, *Shocking the Conscience*, 162.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice.

This was an imperative trip for King as the young preacher was still at this point securing his role as the preeminent civil rights leader. Being the first international trip for Dr. King, according to Jackson, “the trip reinforced King's socialist commitment to redistribute political and economic power” and King even met “with the Marxist historian C.L.R. James in London en route home.”⁶¹ This trip affected Dr. King’s rhetoric as the message of the civil rights movement shifted to challenging the position of the U.S. as a world leader of justice and democracy. As Dr. King focused on economic rights as a major component of civil rights, so too, did other civil rights organizations. The economic concerns of many civil rights organizations would culminate into the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his infamous, ‘I Have a Dream’ speech. While the 1963 march was attempting to push the envelope in addressing the more radical issues of economic reorganization and wealth distribution, those in attendance at the march according to researchers were still “more educated and affluent than average blacks, disproportionately northern urbanites who paid their own way, and already members of civil rights organizations.”⁶² Because the 1963 March on Washington included fighting for jobs, it would be those without jobs or working barely livable wages who would most need to be included in the movement. However, with the 1963 march taking place in Washington, many of those unemployed and not living locally would not be able to afford to travel to Washington to participate. Plans for two unemployed workers to speak at the march were even dropped. Even though “[e]qual employment and school desegregation topped their list of goals,” when African American marchers were asked, “they doubted whites would welcome

⁶¹ Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 82.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 179.

them into their neighborhoods.”⁶³ With the intention of broadening its base to include the working-class African American members of the community, the 1963 March on Washington still played into the image of the respectable African American simply wanting to be included into a system rather than overturning it. The majority of the subsequent press and coverage of the 1963 march focused on this inclusion piece, and altogether forwent the focus of economic liberation.

Johnson Publishing Company remained a champion for the NAACP and civil rights overall. In addition to the profiles of civil rights leaders that they published in *Ebony* magazine, JPC also made sure to put attention on the larger events of the civil rights movements such as the 1963 March on Washington. However, by 1963, the NAACP thought that Johnson Publishing Company could be doing more. As JPC was a private company and had its own agenda and priorities to tend to, there was not always an easy exchange between JPC and the NAACP. In a letter dated December 4, 1963 and sent to JPC founder, John H. Johnson, NAACP Los Angeles chapter president, Dr. H. Claude Hudson aired his grievances over a 1963 article on the March on Washington featured in the November 1963 issue of *Ebony* magazine. Spanning twelve pages within the issue, the article, “Biggest Protest March,” told of the August 1963 March on Washington. Within the letter to Johnson, Hudson wrote, “In spite of the fact that the NAACP is the leading and oldest Civil Rights organization, and in spite of the fact that you, with your facilities for getting information must know the part the NAACP played in making the March on Washington of August 28 so successful, you, I hope inadvertently, failed to give this information to your many readers.”⁶⁴ Within the article of “Biggest Protest March,” the NAACP is only

⁶³ Ibid., 179.

⁶⁴ Dr. H. Claude Hudson to John H. Johnson, 4 December 1963, Microfilm, Part 16: Supplement, Board of Directors File, 1956-1965, Series Group III, Series A, Administrative File, Board of Directors File, Reel 2, Box 22, 0471, Papers of the NAACP, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

mentioned three times across the twelve pages, and with two of the mentions simply being markers designating membership for two figures being discussed in the article. Not only did Hudson exclaim that the successes of Martin Luther King, Jr. could not have been possible without the NAACP, but also he questioned if *Ebony* would be in existence if not for the efforts of the NAACP. Hudson ended his letter to Johnson with the plea to “in some future publication, outline to the people of America what the NAACP has meant in this vital struggle.”⁶⁵ Just five days later on December 9, 1963, it was reported in an NAACP executive committee meeting that the NAACP Director of Public Relations had a conference with John H. Johnson “with reference to the EBONY [sic] story on the March and the failure to make any mention of the NAACP's role in this historic event.” It was also reported in this conference that, “Mr. Johnson acknowledged the Association's role in the March and accepted the responsibility as publisher for the error. He promised to do an article that would indicate our role primarily in the legislative field but which would reach back and pick up our role in the March and its legislative objective.” The end of the report concluded that at this executive meeting “EBONY [sic] is to carry a story of our life membership campaign as a result of a conference [the PR Director] had in Chicago with Mr. Johnson.”⁶⁶ The result was a seven-page spread featured two years later in the May 1965 issue of *Ebony*. This article did its due diligence in highlighting the NAACP as the organizational leader of the civil rights movement, especially a year after the Civil Rights Acts of 1964. One quote from the article read, “Other civil rights groups like CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), and the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) play vital and colorful roles in the drama of the civil rights, but it is the NAACP which remains the cornerstone of the battle, accepted by most as the biggest

⁶⁵ Dr. H. Claude Hudson to John H. Johnson, 4 December 1963.

