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The Myth and Propaganda of Black Buying Power

Media, Race, Economics

Second Edition

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This book remains humbly dedicated to various insurgent intellectual and political movements, most notably those focused on laborers, the colonized, and with special thanks and praise to those whose continued incarceration for participation in those struggles is most decidedly political.

Foreword

All scholarship, all public policy, and all remedies begin with a normative set of values. This is not a general critique; rather, it is simply a statement of fact—a fact that opens the door for productive and critical engagement with any program, structure, or policy; any identification or framing of what is or is not a problem; and any purported solution to said problem. There are few examples that reveal the powerful effect of these discourses, framings, and purported solutions than the notions of Black buying power. And no one has dispelled this myth with clarity, purpose, and overwhelming empirics more than Professor Jared Ball in this seminal text.

The political and economic effect of this Black buying power myth absolves structure and the state for the conditions and remedy of racial economic disparity and Black economic underdevelopment, and instead shifts the locus and onus of this disparity onto Black people (in this case their buying decisions) themselves (Ryan, 1968)—whether this is intentional or not, this counterproductive political discourse remains. The politics of it is that any analysis that is not explicit about these interconnections is either deliberately explaining away racial stratification or unconsciously overlooking the role of race and racism in determining material outcomes. The economics of it is Black buying power is believed to be powered by a "free market" wherein atomized, rational economic actors transact with each other guided by their free-will to generate so-called efficient and optimal social and economic outcomes. In this formulation, any attempt of the state to exert stimulus or regulatory influence on these economic relationships for intended outcomes is considered to be an interference, a distortion, and a deviation from the "natural" order. That is to say, the state cannot deliver what heroic individuals can themselves accomplish when left to their own devices. The notion of Black buying power extends the market-fundamentalist individual decision-making dogma to consumption choices and intended racial uplift: If Black people would only engage in more strategic spending habits, we would be able to capture a greater share of America's vast wealth.

Nothing could be further from the truth. From the very beginnings of the American project, our government has proactively shaped our economy, determining who reaps the benefits of prosperity. For example, while nineteenth-century import tariffs and infrastructure investments nurtured a fledgling domestic industrial base, fugitive slave laws enshrined a racial structure of work and ownership. Concurrently, the U.S. government's genocidal displacement of indigenous peoples from their homelands made way for the Homestead Acts, which transferred those lands to White families, free of charge. The same New Deal policies and investments that generated the conditions and capital to fuel White wealth and defrauded Black people of whatever capital they may have amassed and redlined them into under-resourced and dilapidated neighborhoods.

The proactive role that our government plays in determining winners and losers, especially by race in our economy, is undeniable. There is no aspect of our economy that is beyond the purview and continuous involvement of our government, and an economic structure from its origins that was founded upon Black people as chattel capital. The racial wealth gap, income inequality, wage stagnation, and persistence of poverty that characterize the American economy are not natural or accidental. They are the direct and deliberate result of laws and policy, both past and present, designed to serve specific interests. In the final analysis, there is no amount of individual economic effort that can outrun the centuries-long program of resource-hoarding among the wealthy and powerful few supported by a political economy that offers the dominant political group (predominantly White with some Black exceptions) relative-status anchored by a "otherness" defined by Blackness.

Why, then, is the myth of Black buying power so widespread and enduring? Why does it still hold such resonance as a viable solution to long-standing racial stratification?

The myth is so appealing to so many audiences for different reasons. For those interested in preserving the economic status quo, the myth serves the function of misdirection. In focusing on the individual choices of Black consumers, the myth lets government and the larger the public off the hook. For Black people, as Professor Ball keenly observes, the mythic efficacy of Black buying power has found its way into every corner of the Black ideological spectrum, from Black conservatives, Black nationalists, the Black left, and everyone in between. The underlying commonality is that all are drawn to the myth's promise of agency and self-efficacy. However, the inconvenient truth that Professor Ball so rigorously uncovers is that the efficacy of Black buying power is limited to selling advertisements in Black-owned and Black-targeted media outlets. Beyond that, the value of Black buying power—especially when inflected as the general mandate to "buy Black"—is largely aesthetic. I do not want to minimize that aesthetic, indeed, I personally am drawn to it. Moreover, the feelings of affinity, consciousness, and solidarity may deliver substantial psychological or cultural benefits. However, we should not be naive to the limitation of a consumption preference in a context of, in reality, inadequate economic assets, power, and ownership of the means of production, with an actual strategy to improve the material conditions of Black people.

If not in collective buying power, where is the actual remedy and efficacy to be found?

The good news is that we do have collective agency. Our agency lies not in a mythic notion of buying power, but in political power. Ultimately, our economy is a choice. There is no such thing as a free market. All markets—indeed all economic relationships—are political choices enforced by our government through discourse, law, and policy. Exerting a claim on our economy requires building movements and organizations that can exact demands and conditions that truly empower Black people with the resources to be self-determining with economic agency.

In order to redirect collective agency from the false promises of strategic consumption to the domain of political action, we must expeditiously and thoroughly dispatch the myth of Black buying power. In writing this book, Professor Ball has given us a powerful tool with which to do so.

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Preface to the Second Edition (2023)

When Kwame Ture remarked decades ago that "Black visibility is not Black power," he was making a statement about the difference between symbolism, popularity, celebrity, even myth, and genuine power, or as his former comrade Dr. Huey P. Newton defined the term, "the ability to define phenomena and have it act in a desired manner." Ture's comments were as prescient then as they are now and even more relevant. Never before has it been easier to develop and distribute tailored messaging designed to effectively manipulate targeted audiences as intended. This applies equally to the point made by Ture, one relevant to my argument here, that popular media, in all its forms, and including popular culture, news, celebrity, entertainment, and punditry, are constructed and with political intent. Specifically, what Ture was speaking to are the ways mass media/communication function to discourage political power among Black people in favor of symbolic, mythological advance that is never to be matched by any material reality.

As discussed in the first edition of this book, dating back more than 50 years, Ture and others were explicitly targeted by the administration of then President of the United States Richard Nixon so as to redefine the call for "Black Power" as led by Ture away from threatening ideas involving internationalism, pan-Africanism, socialism, and toward Black Capitalism and a mainstream participation in electoral politics. In September of 2022, *The Guardian* newspaper for the first time reported on its nation's own allegiance with the United States in targeting Ture in order to similarly disrupt his efforts to define Black Power and Black American liberation as part of an internationalist, anti-imperialist, pan-Africanist, socialist movement (Burke 2022). The goal of the British was no different than that of their American allies, to impose an overall view that Western Empire and American capitalism were the only path forward for a post-World War II world and that those Africans held formerly as formal colonized subjects should accept a path laid for them and led by former colonial powers, largely along the carefully placed guard rails of Black Capitalism.

In an extreme microcosm, and admittedly involving at least some speculation, it has felt since the initial publication of this book that the intended outcomes of protecting Black capitalist logic described by *The Guardian* had reached peak success in how it was received. It is difficult to reach any other conclusion as to why so little honest or accurate attention, dare any at all, has come despite the relevance and relative popularity of the work. The scant and mostly uninformed public disagreements with this book have come largely from those ultimately looking to defend against its criticism of [Black] capitalism. And while this book avoids broader and deeper consideration of my own or its own logical conclusions, the fact that they do at all point toward the very same pan-Africanism and socialism targeted for so long by the most powerful states in the world has resulted in many targets of its propaganda adhering to aspects of it. That is, in some cases, the mythology surrounding buying power, as predicted in the first edition, has proven too alluring, obfuscating, or is simply recognized as being outside the lines of acceptable, and "captured," (Táíwò, 2022) discourse.

The first edition, no doubt aided by a post-George Floyd uprising digitally free offering from Palgrave, saw no less than 100,000 total online downloads and full book purchases and yet received little by way of reviews, academic or otherwise. In fact, it has been more likely that even those who know me or the work well would simply ignore the book and refuse any discussion, debate, or interview, more as a matter of political or employment self-preservation than any substantive or demonstrable flaw in the work itself. Similarly, be they former friends, colleagues, even comrades, or members of the commercial mainstream and Black presses, and even within some nominally radical Black Nationalist spaces, there has been little discussion and no direct criticism. And, again, what criticism there has been has largely focused on what readers saw (accurately) as my rejection of Black capitalism, Black entrepreneurialism, or "Buy Black," as viable solutions to Black material inequality. Even those who had previously praised my work on the subject have routinely misrepresented the book's arguments, ignored them, or argued against them absent anything written, popular or scholarly, and without invitation to discuss.

In this edition, I have tried to clean up, clarify, at times update what had been previously written and have included a small chapter on what I have called "Cryptoganda" to look specifically at how the rise of cryptocurrencies has spawned a new form of the buying power claim. I have also added some discussion of the very problematic McKinsey & Co. who appear to be challenging Nielsen, and the Selig Center as a dominant reference for the buying power claim and with just as much marketing-driven inaccuracy. And while I have enjoyed being contacted regarding extensions of this argument as it may relate to other parts of the African diaspora, Latin America, the LGBTQ+, and even disabled communities, this edition remains focused on the particulars of Black America, or the African diaspora as it has and is developing within the United States, as the myth continues to have a truly unique historical relationship to that community. However, the precision here must not be confused in any way with currently prevailing and disturbingly reactionary trends which literally are the antithesis of what are my own views in support of the appropriately directional hashtag of #SODA or Solidarity of Dispersed/Diaspora Africans.

Baltimore, USA — Jared A. Ball

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Táíwò, O. O. (2022). *Elite capture*. Haymarket Books. Kindle Edition.