⁶⁶ Agenda for Executive Committee Meeting, New York, NY, 9 December 1963.

and most potent weapon the Negro possesses today.”⁶⁷ Over the course of the next year, *Ebony* magazine went on to have 30 features on the NAACP. While this was only a modest increase from 22 features on the NAACP ten years prior, it was still more than its *Life* magazine counterpart, which only had 17 features on the NAACP in 1964 (see fig. 1). JPC and *Ebony* magazine undoubtedly had influence on a middle-class African American public when elevating the mission of the NAACP and the civil rights movement. The claim can also be made, however, that JPC and *Ebony* also influenced the larger American public (including whites) in becoming aware of the message of the civil rights movement.

1963 continued to be a year that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) strategized to retain its image as the premier civil rights organization. Once again, the NAACP knew that this was an issue of public relations and that it needed to utilize the tools of the mass media. On November 8, 1963, Roy Wilkins, President of the NAACP, accepted an invitation to speak at the Eastern Annual Conference of the American Association of Advertising Agencies (4A’s) held at New York’s Waldorf-Astoria. For the 1963 conference, the opening session was “The Expanding Negro Market and its Importance...Methods to Reach It.” The purpose of this morning session was to “focus on the economic impact of the Civil Rights struggle and its importance to advertising [with] speakers...describe[ing] the potential of the Negro market and explor[ing] effective steps that advertising agencies are taking to penetrate this market.”⁶⁸ Also in attendance, and speaking directly after Roy Wilkins, was JPC founder, John H. Johnson. Johnson’s focus was “the rapidly

⁶⁷ “The Golden Age of the NAACP,” *Ebony*, May 1965, 127-138.

⁶⁸ Program for Eastern Annual Conference of The American Association of Advertising Agencies, 8 November 1963, Microfilm, Part 13: Supplement, NAACP and Labor, 1956-1965, Series Group III, Series A, Administrative File, General Office File, Reel 7, Box A-184, 0059-0060, Papers of the NAACP, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

growing Negro market and the various media which serve it.” Commencing the morning session, however, was Roy Wilkins. Wilkins elucidated on the “[e]conomic and cultural stratification within the Negro community...The new Negro mood...Increasing group consciousness, and utilization of Negro purchasing power.”⁶⁹ In his address aptly titled, “Economic Impact of the Civil Rights Struggle,” Wilkins connected the struggles of the civil rights movement to the change that needed to occur within the field of advertising. Wilkins first opened up with the 1963 March on Washington as a significant event in the past year. What Wilkins attributed to the fruition of the 1963 march was “mounting anger stemming from the brutally repressive measures used by the police against civil rights demonstrators. There has been fury because of the unpunished assassination of Medgar W. Evers in Jackson, Miss., and the bomb murders last September 15 of four Negro children in Birmingham. There has been increasing distress because of the failure of the Federal government to act effectively to protect basic human rights.”⁷⁰ Through Wilkins’ talk of segregation and discrimination, there was a focus on African American economic health that Wilkins’ speech highlighted. Calling attention to the class differences within the African American community, Wilkins noted that the “Negro protest movement has involved not only the limited and dispossessed, but also the economically secure and the talented. These latter were in Washington by the thousands, not in pursuit of jobs for themselves, but in demand for freedom and equality for everyone.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ Program for Eastern Annual Conference of The American Association of Advertising Agencies, 8 November 1963.

⁷⁰ Roy Wilkins, “Economic Impact of the Civil Rights Struggle” (Remarks for Eastern Annual Conference of The American Association of Advertising Agencies), 8 November 1963, Microfilm, Part 24: Special Subjects, 1956-1965, Series C: Life Memberships-Zangrando, Series Group III, Series A, Administrative File, General Office File, Reel 32, Box A-303, 0554-0560, Papers of the NAACP, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

⁷¹ Roy Wilkins, “Economic Impact of the Civil Rights Struggle.”