Preface to the First Edition (2020)

This book most certainly can be taken at face value and read specifically for its most immediate purpose; a criticism of Black buying power as propagated myth which has nothing to do with any actual economic, political, or social reality. This book indeed demonstrates Black buying power to be a concoction of a business and marketing class and propelled with a media force able evolve the myth to axiom. However, this book can also be read as a case study of our media environment, that of the United States, or an investigation into the political and social function of that media nationally, including their specific relationship to African America. Further still, this book can be read as an elucidation of the development, distribution, and impact of propaganda or the ways in which new media technology, the advent of the Internet and social media, have allowed traditional patterns of propagation, marketing, advertising, and even psychological warfare to flourish. And finally, this book can be seen as a critique of commercial journalism, that of a mainstream White commercial press, but also the commercial Black press which is often correctly heralded as advancing the historical causes of Black people but equally as often ignored for their complicity in developing and propagating harmful economic mythology.

In my more than a decade of tracking the myth of Black buying power, I have compiled an overview of the rise, dissemination, and to an extent, the impact of the myth on its target audiences. This book is comprised of that work and through charting press coverage of the myth, and attendant economic realities, shows also how commercial journalism can mask material realities and in this case the persistence of Black economic inequality. Said differently, reading this book will help better understand how the U.S. economy works, who benefits, and how Black collective economic stagnation and decline are confused by popular imagery and the limits of commercial journalism into being understood by many as progress or even power. What the book argues is that an initial concept of buying power developed by the U.S. government and business elite to manage labor and product costs, as well as the social unrest which often accompanies increases in inequality, was taken by a mid-twentieth-century emerging Black business and media class and turned into marketing tools to procure more corporate advertising dollars for Black-owned and targeted media. From there, the myth has been propelled for decades by an implicit agreement primarily between a White and Black business class whose interests merge in this instance to project a Black material reality which has never existed.

As is the case with the development of the current economic state of affairs, it is true of any change; solutions to economic inequality are in public policies which determine how wealth is created and how that wealth is distributed. The popular claims that if Black people would spend differently the collective would be better off are the result of propagated myths which deny the role public policy plays in determining societal outcomes. Instead, resulting from the myth is a tendency to ignore policy in favor of personal or community financial habits. The underlying perniciousness of the claim then, specific in its application to Black America, is that poverty or inequality at all is the result of bad decision-making among the poor. With the least powerful then blamed for their own poverty, little attention needs to be paid to the more difficult struggles around public policy which are truly what determines the financial success of any community or group.

For example, public policy, laws, regulations, etc., determine what immigrant communities are given government incentives to develop businesses throughout the U.S., incentives not afforded to Black Americans. However, rather than the more easily and popularly repeated condemnations of or negative comparisons to various groups of Asians, Jews, Arabs, Latin Americans, etc., more appropriate focus would be the policies which support these populations working endlessly in small corner stores, restaurants, cleaners, etc., to support many more unseen and from countries where there is as much or more inequality. Rather than encouraging more competition among the poorest communities, this book argues through its focus on buying power that more attention be paid to policy targeting better redistribution of the tremendous annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the United States.

Many adherents to the myth are captured by the routine component claim that Black buying power makes Black America equivalent economically to the national economies of many countries by comparison with GDP. This claim is also dispelled in what follows; however, positive use is made of these consistent comparisons between Black buying power and the GDP of other countries. If public policy was developed to better redistribute the GDP of the United States which annually is now more than $20 trillion, there would likely be no poverty requiring mythological claims of buying power to overcome and no need to point at other communities as having anything to do with Black poverty. Public policies targeting for redistribution the more than $20 trillion produced each year, as opposed to arguments in favor of redistributing Black dollars associated with shopping, are needed if genuine change is to occur. Breaking the imposed collective adherence to buying power as a means of economic advance is essential to returning focus appropriately to the actual functioning of the economy and the role public policy plays above and beyond shopping habits and notions of "financial literacy."

A Brief Note On Meaning

The phrase "buying power" will be used throughout without quotations though this should not be taken ever to mean that it is an accepted reality by this author. Similarly, though I understand that within the field of economics there are some who draw distinctions between "buying power" and "purchasing power," the two phrases, along with "spending power," will be used interchangeably as in the context discussed here they have historically and still always carry the same meaning, both in terms of their use by purveyors, or among those who most promulgate the concepts (myths), as well as, among those who accept or debate their realities.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract Buying power as economic mythology developed within a broader effort to impose Black Capitalism as an alternative to political or social equality and citizenship. An evolving Black business class adopted and adapted the mythology to their own particular racialized class interests and used their relationship to the larger economy to help create a Black or Negro market to be targeted by a more wealthy and White commercial corporate advertising community.

Keywords Fred Hampton · Jay-Z · Black bourgeoisie · Power · Black capitalism

In 2017, Jay-Z's "The Story of OJ" dropped and immediately became an enormous topic of conversation as much for its apparent astute economic analysis as for its accompanying video's visual walk down a memory lane riddled with the tremendous wreckage of heavily propagated anti-Black imagery. The juxtaposition of visuals depicting a national oppression with lyrics largely framing that oppression as resulting today from financial illiteracy beautifully demonstrates so many of the contradictions discussed below. The anti-Black mythologies developed and carried through the video's images, filled with historic reminders of institutional, state-supported racism, drawn with painfully accurate ironic depictions

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of Disney and Warner Brothers' own viciously anti-Black cartoon histories, are, however, (im)balanced by the accompanying lyrics which point instead to Black ignorance as the cause of existing inequality. The video depicts crosses burning while Dr. Huey Newton and the Black Panther Party are (ironically?) lampooned. However, the lyrics speak to a very different, and anti-Black Panther Party, politics.

In full contradiction of the wonderfully drawn images of institutionally imposed Black trauma, the lyrics speak only to Black ignorance, literally described as "Dumbo." The play on words is classically brilliant Jay-Z as is the absence of accurate financial analysis. Being as he remains today, anchored to [Black] capitalist notions of success and financial literacy, Jay-Z claims stupidity, "Dumbo,"—even depicting the Disney character in the video to drive home the point—by saying he should have been wise enough, financially literate enough, to have invested in "DUMBO," or the "Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass" section of Brooklyn which more recently has become a real estate hot spot. However, rather than explaining accurately that this land had already been purchased a year before Jay-Z's birth by which point David Walentas had already bought his first apartment building in what would become his foothold into SoHo, NoHo, and DUMBO making it impossible for him or anyone else to do the same, Jay-Z leaves us with the prevailing narrative that it was his, all Black peoples' collective ignorance.

By dismissing Black material inequality, poverty, and oppression as ignorance, financial, or otherwise, Jay-Z powerfully reconstitutes and redistributes dangerously a Black capitalist logic which has been encouraged as acceptable and against which many have written and struggled. So even beyond the easily demonstrable love of capital in his extensive catalog, being as he has said, "… from the murder capital where we murder for capital," Jay-Z has even gone to the extent recently of taking to the platform developed by his cryptocurrency business partner Jack Dorsey to defend himself against criticism by equating condemnation of capitalism with racism:

> All these lies that America told us our whole life and then when we start getting it, they try to lock us out of it," he said. "They start inventing words like 'capitalist.' We've been called 'n—ers' and 'monkeys' and s–t. I don't care what words y'all come up with. Y'all gotta come with stronger words." "… people calling me a capitalist is like them calling me the N-word." (Kaufman 2022)

Specific to the mythology of buying power, and returning to "The Story of OJ," Jay-Z explains that unlike Jews who "… own all the property in America…" Black people are only "… throwin' away money at a strip club." Further, again contradicting the (lampooned?) image of the quite political Black Panther Party, Jay-Z speaks an imposed political pessimism saying that "financial freedom [is] my only hope…" and proceeds to discuss flipping property, art, and music sales as viable pathways to get there (Carter et al. 2017). Indeed, "The Story of O.J." is a metaphor for opportunities wasted due to poor individual choices and is meant, as Jay-Z has said, to be more than just a song, saying that it is really about "… we as a culture, *having a plan*, how we're gonna push this forward…" (Serwer 2017, emphasis added). The expressed "plan" is to eschew political power in favor of a sole focus on economics, Black capitalist economics with buying power as a central philosophy as the "only hope" for freedom, and all presented as progressive, pro-Black, empowerment messaging.

The projection of Black Panther Party imagery, but with an entirely antithetical politics, helps create the subconscious association among targeted audiences between Black capitalism, entrepreneurialism, business, or "buying power," with revolutionary political activity. However, and unable to expand on the point here, the Black Panther Party espoused a socialist politics that condemned Black capitalism and sought to explain the value of political power, the "ability to define phenomena and have it act in a desired manner." In other words, political power—beyond simple obeisance to mainstream electoral politics—determines the arrangement of a society, what it will produce, how, and in what ways wealth will be defined and, most importantly, distributed.

Paradoxically, Jay-Z was born the day Chicago Black Panther Party members Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were killed. December 4, 1969, marks both the birth of one of the greatest rappers and entrepreneurs in history and the death of two members of one of history's most impactful political organizations, with Hampton targeted specifically for assassination in a coordinated effort led by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Chicago Police Department. One has made clear during his multi-decade career that he aspires to the highest of capitalist heights and the other was disposed of by the United States federal government in part for aggressively espousing the redistributionist politics of socialism. One is today a leading force in popular culture and even political activism. The others have had their lives relatively suppressed beneath omitting histories and popular (mis)representations carried, for instance, by the even more impressively entrepreneurial, well-promoted, and popular spouse of Jay-Z.