Wilkins' approach to class differences within the African American community took a different turn from what was presented to the 4A's about a decade prior with JPC's short film, *The Secret of Selling the Negro*. While there was still a sharp divide between the black middle-class and the black working-class, the focus in 1963 turned away from concentrating only on the middle-class as a way to increase business for companies and organizations, and was now more geared towards how the black middle-class could help to increase opportunities for the black working-class as well. Wilkins suggested that middle-class African Americans "recognized that, as long as the color bar remains, their fate is inextricably linked with that of the jobless auto worker in Detroit, the unlettered field hand in Mississippi, the rejected applicant for apprenticeship training in New York City, the displaced mechanic in Chicago."⁷² Fitting the efforts of the civil rights movement over the past decade into his purpose of speaking at the conference, Wilkins stated that one of the goals of the NAACP was "Jobs and Freedom, yes. But also the white man's image of the Negro"⁷³ was just as equally important. Not merely for acceptance or admiration from whites, the image of the African American was imperative for Wilkins in regards to employment and economic opportunities for African Americans. Wilkins believed that the "denial of jobs and freedom stems largely from the distorted image the white majority has of the Negro...This stereotype is daily reinforced by all the media of mass communications - the press, radio, television and films."⁷⁴ Harkening back to his original claim four years prior in 1959, this image of the African Americans was tied to the image of the NAACP as an organization at the forefront of the civil rights movement. Therefore, the

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

safeguarding of the image of the NAACP for Wilkins was the safeguarding of the image of the African American at large.

Wilkins did not shy away from stating that the “NAACP has long been engaged in efforts to eradicate this image which has consistently been invoked to deny Negroes jobs, decent housing, access to public accommodations, justice in the courts, and, in the South, the right to vote.”⁷⁵ Wilkins added that while “[s]ome gains have been made...the stereotype persists.” For his audience of 4A members, Wilkins made clear that “[w]hat the Negro asks of the communications industry and particularly of you gentlemen in the advertising field is not special treatment nor a crusade for civil rights - that's our job and we will carry it on. What we in the Negro protest movement ask is realistic treatment of the Negro in the roles he actually plays in American life today.”⁷⁶ When speaking of the amount of African American representation throughout the media, Wilkins knew that there was still a long way to go. Wilkins stated that the current state of American advertising gave little “reason to believe that the United States is populated by any persons other than White Anglo-Saxon Protestants.” Taking a move that would have surely been endorsed by John H. Johnson, Wilkins turned his audience’s attention to the vast opportunity being overlooked with African Americans being used in advertisements. Wilkins surely knew that “Negroes in the United States represent a huge consumer market” and he reminded his audience that African Americans “buy refrigerators, washing machines, automobiles, clothing, food, detergents and deodorants. They consume drinks - soft, hard and in-between. They smoke pipes, cigars and cigarettes, at the same risk of lung cancer as white people.”⁷⁷ Even despite these facts, Wilkins found it very disappointing that “to look at television

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

commercials and read advertisements in the daily press and the mass circulation magazines, one would never realize this.” Giving praise to the following speaker at the conference, John H. Johnson, and his company JPC, Wilkins exclaimed, “Only when one turns to EBONY Magazine [sic] or to the Negro newspapers is one made aware of the existence of Negro consumers.” Due to the fact that black-owned publications were the only popular publications at that time publishing a realistic image of the African American not steeped in stereotypes, Wilkins implored his audience that the “time has come for a change.” What Wilkins believed to be the professional responsibility of members of the 4A’s may not have been to directly support civil rights, but to push other white advertising companies and agencies towards this new image of the African American. Wilkins told his audience that “[t]here is every reason why [you] should let this fact be known through the advertisements, not only in the Negro media, but also in [white-owned companies’] television commercials and in the press of general circulation.”⁷⁸

The urgency of African American inclusion within the advertising field was due to the fact that “Negro consumers are concerned about jobs and image. They like to spend their money where Negroes can get employment and with businesses which do not distort the Negro image either by ignoring the existence of Negroes or by utilizing unacceptable portrayals.”⁷⁹ With 1963 attributing to a changing landscape in America’s race relations, Wilkins made the case that the “NAACP and other civil rights organizations are prepared to mobilize the Negro's considerable purchasing power in the fight for jobs and freedom” and that “the Negro public in 1963 is more responsive than ever to the call to exert economic pressure in pursuit of legitimate goals and aspirations.” This was no bluff. “In 1963, a study by the Center for Research in Marketing found that 90% of African Americans would support a product boycott if it were backed by one of the