The performative allusions by Beyonce' Knowles to the Black Panther Party and radical Black histories have in many ways become those histories' most dominant and well-distributed symbols. After 40 years, former Black Panther Assata Shakur remains in exile under renewed calls for her extradition from Cuba and imprisonment in the United States. Beyonce' tours with $50 million Pepsi sponsorships and $60 million Netflix deals. Jay-Z has helped sell nearly every major name brand and has even become the recent face of the NBA and NFL as they've expanded franchises and into politics. As such, Beyonce' and Jay-Z have become among today's biggest proponents of Black capitalism couched often in the aesthetics or language of Black Power. The beginning and end represented in that 1969 exchange of lives and politics would be charted beautifully the following year in Earl Ofari's *The Myth of Black Capitalism* (1970), itself found one year after that in the prison cell of George Jackson, another assassinated, and often forgotten, member of the Black Panther Party whose image has also been previously appropriated by the equally commercial rapper Ja-Rule (2003).

Ofari's work took on and disposed of the broader mythologizing of Black capitalism and its subsidiaries, Black banking, investing, saving, and business as methods of ending economic inequality. His work was published at the height of this country's struggle over Black capitalism's promotion, largely by the administration of President Richard Nixon, and adopted by a more conservative Black business class, as a response to increasingly Left-leaning and radical Black political movements. The fear of an advancing Black Power Movement, including the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army, that increasingly espoused variants of pan-Africanist, nationalist, socialist, and communist politics encouraged, in part, the promotion of Black capitalism as a more viable, pragmatic, or mature solution.

The crux of Ofari's argument in the end remains a centerpiece of what follows here; Black people do not have enough money or access to larger national and global economies to have what income or wealth does exist to in any meaningful way improve the material, economic, and lived conditions of the Black community as a whole. Attempts by Black people in the United States to marshal their resources to the benefit of the whole and the various ways these attempts were bound to fail were all laid out by Ofari but remain today in even more popular fashion absent similar criticism. We hear today the same arguments made for more than a century, and long-since proven insufficient—buy Black, bank Black, circulate the Black dollar within the community, and, as I will argue, use more intelligently the buying power of Black America and worry less about social movements, political organization or political power. What differs most today is the propulsion of that mythology *as* propaganda in an existing media environment more consolidated in ownership and penetrative in reach than ever. Further, I will demonstrate the inherent class tensions playing out in this history as the myth of Black buying power remains one developed in part, and propelled by, a Black business class and commercial press who benefit most from the claim as part of their pursuit of advertising revenue and investment.

Buying power, as we know it today, is largely a fiction developed and promoted by a Black business class which has its own specific origins and tradition. As Ofari explained:

> Black investigators have, from time to time, been *forced* to deal with various expects of "black" business and the possibility of an independent black economy. The most prominent of these investigators, black sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier, came to the conclusion that "black" business was a myth. Frazier, in his seminal work *Black Bourgeoisie*, went on to give an extended analysis of the historic trends that have led to the current enthusiasm for black business and its embrace by black leaders. As Frazier has written regarding these black leaders: "The myth of Negro business is tied up with the belief in the possibility of a separate Negro economy.… Of course, behind the idea of the separate Negro economy is t*he hope of the black bourgeoisie that they will have the monopoly of the Negro market*." (Ofari 9, emphasis added)

Capturing a Black market, however, has limitations given the limitations on Black economic potential. For the segment of the Black bourgeoisie involved in media, journalism, or advertising to "capture" meant delivering a newly created Black market packaged in a mythic economic strength, labeled buying power, to White corporate ad buyers. Buying power would become a primary mechanism by which Black media and business could attract White investment. If Black people had billions to spend, the myth began, then White ad buyers would find great value in spending their ad-buying dollars on Black-owned and Black-targeted media.

But it was the very promotion of this myth of Black buying power, by a Black media and business elite, that has created a journalistic echo chamber, with one consequence being the adoption of the myth by any number of Black political, religious, or activist leadership as a particular gateway to economic freedom, or at least, parity. Buying power, though, in its origin and current application as a marketing tool for advertisers, is applied to all and any segmented formation of society, including corporations, and municipalities, its relationship to Black political struggle, and it being a focal point of a solution to centuries-old dilemmas, is particular to Black America. And, as will be discussed, the installation of buying power as a tactic toward a collective Black advance carries a specific brand of violence in that its reframing as a concept by the hands of a Black business and media elite is meant to satisfy their own version of adopted anti-Black and class-based interests. Still with Frazier, this "black bourgeoisie," caught in a liminality between wanting distance from "the Negro masses" while simultaneously "suffering contempt from the white world…".

> … has created in its isolation what might be described as *a world of make-believe* in which it attempts to escape the disdain whites and fulfill its wish for status in American life. One of the most striking indications of the unreality of the social world which the black bourgeoisie created is its faith in the importance of "Negro business," i.e., the business enterprises owned by Negroes and catering to Negro customers. Although these enterprises have little significance either from the standpoint of the American economy or the economic life of the Negro, a *social myth has been created that they provide a solution to the Negro's economic problems*. Faith in this social myth and others is perpetuated by the *Negro newspapers*, which represent the largest and most successful business enterprises established by Negroes. (Frazier 27, emphases added)

In Chapters 2 and 3, more will be said about the origins, intervening years, and the evolution through today of buying power mythology, but one other early criticism from a contemporary of Frazier and with equal, and even more precise, condemnation is worthy of note from the beginning. In his *The Negro as Capitalist* (1936), Abram Harris describes the rise of purchasing power as a concept within Black America demonstrating a continuity of emptiness in the claim that said power exists or can be harnessed to the benefit of the collective Black community.

Harris discusses "purchasing power" appropriately within his chapter, "The Plight of the Negro Middle Class," as that group, fully immersed in Frazier's fantasy of a separate economy, are described by Harris as wanting either Black hires for white collar jobs, or Black ownership of businesses targeting Black consumers.

Harris does us well by recounting the history of purchasing power as a concept emerging mostly out of turn of the century "Cost-of-Living" reports assessing the overall expenditures of various segments of society and determining how much communities were spending. Those relatively large totals, combined with the fantasy of a separate economy, assisted that Black middle class desire to capture those sums. But as Harris describes, and as remains to this day, being relegated to serving small impoverished communities, with little to no outside investment, little to no ability to reach global markets with competitive products, and never being able to overcome the collective wealth of a ruling White elite with control over political power and public policy means that no economic rival can emerge, and certainly not from among a particularly oppressed Black community. In the end, Harris describes the promotion of Black capitalist mythology, buying power in particular, as a form of propaganda disguising as Black national pride "… what the Negro businessman wants most of all… [the] freedom to monopolize and exploit the market they provide." Harris would powerfully conclude that Black people "… have no greater exploiter than the black capitalist…" (184).

Shockingly little has changed. In fact, quite the opposite. Harris described the already tired and shifting slogans popularized then pointing Black people to business solutions to problems of political power. From the "Bigger and Better Negro Business" movement, to "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work," Harris showed how these only benefit an often imperceptibly small class of Black people able to create business opportunities in the equally small sectors of the broader economy, often in service roles. Today, we have hashtag slogans promoting #BuyBlack and #BankBlack and with greater reach than before even as both the interracial Black-White wealth divide and the intra-racial Black class divide both remain cemented and/or worsening. We are nearly approaching the centennial of Harris' work and his own research into empty claims made then about circulating "the Black dollar," and Black middle class claims that all would improve if Black people simply "… handled…" better the $4.5 billion spent annually on "food and clothing" according to 1929 "cost-of-living figures" (179). One hundred years of these claims with the additional help today of a media environment designed by colonization, organized by the study of propaganda and psychological warfare, and supplemented by a pop culture fully stocked with talented Black spokespeople for their class interests and it is little wonder why there remains so much confusion around the subject.

Jay-Z's lionized lyrics are indicative of the culminating effect of a near century-old process of propagating economic mythologies as part of capturing markets. His verses accept and regurgitate key elements of the myth of Black buying power (and capitalism) blaming poverty on the poor all while further encouraging an imposed commercialism, product marketing, and promotion of conspicuous consumption which has by now come to fully dominate and manage the content of popular media (Rossini 2015) and popular culture commercial hip-hop (Ball 2011). Like much of Jay's entire career catalog, this more recent contribution, from one who reminds is "… not a businessman," but a "business, man…," suggests an economic potential which is only left unreached due to ignorance among the community, and reflects back a popularly disseminated fallacy that the poor, specifically the Black poor, do not take advantage of opportunities as others have. Jews, according to Jay, unlike Black people, "own all of the property in America" because of their ability to rise above petty dealings, "'gram holding," and understand the value of not "throwin' away money at a strip club." But this is just one more example of popularly circulating mythologies about North American capitalism, race, religion, ethnicity, and specifically, buying power, or consumption, as a pathway to either poverty or wealth, and the potential for Black Americans to mimic those patterns of behavior with similar degrees of success.

Consumerism and spending habits, good or bad, do not determine collective wealth or an economic strength. No community becomes rich, nor can one become poor, as a result of their spending. Black people are not poor for having missed out on previous opportunities, or by choosing today, out of some form of cultural deformity, or intractable financial illiteracy, to, as Jay-Z suggests, foolishly give away potential communal wealth by shopping. Jay-Z, like most commercial artists and art, reflects a racial and class politics often masked by talent and performance. The art becomes an extension of the commercial, political, and ideological market(ing) forces who own the media product (often not the artists themselves) along with its means of production and distribution. It stands to reason than that, as I and others have shown (Ball 2011a, b), much of the popular commercial media and art has become literal marketing for products and contains many of the same advertising industry mechanisms for selling wares, as well as ideas (myths) regarding the national economic arrangement. If hip-hop can be used to sell cars, clothes, and jewelry, it certainly can be used to sell equally fantastical notions of achieving "financial freedom…".

Inherent to Jay-Z's verse(s) is the idea that Black buying power is both real and squandered. Jay suggests that a redirection of Black consumption habits can meaningfully overturn existing inequality and that no other significant barriers to that overthrow exist. But what Jay-Z also demonstrates is the ubiquity of economic mythology and the many ways through which those myths are conveyed to wider audiences. What follows is my attempt to demonstrate, at a minimum, the absence of any real buying power, the origins of the concept, its appropriation later by business and media interests, and then also, the mechanism and context in which this and other myths originate, persist, and thrive. Specifically, *The Myth and Propaganda of Black Buying Power* demonstrates:

- The claim that African America has more than $1 trillion in "buying power" is popularly repeated mythology with no basis in sound economic logic or data. While the myth has a longer history, it is today largely propelled by misreadings and poor (false) interpretations of Nielsen surveys, increasingly nowadays by McKinsey & Co., which differ from but follow an equally flawed methodology to still the dominant source of the myth, the Selig Center for Economic Growth at the Terry College of Business housed in the Bank of America Financial Center in Athens, GA. As will be discussed, and as their website explains, the purpose of these oft-cited (and often not) reports is not to aid Black people in understanding their economic condition or how to improve it. The purpose of Selig (similar to that of Nielsen and McKinsey) is to aid businesses direct and attract ad revenue. The Selig Center was, "*Created to convey economic expertise to Georgia businesses and entrepreneurs*, the Simon S. Selig, Jr. Center for Economic Growth is primarily responsible for conducting research on economic, demographic, and social issues related to Georgia's current and future growth" (emphasis added).
- "Buying Power" is a marketing phrase that refers only to the "power" of consumers to purchase what are strictly available goods and is used as a measurement for corporations to better market their

products. Most of the contemporary and popular understanding of the myth of buying power is derived from, and maintained by, a commercial Black press whose own commercial interests (attracting advertising dollars from the largest White corporations) supersede any journalistic mission to properly inform. "Power" here has nothing to do with actual economic strength and there is no collective \$1 + trillion that Black people have but choose to foolishly spend ignorantly and to their economic detriment.

- The myth of "buying power" functions as propaganda working to deny the reality of structural, intentional, and necessary economic inequality required to maintain society as it is, one that benefits an increasingly decreasing number of people. To do this, the myth functions to falsely blame the poor for being poor while working against the development of more appropriate understandings of the economy, its function, impact, and possibility (or the lack thereof) for change. Poverty, the myth encourages, is the result of the poor having little to no "financial literacy," or as resulting from their bad spending habits, when in reality poverty is an intended result of an economic and social system.

Anyone at all familiar with any part of the Black public sphere will have heard one form or another of the following: "If we just use our money like other communities… If we didn't spend so much on hair, cars and weed… we could make our dollar circulate like 'they' do and be far better off!" More specifically, those familiar with like-spaces would have heard reference to "the numbers," that "Black America's economy makes it among the most powerful national economies in the world…" and that "… we have a \$1 + trillion that we just misuse…" From the most isolated and forcibly marginalized radical activist spaces to the most commonly populated spheres of Black public discourse, the refrain is consistent and always suggests the same that at least a solid portion of the Black oppressive political pie is comprised of a financially illiterate backward mass incapable of correcting itself to take proper advantage of a freedom which waits just slightly beyond their feeble grasp. The suggestion that Black people lack "financial literacy" and, therefore, ignorantly refuse existing opportunities to advance economically obliterates the realities of capitalism as an economic and social system or conditions that system creates.

The idea is as simple as it is wrong but is masked by a surrounding powerful and heavily propagated mythology. The "buying power" of

Black America, it is often repeated, now said to have crossed $1 trillion annually, is foolishly squandered but with some unity could be harnessed to overturn the centuries-old and eerily consistent economic depravations suffered still. However, "buying power," as a concept popularly held, is entirely misunderstood and has been by so many for so long that it continues to confound and inhibit conversations about economics in general, the specifics of the Black economic condition, and what might be done about it. And while all communities, all segments of all communities, businesses, municipalities, etc., have their "buying power" assessed, it is only in relation to Black America that the concept becomes truly mythologized. Beyond that, the myth is politically weaponized with a very particular perniciousness and pervasiveness metastasized to the "conceptual original sin" of American racism (Downing & Husband 2005). The misunderstanding and misapplication of the concept of buying power, by those both friendly and hostile to the Black community, are unparalleled anywhere in political, economic, or media analyses.

Black America does *not* have an annual $1 + trillion that is collectively, by some choice, spent frivolously rather than harnessed to the betterment of the collective. Here, we must develop upon the difference between power as economic strength as is conventionally understood and buying power, a concept developed by business, advertising, marketing, and government interests and where power is defined only as a group's ability to enrich those interests. Genuine economic strength is measured in wealth, assets, land, stock, etc., and with a clarity in the differences between wealth and income, the latter being what one earns in exchange for labor, the former being income earned from the labor of others.

"Power" in the phrase "buying power" does *not* mean what many assume is a kind of genuine wealth, sovereignty, or autonomy. Once consigned to the phrase "buying power" that latter term loses all popularly (rightly)-held assumptions of its meaning and becomes something very different, almost dangerously different in terms of how that difference is carried to, and with what impact it has on, various audiences, and Black America specifically. In the form of its association with the word "buying" power means only the ability to spend what available money (or credit) is available on only the specific goods similarly made available for purchase. Having access to rims, fronts, hair, or weed is one thing, while access to capital, stock, land, expanding business, etc., is quite another. Black people can buy marijuana just not the increasingly legal dispensaries emerging into a multi-billion dollar almost exclusively White industry (Ross 2018).

Buying power, spending power, or purchasing power are all interchangeable and applied to nearly every possibly grouped segment of society and are also applied to corporations and local, state, and even national governments. But the concept, or more appropriately said, the marketing formula, is used with a particular pernicious intent, when it comes to Black America and, as such, deserves this special focus and attempt at dispelling. Nowhere else, for no one else, is buying power used as a bludgeon with such regularity and persistence within communities, both in terms of media attention and as a method of "political organization," as is the case with Black America. For solutions to come, it is true that those spaces where Black politics are most often discussed and where the futures of Black people are most seriously considered must rid themselves of this and other mythologies related to the economy of the United States and the role Black people play within. This would include challenging the prevailing wisdom, as it applies to *this subject only*, of past and present luminaries.

Across the political spectrum and across space and time, the myth of Black buying power has been carried by many important Black historical figures. The heavy promotion of the myth, its origins in, and being so well suited to, a commercial journalism and media environment, has helped propel the myth into every segment of Black politics across its entire spectrum. No particular formation, from Left to Right, has been able to entirely escape a myth which has been misapplied to their varying efforts. The few critiques which have ever been waged have been lost in the mass of propaganda all claiming an economic reality which is not. With few exceptions, none clearer and more direct than that of George Jackson has there been a resounding near unanimity on this issue. Jackson, exceptional as he was, again, here too, stands largely alone:

> So what is to be done after a revolution has failed? After our enemies have created a conservative mass society based on meaningless electoral politics, spectator sports, *and a 3 percent annual rise in purchasing power strictly regulated to negate itself with a corresponding rise in the cost of living*. What is to be done about an expertly, scientifically calculated contra-positive mobilization of the entire society? What can we do with a people who have gone through the authoritarian process and come out sick to the core!!! There will be a fight. (Jackson 1971, p. 174, emphasis added)

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CHAPTER 2

Propaganda Versus Economics: Constructing A Myth

Abstract The myth of Black buying power is dismantled by taking primarily two lines of argumentation: (a) as an issue born of a media environment itself well suited to the transmission of propaganda and (b) as an issue of economics, or economics reporting, where substantive research and data on the economic condition of Black people are supplanted by more salacious and fallacious claims of economic strength.

Keywords Public policy · Economics · #BuyBlack

Black buying power is more propaganda than it is economics. That is, the financial side of the myth, while nuanced and even at times complicated, is relatively more easily dismissed once the fog of media and sloppy journalism is cleared. On the one hand, it is truly simple, Black people—collectively—have no money. On the other hand is the more complicated mythology generated as propaganda, carried by all forms of media, and which includes all manner of misread and misreported data, woeful punditry with worse analyses, all propelling entirely false narratives about the causes of Black inequality and the possibility of [Black] capitalism as a solution.

Today, the popular claim that Black America spends more than $1 trillion annually, specifically, according to one report, $1.7 trillion by

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2030 (Noel et al. 2021), comes from marketing agencies and financial firms wanting to earn money by helping advertising agencies target their spending to be as effective in reaching specific audiences with specific ads. To do this, as will be discussed more in Chapter 4, entities like the Selig Center, Nielsen, and McKinsey & Co. use paywalls, obfuscating language, and bad reporting to mask that they are simply (mis)using data (mostly) from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) which report nothing more than aggregate spending totals providing general economic data for business, government, policymakers, educators, etc., to assess and interpret. And it is at this level, that of interpretation, where an abundance of the massive problems occurs.

As Chapter 4 discusses with more detail, the BLS was not established, nor does it exist today, to explain the country's economy, or how various groups are treated within. In fact, any review of the history of, or materials produced by the BLS, supplemented by my own discussion with a BLS representative, demonstrates clearly that use of their materials for assessment of actual economic conditions of Black communities (or anyone else) is inappropriate at best and willfully misleading at worst. Specifically, the content of BLS reports on expenditures reflects only what are recorded surveys of incomes and spending. Secondly, BLS reports do not assess income inequality within the economy nor do they assess at all wealth levels of various groups. Thirdly, BLS reports that calculate total spending levels do not account for what purchases are made on credit. And finally, when asked directly about the use of their reports by McKinsey & Co. specifically, I was told that the BLS does not support their conclusions regarding buying, or purchasing, "power," or any which suggest their data measure the actual economic condition of Black (any) communities (Thomas Johnson, BLS spokesperson, personal communication, April 27, 2022).