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

major civil rights organizations (NAACP, Urban League, CORE, SNCC, and SCLC).”⁸⁰ With this, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) started their Advertising Image Campaign in 1963 which boycotted companies that did not use diverse models in their advertisements. While CORE’s campaign would have a focus on integrating television commercial advertisements to use *both* black and white models, it had effects on print advertisements as well. Just two months before the Eastern Annual Conference of the American Association of Advertising Agencies (4A’s) in September of 1963, due to CORE’s Advertising Image Campaign, “forty major advertising agencies announced they would be preparing integrated advertisements.”⁸¹

As Roy Wilkins acted as a representative for the NAACP at the 1963 4A’s conference, CORE reached out for the NAACP’s support to sustain its efforts of the image campaign. Almost exactly one year after the Eastern Annual Conference of the American Association of Advertising Agencies, on November 6, 1964, the CORE director of the Advertising Image Campaign, Clarence Funnyé, reached out to NAACP president, Roy Wilkins, as CORE “embark[ed] on the third phase of the Advertising Image Campaign.” Funnyé wrote to invite Wilkins to “a meeting with 50 more of the nation's leading advertising on November 21st.” He also stressed that “[a]s the scope of the campaign broadens, full cooperation on the part of all civil rights groups is most urgent.”⁸² In a response on November 16, 1964 from the NAACP Assistant Executive Director, John A. Morsell wrote to Funnyé that “we are referring [this invitation] to the president of the New York State Conference of NAACP Branches for his information and whatever action he might deem appropriate [being that] our National Office

⁸⁰ Chambers, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line*, 138.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁸² Clarence Funnyé to Roy Wilkins, New York, NY, 6 November 1964, Microfilm, Part 21: NAACP Relations with the Modern Civil Rights Movement, Series Group III, Series A, Administrative File General Office File (Leagues and Organizations), Reel 13, Box A-202, 0883, Papers of the NAACP, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

does not inject itself into projects which fall under the jurisdiction of the local NAACP units.”⁸³

Wilkins’ call for action to advertising executives the year before at the 4A’s conference was in reference to CORE’s Advertising Image Campaign and the African Americans who would be more than willing to organize mass boycotts of companies who did not advertise to or employ African Americans. Even for Wilkins, just as much as African Americans were “making their desires known, preferably in conferences and negotiations, [which] is why I am here today,” he “if need be, [would also be] on the picket line, where I may be tomorrow.”⁸⁴

Wilkins made clear that though equal opportunity and employment was a civil right that would need to be addressed across the entire country within many fields and organizations, “[t]he pursuit of new job opportunities extends also into the offices of advertising agencies.”⁸⁵ Pushing the work of the NAACP and JPC beyond black-owned publications to influence the larger mass media, which included white-owned companies, Wilkins took up a similar position to that of the U.S. Department of Commerce in the short film, *The Secret of Selling the Negro*, in that economic rights as civil rights would not only benefit African Americans, but the economic prosperity of the nation as a whole. Wilkins believed that equal rights within the advertising field would “present a true picture of the Negro, projecting a new, realistic image” as well as to “also provide new employment opportunities for Negro models.” Wilkins also believed that a “measurable increase in job opportunities for Negroes redounds to the benefit of the total economy. It does not mean fewer jobs for white persons. On the contrary, it means more jobs for the whole community.”⁸⁶ Pointing out once again the benefits that white advertising companies

⁸³ John A. Morsell to Clarence Funnyé, New York, NY, 16 November 1964, Microfilm, Part 21: NAACP Relations with the Modern Civil Rights Movement, Series Group III, Series A, Administrative File General Office File (Leagues and Organizations), Reel 13, Box A-202, 0883, Papers of the NAACP, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

⁸⁴ Roy Wilkins, “Economic Impact of the Civil Rights Struggle.”

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

would gain from black consumerism, Wilkins stated that “[n]ew millions of dollars in circulation would create more jobs for all. Employable Negroes could come off the relief rolls thus reducing the tax burden and releasing more money for circulation.”⁸⁷ Within Wilkin’s rousing speech from the Eastern Annual Conference of the American Association of Advertising Agencies (4A’s) in 1963, even through his talk of African American community uplift through equal opportunities in employment and black buying power, there still remained the element of this possibility being attained not by advertising companies supporting employment opportunities and the buying power of African Americans for the sake of right or wrong, but more so simply taking advantage of it for their own capitalist gain.

The eventual success of CORE’s Advertising Image Campaign was not an effort in silos. It built upon the work of Johnson Publishing Company, which made the same appeals to the American Association of Advertising Agencies (4A’s) two decades prior with the short film, *The Secret of Selling the Negro*, as well as the parallel efforts of the NAACP in boycotting stereotypical advertisements. In its 1963 Annual Report of the Department of Public Relations, the NAACP detailed its efforts within the mass media as well as coverage from specific outlets. The report optimistically noted that “[j]udged by the amount of space and time devoted to reporting and commenting upon the far-flung activities of the Association and by the volume of the demand for NAACP spokesmen to appear before varied groups, the Association’s public relations program in 1963 attained a new high level.”⁸⁸ The report went on to also note not only the request in speaking engagements of NAACP representatives, but “requests for information and guidance from the media, public relations consultants and other interested persons and

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Annual Report of the Department of Public Relations, 1963, Microfilm, Part 24: Special Subjects, 1956-1965, Series A: Africa-Films, Series Group III, Series A, Administrative File, General Office File, Reel 3, Box A-38, 0125-0126, Papers of the NAACP, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

organizations including the Federal Government.” Listed among the publications that had a significant positive impact on the image of the NAACP were *U.S. News & World Report*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, and of course, *Ebony* magazine. The report noted that “The Department of Public Relations gave counsel and assistance in the preparation of these and other publications and programs dealing with Association activities and civil rights generally.”⁸⁹ More than mere mentions, the publicity that the NAACP garnered in 1963 through various media outlets was carefully crafted by the NAACP to represent the image of itself that it had always tried to project. This was the case in the following year of 1964 when Charles L. Sanders, Associate Editor of *Ebony* magazine, reached out to President of the NAACP, Roy Wilkins, to prepare a statement to be used in an article on school desegregation in *Ebony* magazine in which Sanders wanted Wilkins’ “views concerning the boycotts, their purpose and their effectiveness.”⁹⁰ The 1963 NAACP Annual Report of the Department of Public Relations also called particular attention to the efforts of CORE’s Advertising Image Campaign (though not mentioning it by name), in which the report stated that “there was a notable increase during 1963 in the use of...Negro models in television commercials and in advertisements in newspapers and magazines of general circulation” and also mentioned that “[o]n Nov. 8, the Executive Secretary was on a panel on "Integrated Advertising" at the annual Eastern Regional Conference of the American Association of Advertising Agencies. Secretary Wilkins told the conference that the NAACP goal was twofold--expansion of employment opportunities for Negroes in all aspects of the industry and projection of a realistic image of the Negro American as he is today.”⁹¹ The

⁸⁹ Annual Report of the Department of Public Relations, 1963.

⁹⁰ Charles L. Sanders to Roy Wilkins, New York, NY, 13 February 1964, Microfilm, Part 03: The Campaign for Educational Equality, Series D: Central Office Records, 1956-1965, Series Group III, Series A, General Office Files, Desegregation--Schools, Reel 10, Box A-107, 00138, Papers of the NAACP, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

⁹¹ Annual Report of the Department of Public Relations, 1963.

report also revealed that the NAACP Director of Public Relations along with an NAACP chapter president and NAACP attorney “met twice in New York City with officers of AAAA [the 4 A’s] and representatives of the agencies Sept. 5 and again, Dec. 13.”⁹² Representative in the 1963 Annual Report of the Department of Public Relations was the leveraging and utilization of other organizations by the NAACP to advance the image that it wanted to project of its organization as well as that of the African American at large. Some of these organizations were formal civil rights organizations as well such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). In pushing a new representation of the African American, the NAACP also worked in domains outside of the civil rights sphere such as that of the advertising field. While advancing its goal of improving the depiction of the African American used in advertisements, the NAACP often depended on another prolific African American organization that it consistently, and not always coincidentally, came into contact with – Johnson Publishing Company.