More specifically, and for example, the median income for Black America was reported in 2018 at $40,258 (Wilson 2018), and there are roughly 40 million African Americans in the United States. For there to be what is popularly understood as more than $1 trillion in buying power this would mean each and every single Black person would have to spend at least every single penny earned. Every woman, child, and man, regardless of age, would have to spend it all to amass the claimed numbers. 40 million times 40 thousand is 1.6 trillion. None of this accounts for what people owe, what goods, or wealth-producing assets are available, or how any of this spending could currently be organized and directed in any meaningful way or with what impact. None of what actually matters to an economy or in determining economic condition, strength, potential, etc., is considered by anyone making claims about buying power.

For one example, between 1992 and 2012, Black people created more than 2 million businesses, but their capture of national sales revenue went *down* from a mere 1% to 0.05% (Muhammad et al. 2021). Big buying power numbers and trillion dollar figures sound great, but they speak nothing about an economy or where people are within. Black businesses target mostly Black consumers who themselves have the lowest levels of wealth and income. An absence of outside investment, access to venture capital, business loans, or the political power necessary for bid-selection, zoning, tax and tariff intervention, etc., all conspire to assure that even when pursuing popularly encouraged entrepreneurial solutions those efforts cannot succeed. Buying power does not explain an economy, income inequality, where wealth is or how it is defined and generated, nor does buying power consider political economy or the relationship between policy, the economy, and political power.

Buying power numbers do not reflect income inequality or that fact that, "[a]s of the first quarter of 2022, the median White worker made 27 percent more than the typical Black worker and around 333 percent more than the median Latinx worker" (inequality.org 2022). And when measurements of wealth are made, a far more accurate assessment of actual economic condition, the projections make claims of power more dubious:

> If the racial wealth divide is left unaddressed *and is not exacerbated further over the next eight years*, median Black household wealth is on a path to hit *zero* by 2053—about 10 years after it is projected that racial minorities will comprise the majority of the nation's population. (Muhammad et al. 2017, emphases added)

And further:

> With the US set to become "majority minority" by 2044, researchers say this spells major economic peril for the nation. "If the racial wealth divide continues to accelerate, the economic conditions of black and Latino households will have an increasingly adverse impact on the economy writ large, *because the majority of US households will no longer have enough wealth to stake their claim in the middle class*." (Lartey 2017, emphasis added)

Another leading researcher on the subject of Black economic history has put recently, at 1% Black America retains today roughly the same percentage of the national wealth held in 1863 (Baradaran 2017, 9), and as yet another study concludes, regardless of the quality or condition of the national economy Black people remain always in a "permanent recession" (Austin 2008). More still, what are described as wealth and income "gaps" between Black and White America continue either to widen or show signs of closing at rates which will literally take hundreds of years to achieve parity (United for a Fair Economy 2004–2019). How then can there be so much "power" in buying? How then can power be redefined as every Black person, including those too old or young to even be in the workforce, retaining none of what they earn?

Black people have little money and less wealth. As will be detailed below through a comparative review of related journalism, the reality of Black economic life is often un-reflected and even suppressed beneath more wishful or fanciful emphases and interpretations. Relative to the national economy, and White America, against which economic gaps are measured, Black people, at roughly 14% of the population, represent, or constitute, or maintain, a paltry 1% of the national wealth. If all the deposits in all the country's so-called minority banks were combined into one, it would rank 16th in the United States for total deposits and would still be hundreds of billions of dollars behind just the top 3 banks alone. And even within the false construct of buying power Black people still only have 8 percent of the whole. Black people earn far less than their White counterparts regardless of, even in spite of, education levels. Inherent national anti-Blackness means that socioeconomically the value of homes owned by Black people drops rendering largely meaningless even the idea of homeownership as a pathway to economic equality. Indeed, in all areas of life, the "cost of Blackness" (Austin 2016) renders meaningless most claims of economic or material advance. Incarceration, police violence and surveillance, media-related trauma, health care, and more all point to conditions which can only be said to be improvements over already inappropriate standards for human existence. But mostly, it remains still, as the late legendary legal scholar Derrick Bell once summarized, that inequality is a matter of intentional public policy, not an issue of individual or community behavior. In fact, as Bell put it:

> [i]f the nation's policies towards blacks were revised to require weekly, random round-ups of several hundred blacks who were then taken to a secluded place and shot, that policy would be more dramatic, but hardly different in result, than the policies now in effect, which most of us feel powerless to change. (Bell 1999)

It is perhaps this underlying sense of powerlessness which assists the effectiveness of the messaging which encourages a hope, or sense of real power, in the most welcomed, apolitical, and unthreatening activity; consuming. But the meaning of power is perversely distorted by the myth. Helped by the reporting of this issue, many mistakenly take power in the phrase buying power to mean something which resembles a form of real social, political, or even economic strength. With comparisons to other nations, repetitious display of headlines touting enormous sums like "$1 + trillion," and with carefully constructed narratives which suggest that true collective life change can occur if only these sums were more intelligently put to use, the idea for many becomes that buying power is something that it is not.

Power, in the phrase buying power, is not what economists consider when assessing the economic health of a group or country. Buying power is not wealth, it cannot be invested at will and used to create more for its investors. Buying power is not stocks, bonds, or land, and is not even real estate, it cannot be built upon, renovated, or flipped. Buying power is not income, it is not earned in exchange for labor and it cannot be spent at will or used to pay one bill versus another. Buying power has its origins in government labor statistics meant to help assess where wages should be set relative to inflation but is now, today, mostly a phrase created and propagated by marketers in an attempt to assist the business community govern its advertising revenue. Power, in the phrase buying power, strictly means the power consumers have to buy one available product over another. Put another way, power, in the phrase buying power, means only the power to generate wealth for one corporation or another.

The studies from which most national discussion of buying power come are to be credited for being clear that their reports do not in any way relate to what most think of as genuine economic strength. They do point out that their work is not an assessment of wealth, income, ownership, etc., the true indicators of economic strength. Where the reports' authors fall most short is in clarifying the methods used to reach their conclusions and in clarifying in the press which carries those conclusions that these are not statements on actual economic condition. It is primarily through the practice of popular journalism and commentary that allow the word power, in the phrase buying power, to lose all meaning. The term "power" is redefined to mean shopping but works to confuse potentially powerful communities and energies into what advertisers want most which are consumers whose acts of generating wealth for others are magically redefined into a concept of individual and collective political, economic, or social power.

The ability to turn the concept of power into a simple act of consuming what others own and produce is what makes the issue of buying power one more of propaganda than one of economics. Beginning in 2009, I began producing commentaries and subsequent research attempting to trace the origins of the concept of buying power and its popular dissemination in an effort to reconcile previously described inconsistencies between economic realities and the incessant claim that there lies dormant this currently incapacitated economic giant of buying power strength. What follows expands upon ten years of tracking various reporting of buying power and related economic studies in an effort to identify the process by which the myth is developed and disseminated, and to estimate its impact.

What I have found is that today Black buying power claims emerge from surveys of Black consumers conducted by the media monitoring group Nielsen, increasingly McKinsey & Co., and often without attribution, from the more dominant source the Selig Center for Economic Study based in the Terry Business School within the Bank of America building in Athens, Georgia. In each case, Nielsen, Selig, and McKinsey make clear in various ways that buying power is not a measure of economic strength, and that it is a phrase meant to help the business community address itself to potential consumers. And yet, in each case, the numbers of all three are derived via similarly poor methodologies, are popularly misinterpreted, and then even more poorly reported by conventional presses and media.

What magnifies the impact of buying power claims is that they are largely promoted by, and even the product of, a Black commercial press who would transform the original concept into one designed to specifically target Black audiences. Beginning with John H. Johnson and carried throughout Black commercial media to today via the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA), Roland Martin, Earn Your Leisure, Million Dollaz Worth of Game, Ian Dunlap, through popular journalists, academics, and media personalities such as Tavis Smiley, Tom Joyner, Karen Hunter, Hill Harper, Steve Harvey, and Dr. Julianne Malveaux, even traditional Civil Rights organizations, including the Urban League and the NAACP, the myth has been propagated for two primary reasons. The first, less known, and garnering far less attention in the overall conversation is that buying power is used as a means to attract advertising revenue by convincing White corporations of the potential in the Black consumer. The second reason for so heavily propagating the myth, far more popular, and far more mythological, is as a means of collective uplift or empowerment. Buying power largely then becomes a way for contemporary leadership or punditry to rebrand particular, and more conservative, traditions of Black political struggle absent meaningful examination of the histories of these claims, their shortcomings, or criticism.