CONCLUSION

In the decades following the civil rights movement, *Ebony* remained a popular magazine amongst African Americans. The publication retained its relevancy within the African American community by speaking to current racial issues in the United States. Entering into the 1970s, Johnson Publishing Company (JPC) would also have a hand in promoting another new black aesthetic. As the Civil Rights Movement digressed, many African Americans turned to the Black Power Movement as a way to envision black liberation and a black identity. Within the world of advertising, this new aesthetic was used by African American advertising agencies as the “soul aesthetic” in order to connect with African Americans who identified with the Black Power

⁹² Ibid.

movement.⁹³As opposed to the aesthetic of the Civil Rights Movement, the aesthetic of the Black Power movement unapologetically promoted a militant image of the African American determined to fight for liberation. Throughout the 1970s, *Ebony's* advertisements would noticeably feature models who highlighted the natural elements of African American embodiment which included natural hair often found in the form of afros and models of darker hues. JPC's adaptability of its aesthetic based on a changing audience started with the initial aesthetic of the African American it had created during the civil rights movement. During the Great Migration in which millions of African Americans had to become acclimated to new urban environments in the north and in the west, JPC's publication of *Ebony* magazine allowed African Americans as a mass audience to see themselves in a way that was novel from the usual African American depictions of poverty, vagrancy, and criminality. Having new exposure to educational and employment opportunities, *Ebony* magazine created an image of the African American navigating and succeeding in the new social terrain of middle-class life.

The new aesthetic of the African American that *Ebony* showcased throughout the civil rights movement was compromised, however. In order to create an aesthetic that would be accepted by a larger, white society and seem non-threatening in regards to the attainment of civil rights, the African American aesthetic of *Ebony* magazine played into respectability politics. The identity that was attached to the aesthetic created by *Ebony* magazine was that of a middle-class status attained through professional white-collar employment. Ignoring groups within the larger African American population which included working-class families, the aesthetic found in *Ebony* focused its identity on respectable black middle-class families that were fashioned after a *white* American aesthetic and image. This respectable black aesthetic was then brought to

⁹³ Chambers, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line*, 230.

advertising companies in order to do business with JPC and advertise their clients' products in *Ebony* magazine. The respectable middle-class aesthetic tied to professional employment created by JPC was for the sake of presenting black America to white advertising companies as a demographic that was able to be a profitable consumer base for advertising companies' clients. The advertisements that were then featured in *Ebony* magazine had a focus on middle-class status being achieved through material consumption and brand association. The African American aesthetic produced by *Ebony* magazine fit perfectly within a twentieth-century American capitalist mold of a normative nuclear family acting as an economic unit within the larger white society. This aesthetic of a respectable African American that became tied to the civil rights movement not only featured an African American face for a new urban context, but it was also created by African Americans.

In writing about the larger black aesthetic created in the 1960s and 1970s, W.D. Wright turned his attention specifically to the black middle class. Wright called attention to "the full complexity of the Black historical foundation and Black identity in America." Wright mentioned that this foundation and identity had three sources: "an African heritage, a slave experience and heritage, and a Euro-American heritage."⁹⁴ With the egregious experience of slavery being a part of the African American legacy, African Americans can be considered as essential to the larger American culture that was an amalgamation of distinct African cultures and a foreign European culture through their roles as cultural mediators within the position of being enslaved. Wright continued with "[m]ost Black intellectuals have yet to realize that the Eurocentric, or the broader Euro-Americancentric orientation or perspectives, are theirs as much as they are the orientation and perspectives of white people."⁹⁵ Wright urged for the contributions of African Americans to

⁹⁴ W.D. Wright, *Black Intellectuals, Black Cognition, and a Black Aesthetic*, 157.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

the larger America culture to be recognized and saw the black middle-class as the result of such contributions. In his 1989 autobiography, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, founder of Johnson Publishing Company, John H. Johnson, shared his reason for starting Johnson Publishing Company, and specifically its publication of *Ebony* magazine. Johnson wrote, “We need, in addition to traditional weapons, a medium to make Blacks believe in themselves, in their skin color, in their noses, in their lips, so they could hang on and fight another day. Last but not least, we needed a new medium – bright, sparkling, readable – that would let Black Americans know that they were part of a great heritage.”⁹⁶ The initial goal of JPC was to show to a growing audience – a black middle class coming into being within modern, urban, and northern settings – a representation of themselves that would get them to be seen as equal within the realm of industry and commerce, which for Johnson, was the American dream. And although the American dream was constructed only for white families during the era of Jim Crow, Johnson created a new American dream for *Ebony*’s black audience, primarily middle class, that included them in it, as they too, had rights of ownership to the American way of life that was found in that dream. As African Americans called for freedom from oppression and discrimination through the civil rights movement, it was important for them to be behind the creation of the image that would act as the face of the movement.