Traditions of Black political struggle which are most heavily promoted are those for which commercial presses have traditional political and economic preference; traditions which favor entrepreneurial or business elements of Black politics. Routinely in these presses, Black buying power will be brought into discussions where allusions are made to moments in history when Black business seemed on the rise or more well valued as part of struggles for freedom. This was the case recently when Black buying power was raised in a defense of reparations where it was argued that instead of cash Black people need another Black Wall Street (Coard 2019). In a piece titled, "#BuyBlack Reinforces Efforts from Civil Rights," a defense of the #BuyBlack campaign, the myth of Black buying power was mentioned within an allusion to traditions of Black political struggle which emphasized more conservative notions of self-help, Black business, and Black capitalism:

> The idea of black capitalism goes back many decades, according to an NPR report which cited civil rights activists Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey advocacy for African-Americans to create and do business with their own to build wealth in their community. (Brown 2016)

Focus on Garvey and Washington as doing "business with their own" and as engaging in "black capitalism" is in part routine and results from a bias rampant within commercial presses and media. Promoting entrepreneurial pathways to freedom works well for a business class propagating those ideas in their commercial media as a method of generating revenue from advertising purchased by White corporations. Many Black political luminaries and aspirants have engaged forms of Black capitalism, what Ofari described as "economic nationalism," and many have then and still promoted buying power as having value in advancing the plight of Black people. Before even the first government report to include the development of buying power as "Cost-of-Living" studies in 1904, the concept had already evolved within Black political and business circles.

In 1897, for instance, the world's first Black woman law professor, Lutie A. Lytle, was already describing racism's ability to "degrade black buying power and credit" as she, and many others, would seek to expand Black enterprise into Black consumer spaces previously abandoned by Whites (Henderson, 2017). And by 1900 Booker T. Washington had established the National Negro Business League (NNBL) to help fill that void. The NNBL and Washington worked explicitly within the logic that Black business was key to Black collective improvement and his elevation to prominence helped, to this day, to promote the same. As a result of those lesser known like Lytle and those most prominent still like Washington, the business enterprise approach to Black struggle and the particular incorporation of the concept of buying power would soon dominate Black political discourse:

> By the end of World War I, two clear variants of how to achieve an independent black economic nation dominated the historiography. The first focused on African American business development and entrepreneurial leadership and the second on leveraging African American *consumer buying power* and grassroots leadership. In practice, however, the two strains often overlapped; people spent their money and participated in the separate group economy in ways that crossed such intellectual categories. (Garrett-Scott 2009, emphasis added)

So popular would the concept become, the idea that Black consumption equated in any way to legitimate forms of [political] power, it, according to Harris, had "[s]ince the depression … won over a growing number of adherents" (180). The growth of the mythology would include attendant sloganeering from "Bigger and Better Negro Business," to "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work," control over the "Black Dollar." Today, we have #BuyBlack, #BankBlack, and still references to the need for Black people to "circulate the Black dollar" and all resulting from the same Black elite desires to mimic White capitalism within fantasies of segregated economies and an ability to avoid the work of political organization and struggle. Then as now the ability of a Black elite to promote their preferred method of change leads to even those with varying radical politics to misinterpret the concept of buying power in an attempt to bend it to their more revolutionary projects. So even amid their rivalry by 1925 Marcus Garvey was promoting the concept of Black buying power within his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and *Negro World* newspapers and chastising rival W. E. B. DuBois for belatedly realizing that the "buying power of the Negro is the most tremendous force within his reach today" (Mislan 2013).

By 1932, economist Paul K. Edwards published *The Southern Urban Negro as a Consumer* which offered, "the first scholarly research that focused on minority consumers" (Cui 2001, 24) a groundbreaking and detailed analysis of Black consumer habits, marketing trends, and the "negative attitudes" of many Black consumers toward White advertising. And it would be immediately put to use in service of White business interests and set in motion a relationship between Black consumer marketing materials, Black political and social movements, and White commercial interests:

> Using Edwards' work as its inspiration, the white advertising firm W. B. Ziff and Company published *The Negro Market* in 1932, and devoted an entire Rate Book to the subject *The Negro Field* in 1934. Beginning in the 1920s, advertising executive William Ziff worked closely with major African American newspapers. He also encouraged white-owned companies to capitalize on Negro buying power and to increase their volume of advertising in the African American press. (Garrett-Scott 2009)

But it is the reduction of Black political struggles to variations of capitalist endeavor which further impose limitations on understanding these histories, their shortcomings, and on ideas of what can still yet be done. Commercial interests, Black and White, have from the start, become infused into, and even to dominate, the full range of Black political consciousness. And as a heavily promoted product of those commercial interests buying power as a concept has come to play a particularly powerful role in Black politics and in inhibiting a better understanding of capitalism or the promise it offers as a solution. Before engaging more meaningfully the contradiction of capitalist enterprise as a collective salve, there will need to be a confrontation or reckoning with heavily promoted mythologies such as this one, an idea promoted for decades by a business and marketing class but taken by so many as progressive, even militant, radical, activist tactic. Again, Ofari remains correct:

> … [the] lesson is that no matter how large or well-organized a black political or social movement becomes, those involved must be equipped with the proper understanding of the American economic order. Unless they are, they will never use the correct approach in determining methods for the struggle against the conditions of corporate capitalism which are impoverishing black America. (Ofari 39)

Difficulty in learning this lesson extends largely from that fact that the struggle to understand the "American economic order," never mind just buying power, is exacerbated by a particular historical context and media environment. New media technology often confuses the issue, but it remains that our media environment is one largely constructed and run by the most elite corporations and private equity groups the world has ever seen. Internet media are still delivered by a handful of corporate owners, and these owners are themselves directly or indirectly, via interlocking boards of directors, politics, race, gender, and class bias, linked assuring that what we see, read, and hear, even in the new media age in which we find ourselves, is carefully manicured. The choreographed nature of that media leaves room for debate perhaps in the realm of impact but not at all in intent. In fact, propaganda, "{a}s a process of persuasion, it is value neutral… it is *the intention behind the propaganda that demands scrutiny*, and it is that intention which begs value judgments, not the propaganda itself" (Snow 2014, emphasis added).

Propaganda, consciously targeted messaging meant to impact, limit, manipulate, and form public opinion, is, "… any organized or concerted group effort or movement to spread a particular doctrine or a system of doctrines or principles. It is mass persuasion with a purpose that advantages the sender" (Snow 2003, 61). Propaganda is also, "understood to have a persuasive function, intend to reach a sizeable target audience, be representative of a specific group's agenda and make use of faulty reasoning and/or emotional appeals" (Simmons 2019).

And today propaganda has been described as, "the primary means by which the elite communicate with the rest of us" (Noble, 2010). Just in the United States alone propaganda has been essential to the development of national myths of origin (Bradley, 1998), and a construction of an anti-Black consciousness, described by W.E.B. DuBois as the "Propaganda of History" (DuBois 1935, 711), meant as both a multimedia and multi-form attack against Black people and one meant also to establish a false consciousness of a singular superior and White humanity. As DuBois was reaching his conclusions, the field of communication studies was evolving as an extension of the commercial and political elite and their particular interests in developing a new White American identity, an ability to manipulate that identity for support of war, and, a particular concept of the citizen as consumer, wedding the notions of democracy and capitalism into a new consumer consciousness. Included in this process was the popular rebranding of propaganda as public relations, marketing, or advertising.

The long and global history of propaganda would in the United States take on a particular importance, power, and relevance in the twentieth century. Government funding of communication studies research increased as methods for supporting war efforts, propagandizing the enemy, and generating support (and enlistment) at home, were evolved and imported domestically as methods of developing consumers, creating new citizens out of (European) immigrants, as well as discrediting dissidents and dissident movements (Simpson 1994, 1999). Today, while there may be renewed claims of foreign government infiltration and influence of U.S. media, that media is already awash in so much commercial and government interests that outside messaging struggles to find room. In 2018 alone, U.S. commercial media collected $163 billion in ad revenue from just the top 200 ad buyers assuring that historic arguments regarding corporate influence over media content, framing, and bias remain as relevant as ever (Advertising Age 2019).

Similarly, further complicating the matter, so much of what is often dismissed as "entertainment" is itself the product of U.S. intelligence agencies and public relations meaning that even our favorite television shows are often dramatized (or comedic) ideological, political advertising delivered between more overt commercial marketing. The number of pro-U.S. military and police programming written, produced, directed by current or former intelligence agents is nearly 2000 in television alone (Alford & Secker 2017). What is promoted as "news" is often government, military, and commercial interest packaged as objective reporting to disguise its function as "message force multiplication" (Barstow 2008).

Propaganda has been commercialized as public relations, popularized as brand marketing, and militarized as psychological warfare. It is no wonder that media theorist Marshall McLuhan once described advertising as a "vast military operation," which helps in reducing us all to fish who could not have discovered water because "… an all-pervasive environment is always beyond perception" (McMahon & Sobelman 2002).

Ultimately, the myth of Black buying power is bolstered in its ominousness by a national demographic shift toward becoming "majority-minority" but in such a way that matches a media system already in place and described as one of "apartheid" (Gonzales & Torres 2011). That is, we already have a majority population of so-called people of color, women, and the poor, who are relegated to accept an imposed media environment produced by and for a *minority* affluent White population. Or, as has been said, our economic and social reality is fast coming to match an apartheid already existing in our media (Ball 2014). Exploring the origins and rise of the myth of Black buying power shows how that affluent White minority projects its interests by promoting them via ad spending in Black media.

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CHAPTER 3

Buying Power Not Protest: The Myth Prevents Unrest

Abstract The history of buying power is all but entirely neglected but reveals plenty regarding its deployment today. Buying power originated as a focal point of study precisely to assure societal peace based upon working people being able to afford the products they produced. From there, buying power would be adapted by government, business, and both White and Black commercial presses and used to promote a Black economic unreality designed to attract and direct advertising revenue.

Keywords Labor movement · World War II · Marketing · Propaganda

It is a fascinating paradox that buying power as a concept originates in late nineteenth-century tensions between U.S. workers wanting to compel honest and accurate government assessment of their conditions, and government wanting to use that research to alleviate those concerns in an effort to prevent rebellion. Workers wanted proof of the actual value of their earnings to show whether they were indeed earning a wage commensurate with the value of what their labor produced and assurance that those wages could increasingly keep up with (if not surpass) the rising costs of goods and other services. Working people wanted evidence that their incomes were enough to survive, if not advance, in a growing and changing national economy. The government wanted the research to

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help manage the growing gaps and related tensions between what workers were being paid, what owners were making, and where goods were priced.

Today, the concept of buying power is largely used *against* an advancing working-class consciousness with an effect that is primarily to falsely convince audiences of an economic reality which simply does not exist. Rather than informing, in this case Black people of their actual condition relative to the economy, the actual value of money earned, and what that money can or cannot do within the national economy, buying power is used to weaken understanding while promoting a non-existent [economic] strength. That fascinating paradox is exposed when it is unraveled that studies initiated by the federal government to reduce strife between public labor and private capital by informing all involved of their precise conditions have largely come to do just that by instead convincing all relevant parties falsely of their current conditions using imprecise reports produced privately and imposed on a largely misinformed public.

The concept of buying power comes originally from government statistics generated by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). In fact, the definitive history of the bureau, *The First 100 Years of the Bureau Of Labor Statistics* (Goldberg & Moye 1985), quite serendipitously has as its literal opening line:

> This volume reports the first century of a government agency whose founders hoped that, by publishing facts about economic conditions, *the agency would help end strife between capital and labor*. (iii, emphasis added)

A bit further, it is explained that the BLS itself is an extension of a bill signed by the 21st President of the U.S. Chester A. Arthur which established the Bureau of Labor within the Department of the Interior on June 27, 1884, in partial response to the previous two decades which:

> … had seen vast changes in the American economy and society. A truly national economy was developing, epitomized but the transcontinental railroads. Industry was attracting increasing numbers of unskilled workers, recruited from among immigrants, freedmen, women, and children, into the urban centers. *And, with the emergence of the industrial worker, unemployment, slum conditions, and labor unrest were all on the rise.* (1 emphasis added)

The arsenal deployed nationally to address the increased class disparities which developed as the new economy and society emerged in the decades following the Civil War included the idea that dissemination of information about economic realities would help politicians and business owners manage them. Specific to buying power, BLS studies would eventually develop to include "Cost-Of-Living" studies meant to assess the exact value of money earned by working people to determine how much of *what was available for purchase* that money could buy. Out of those studies came direct focus on "purchasing power" which has never been about assessing the strength or potential of the working people to overcome poverty or a depressed class position. From the start purchasing (buying) power has been meant as a measurement of what workers could buy and a measurement by which leaders of business and government could work in unison to assure that workers' wages were low enough to assure maximum profit for ownership while sufficient enough to buy what was produced. Striking such a balance would bring societal peace and, equally important, the uninterrupted proper function of business.

This is the true definition of buying power; a measurement of how much working people can buy with the money they earn from their work. The very purpose of taking the initial measurement was to gauge how much working people earned, how much that money could pay for, and at what point the gap between the two would lead to further rebellion. Keeping as low as possible the gap between what workers were paid and what that money can actually afford was seen from the start as essential to balancing inherent tensions between capital's desire to replicate itself as wealth for a tiny few and the work required from a largely impoverished and powerless class of working people to produce that wealth.

Initially, the politics of buying power projections were clearly understood by a more vibrant, organized, and loud labor movement of the time. The first report in 1904 claimed the previous decade or so witnessed hourly wage increases outpace increases in the price of food meaning there had been an "… increase in purchasing power of the hourly wage, [of] 5.4 percent." Immediately, there were "sharp reactions" as many raised concerns over method, politics, and a set of rosy outcomes that did not match the lived realities of those facing "… industrial unrest and strikes due to layoffs, wage reductions, and *reduced purchasing power* following the panic of 1903…" (Goldberg and Moye 37, emphasis added). From the very beginning, the optimistic claims of buying power did not match the actual economic realities of the day and, specifically, of those most negatively affected by any misrepresentations of fact. From the start, the politics and methodology behind the development of purchasing power claims were challenged. However, today, they are taken as rote, unquestioned, and even inherent to any process of advancing the economic, political, and social conditions of, *at least one segment of*, oppressed communities.

How then did we get from working people initially, and correctly, identifying the emptiness of a claim of power associated with consumption to a point today where, not only are these critiques largely disappeared, but, and particularly within Black America, there is an outright and vigorously defended acceptance of these claims that buying power is real and an essential component of a nearly and always potential collective rise? One part of that answer is in the previously mentioned business traditions developed upon immediately following enslavement and promoted by an evolving class of Black entrepreneurs. The development of separate Black communities with seemingly separate economies suggested the real ability for some to achieve degrees of income and wealth. But it was the ability of the Black business class to project that possibility to the whole which continues to confound understanding and subsequent planning.

The greater part of the answer as to how we got here is found in the post-World War II shift in national and Black-targeted media messaging most of which would come directly from the Black business and media ownership class itself. As an extreme subset of a broad, and deeply ingrained national concern with [potential] strife caused by an increasing national divide along class lines, and exploited labor, Black America would be targeted with marketing specific to claims of buying power in the years following World War II meant to appease the needs of attracting ad revenue and to lower the volume of Black social unrest. Some of this was done to capture the relatively few dollars emanating from a Black community a bit better off after a burgeoning war economy was forced to make some room for Black labor. Some of this was done to mitigate increasing political protest which included many Black soldiers returning from the war seeking the rights at home so vigorously defended by a Black press and a well-known "Double V" campaign; victory for the Allies overseas and victory for Black civil rights in the United States. And included in those rights was the right also defended by the commercial Black press; the right to relatively conservative, business, and middle-class aspirations and matching politics.

The precedent of promoting an entrepreneurial class consciousness took new form with a previously unprecedented Black-owned and Black-targeting media as a driving force. Rather than supporting calls from among Black political movements for radical redistribution of an existing tremendous national wealth, power was redefined away from political power, and redistribution, and toward consumption. For example, the singularly influential Black media owner John H. Johnson, famously of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines, took to promoting what would one day be the form of Black power rebranded by Richard Nixon as entrepreneurialism and consumption and helped develop an approach to capturing Black consumers which remains dominant today. Johnson produced *The Secret of Selling the Negro,* a brilliant marketing video which, in 1954, launched an updated approach to the Black business tradition of political struggle, one focused on economics, and not politics, and with an emphasis on attracting White corporate advertising money. With a powerful media arm at his disposal, and a keen awareness of how to move Black people, Johnson was able to package and deliver a message of middle-class, aspirational, Black pride, one attractive to many within Black America, and as many within White business circles. For Johnson and others within a Black elite:

> … racism was not a problem that was endemic to American society; instead it was a temporary shortcoming that could be overcome through expanded interracial understanding, genteel public comportment, and *veritable desegregation of the free market*. In order for this to happen, though, white economic powerbrokers had to be made aware of the "goldmine in their backyard." From Johnson, these influential businessmen needed to learn "the secret of selling the Negro" and recognize that they stood to benefit from the full incorporation and unrestricted participation of African Americans in the American free market. *Johnson assured white corporate interests that capitalist competition and robust consumerism were good for everybody, even African Americans suffering under the heel of Jim Crow*. (Fenderson 2019, emphasis added)

The Secret of Selling the Negro could be read today as the blueprint for a two-pronged marketing formula developed to both sell an audience on the concept of Black buying power and sell that same Black audience to the largest White companies with the largest advertising budgets. The original 1954 video depicts a Black population quite inconsistent with the reality of evolving political struggles themselves escalating into what would emerge as the Civil Rights Movement and known by many around the world to be the Black contribution to international anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements. The Johnson video promotes Black America as anything but increasingly hostile revolutionaries. Instead, the propagandized view of Black America presented by Johnson was as good as any of the propaganda of the day developed and distributed around the world by the U.S. State Department to promote a fictitious national racial harmony. Just like the Black entertainers sent around the world during the 1950s as part of an effort by the United States to project an image of itself abroad as free, democratic, and absent racial conflict, the Johnson product showed a Black community enjoying a growing economy at home and becoming its own powerful consumer base ready to have an increased income targeted by advertisers.

The first scene of *The Secret of Selling the Negro* is of the very White, business-suited, Bob Trout, reading the latest news release on his teletype informing him that the Secretary of Commerce announced a quadrupling of wages earned by "… the average Negro." Trout then excitedly walks off to share the good news. That good news, as he explains, is "… *good for business…*"—not Black communal economic strengths or needs—in that there is an untapped resource, or a "fresh [and] neglected market…" of Black consumers with "… $15 billion…" in spending. And a few minutes later, minute 3:44 to be exact, is the utterance of the famous claim, this time given sound, and visuals with talented, attractive Black actors, becoming its weaponized propagated form; "buying power."

Even more telling is that *The Secret…* includes, as "… a first-hand report…" on the matter of Black buying power, a statement from then head of the Department of Commerce Sinclair Weeks, which also initiated a continuing trend of confusing the definition and meaning of buying power by attaching the concept entirely to income. Weeks says, "The tremendous buying power of [Black people] is backed, of course, by an increased earning power. The average Negro's family income is at a record high… As a whole, the entire Negro market, has a total income of about $15 billion…" Weeks goes on to further solidify the frame, or approach upon which future claims would be based, namely that this buying power is seen in how much Black people spend on household goods, music, cosmetics, and food. Weeks also lays the groundwork for extrapolating a buying power from increased Black college enrollment and income, variables known now, though not as heavily reported, to be irrelevant to closing Black-White income and wealth inequities.