Even though African Americans were primarily responsible for the creation of the new African American aesthetic found in *Ebony* magazine, with Johnson Publishing Company being a black-owned business, that was not to say that this aesthetic was not influenced by a larger hegemonic white society. With the previous aesthetics of the African American during slavery and the Jim Crow era being based on derogatory and monolithic stereotypes, Johnson ensured

⁹⁶ John H. Johnson with Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Succeeding Against the Odds* (New York: Warner Books, 1989), 157.

throughout the 1960s that African Americans were at the helm of the creation of the new African American aesthetic used in *Ebony*, even if fitting into a white American framework. Being based in Chicago, and not too far from Detroit, Johnson noticed that the ensuing Black Arts Movement was an important part of the modern African American composition. Johnson pulled in writers and artists from the Black Arts Movement throughout the 1960s as well as into the 1970s to work on his publications.⁹⁷ By using black writers and artists that were aware of and involved in the Black Arts Movement, not only did Johnson ensure that African American sentiment, thought, and perspective were in his publications, but his choice also ensured that the African American aesthetic that was produced by *Ebony* in the 1960s was able to metamorphose with a black audience that was becoming more self-aware of its identity within a white capitalistic society with the advent of the Black Power Movement in the 1970s. Because of the writers and artists influenced by the Black Arts Movement, the African American aesthetic used in *Ebony*'s advertisements starting in the 1970s would reject the conformity of respectability politics that was the foundation of the aesthetic of the prior decade. While issues of racial politics were always at play with the two black aesthetics of *Ebony* found in the 1960s and the 1970s, the issue of race as acceptance and acclimation in the 1960s became the issue of race as pride and liberation in the 1970s.

While concerned with African American representation in advertisements, Johnson Publishing Company was also seriously concerned with African American representation in advertising agencies amongst their employees. JPC's goal of representation and equality was also shared by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), as well as many other civil rights organizations. This common mission of equality around the

⁹⁷ James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 204-208.

majority African American audience that both JPC and the NAACP served made JPC a natural partner for the NAACP to amplify its organization's mission of civil rights through JPC's monthly publication of *Ebony* magazine. In addition to promoting civil rights in its publications, JPC also worked with the NAACP to advocate for fair employment in the field of advertising. This was done by John H. Johnson first providing evidence that there was a black middle class and that this black middle class could be active and productive consumers in the American economy. Using *Ebony*'s early readership as inspiration and evidence, JPC created a new image of a black white-collar professional to which white advertising agencies could market. This new aesthetic was used in the 1954 short film, *The Secret of Selling the Negro*, shown to white advertising executives. With a new viable market to which to sell, many advertising companies created departments that focused on specifically selling to African Americans. As the 1960s continued, new black-owned advertising agencies came into being due to JPC's pioneering efforts. Throughout the civil rights movement, civil rights within the American workplace was identified as antidiscrimination. Within the field of advertising, as with many other industries, more African Americans were hired and antidiscrimination policies were put into place (many times, however, only to fill a quota). The progress of African American representation within the field of advertising – both as models and as advertising professionals – was due to a changing landscape of American racial politics as a result of the civil rights movement. What cannot be disregarded in this progress, however, was the tireless work of JPC, which often overlapped with the work of the NAACP within the world of advertising, as well as a well-intentioned image of the African American found in *Ebony* magazine to be presented as equal to all other Americans.

Ebony magazine has proven to be a stronghold in the media still having maintained its status as a popular publication amongst the African American community well into the twenty-

first century. Just as *Ebony*'s aesthetic spoke to the image that what was needed for African Americans to see themselves throughout the civil rights movement and the Black Power Movement, *Ebony* has continued to be a photo album for the African American experience as it continued to document important African American events such as the coming-of-age of the hip hop generation, Halle Berry accepting the Academy Award for Best Actress in 2002, and the momentous presidential election of Barack Obama in 2008. *Ebony* magazine served as a portal for African Americans to see themselves represented in the popular media during the civil rights movement in a flattering light for the first time. It was the efforts of JPC, and other private black-owned businesses, that pushed the message of civil rights within the domain of the everyday social lives of African Americans through the things that they consumed, the thoughts that they interpreted, and the daily activities in which they were involved. And while the successes and victories in the struggle for civil rights were fought in courthouses, jails, buses, and on streets, they were captured through the pictures and articles in which African Americans were able to see themselves as they wanted to be seen. And from the pages of *Ebony* magazine, also came the turn of social change.

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