This is buying power in its most honest form; not an assessment of the actual economic condition of African America, but rather, buying power is shown by the Johnson video as merely an abstract claim to attract White corporate advertising dollars to be spent in Black media outlets. The heavily promoted but unreal claims of an economic vitality among consumers helped turn buying power as a concept from largely an empty branding or marketing mechanism meant to help shift White corporate ad dollars to Black media to one whereby Black consumers are magically metamorphosed into a non-threatening, fully American, and economically determinant market. And it worked. So well in fact that:

> … among ad industry historians [… *Selling the Negro*] is hailed as one of the Top 10 industrial films of all time, not because it was particularly good, but because it was *amazingly effective*. It would be just the first salvo in an increasingly confrontational campaign of ads and tactics Johnson would use over the next decades to challenge and prod mainstream advertisers into moving ad budgets into black publications. Or at least his black publications. (Easter 2017, emphasis added)

The Johnson media product meant, again, only to wed White corporations and advertisers with Black consumers, concretizes beautifully how the myth of Black buying power was developed and how it has been particularly deployed targeting Black audiences. The title is itself wonderfully explanatory. The secret was to convince White advertisers to spend money in Black/Johnson-owned media spaces and then also to convince both Black and White America that such myth promulgation would be the requisite solution to increasing material inequality. And finally, the film's secret was to convince Black people themselves that consumption is itself power or is a pathway to power. It is indeed the Black community, again, in a two-pronged approach, being sold to White advertisers, and then again being sold on the concept that buying power is economic strength. In fact, today, it is a core feature of Black commercial media, seeking to attract the largest sums possible from the largest White corporate sponsors, to make plain their ability to deliver Black consumers in exchange for huge advertising dollars which, again, nationally, by the top 200 ad buyers alone, was $163 billion in 2018. The mythic reference to and rise of the initial "$15 billion" in buying power to now more than "$1 trillion" has become a key feature of Black commercial media and been carried throughout every segment of the Black political spectrum penetrating deep into the collective Black political subconscious. Today, however, as buying power is said to increase the clarity regarding methods used to reach those conclusions decreases. Unlike the original (mis)conception where at least Weeks connects the $15 billion claim directly and exclusively to earned income, as will be shown, today that $1 trillion claim is further unmoored from reality and derived from far more murky methods tied only to projections, expectations, and extrapolations.

It stands to reason that the Johnson Co. marketing product would succeed given that the post-War era was one of the immense developments in the study and deployment of propaganda in the United States. New [media] strategies needed to be developed to manage what was also a moment of increased participation by Black people in the workforce, and in both a desire to be included in, and to radically change, the country's economic, political, and social landscape. The wreckage of World War II left the United States as the single dominant world power and Black people looking for a new role within that new world arrangement were confronted in part by new national messaging. The propaganda developed in the post-war era was itself repurposed psychological warfare meant as the communicative parallel to the economic shift in the country from military production to civilian consumption. And the exact same methods were used. In fact:

> The great Allied campaign to celebrate (or sell) Democracy, etc., was a venture so successful, and, it seemed, so noble, that it suddenly legitimized such propagandists, who, once the war had ended, went right to work massaging or exciting various publics on behalf of entities like General Motors, Procter & Gamble, John D. Rockefeller, General Electric. (Miller 2005, 12)

Further, explains Nancy Snow, "[t]here is no other country in the world that matches {the U.S.} for developing such close links between commerce (salesmanship) and the business of government (statesmanship). None" (2003, 26).

For instance, Edward Bernays, who rebranded propaganda as public relations after World War II to divorce the latter from its connection via the war to Nazi Germany, was fast developing a post-war method of rebranding the concepts of capitalism and democracy as being inextricably linked. His position as a leading corporate marketer, and nephew to Sigmund Freud, situated him perfectly as one interested in his uncle's study of mass psychology to use that research to manipulate people into becoming good consumers, read: perpetually unhappy and unfulfilled. Bernays understood the power of public opinion and that it should be those who made him rich for promoting theirs who should wield such power. He also understood the need to target emotion, not logic, to get best results. The creation of citizen-consumers required his post-World War II work of conceptually collapsing into one, capitalism-democracy. Once capitalism as an idea was wedded forever to democracy, the new arrangement meant consumption would not only bring the promise of self-fulfillment but would become an implicit expression of patriotism and freedom. Shopping meant being free and being free meant shopping. Bernays, as is done today at levels he could have only dreamed possible:

> … didn't simply sell products, but capitalism itself. He directed the publicity for the 1939 New York World Fair, with the theme "Democracity," *explicitly linking democracy and capitalism together in a utopian vision of the future*. Bernays foresaw the enthusiasm that now greets the release of every incrementally modified Apple product, says Donner: "We shifted from a culture in which people said, 'Behave and conform,' to a culture in which people said, 'Indulge yourself, enjoy yourself.' That spurs capitalism." And Freud's nephew truly believed that preying on such desires to encourage spending was key to a functioning democracy. *He thought the elite should be able to manipulate the masses into feeding the economy with their many purchases*. (Goodhill 2017, emphasis added)

Bernays understood the true meaning of buying power. Without use of the phrase itself Bernays recognized that the role of the majority was to be ruled by an elite few whose power would be administered through messaging, and in this case, specifically targeted with militarily precise advertising designed to ease the transfer of money upward and outward. Propaganda, he argued, should be incorporated into every facet of society, from education, to politics, arts, sciences, to social service. The more freedom democracy promised the more propaganda was necessary to assure that freedom be defined along carefully prescribed parameters. And he could not have been clearer:

> The conscious and intelligent *manipulation of the organized habits and opinions* of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. (Miller 37, emphasis added)

Bernays insisted there be a commercial influence over education and a continuity of propaganda from boardroom to classroom and back again leaving no spare moment for independent thought to occur. As he put it:

> The media by which special pleaders transmit their messages to the public through propaganda include all the means by which people today transmit their ideas to one another. *There is no means of human communication which may not also be a means of deliberate propaganda*, because propaganda is simply the establishing of reciprocal understanding between an individual and a group. (Miller 161, emphasis added)

Bernays saw propaganda as essential to a post-World War II establishment of the United States as a permanent and now singular world power. The reciprocity required for this new role meant that all media be bent to the will of society's owners and that the political will of the elite be tailored to every segment of society. The understanding to be reached was, and remains, that each categorized segment of the country be first created, segmented, and then messaged in ways that will assure the greatest levels of compliance. As concerns pertained to post-war American capitalism, media would need to play another role in helping expand the segmented category of "consumer" to include nearly everyone. As World War II ended the infrastructure which had been developed to produce materials for war was, rather than demolished, reconfigured to produce civilian goods for which there would need to be people able to buy them. Buying power's original purpose would be called back into play:

> As the war ended, government officials and policymakers had to figure out what to do with this new industrial capacity. Should the country simply close down the new factories and return to the level of output and unemployment that it had in 1940? Or should it convert the capacity to peacetime use, and come up with new sources of demand to replace government arms spending? … *the key to avoiding mass unemployment was to ensure sufficient aggregate demand*. As Robert Nathan, chair of the War Production Board's Planning Committee, put it, "If increased *buying power* can be gotten into the hands of consumers who will spend it for goods and services, American industry need not worry about finding markets for all it can produce, and produce profitably." (Manduca 2019, emphases added)

Further, it could be argued that Johnson's *Secret…* was in many ways merely taking cues from the highest levels of the federal government which was openly interested in having an increasing national consumer "purchasing power" save a struggling economy. President Harry Truman, also in 1954, made clear the importance of buying power:

> We must strengthen our economy at its base. The great base of our economy is consumer buying, which reflects the standards of living of the whole American people. We now need to raise the standard of living rapidly in order to keep up with fast growing productive power. To do this *we must increase consumer purchasing power and then the rest of the economy will automatically grow… In our of economy… wages have to rise as productivity increases. If wages don't go up, we have more goods than people can buy and that is one of the causes of depression….* (Levy 1954, emphasis added)

When it came to Black-targeted messaging, the suppression of dissent, and the (re)creation of Black people as consumers, an international approach made domestic was tailored further to Black audiences/targets but was no different in substance. Cold War procedures for handling traditional colonies, dissident populations, enemy combatants, and terrorist insurgents were applied domestically to Black America. This was done in part to create consumers but also largely out of fears that historical and persistent abuse might sway Black America toward rebellion and specifically toward a globally spreading communism. Surveillance, incarceration, infiltration of organizations, character assassination, marketing, and manipulation of popular image all were developed specifically for Black audiences/targets. Truman's concerns about the potential depressive effects of capital over labor at home were more than matched by his concerns of an apparent encroaching international "Red menace." Part of Truman's response was his signing in 1947 the National Security Act which led to the development of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to turn its wartime predecessor the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) into a peacetime operation with much the same purpose. And it would be the CIA, along with other intelligence gathering agencies in the federal government, who would help fund early communication studies research and have elements of those studied conclusions applied broadly throughout commercial marketing, entertainment, media, academia, and as part of illegal operations targeting Black Americans and others deemed internal threats to national security. Some of these efforts would later be organized as part of the CIA's Project MK-Ultra and those initiated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) under the Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO).

Part of a post-war peacetime shift of focus from the OSS to CIA was the bi-polar concerns of managing the international image of the newly emergent singular global superpower while also manipulating internal racial, labor, and class conflicts at home. One approach was to involve themselves in the development of academic fields of study whose research would be applied toward the development of an entire media and pop culture environment. As it relates to marketing, or the civilian-commercial application of propaganda and psychological warfare, the newly developing field of communication studies became a well-funded playground for the study of mass public opinion research. Specifically, what emerged during the 1950s was a:

> … symbiotic relationship between the academic discipline now called "mass communications" and the more shadowy entity that Americans called "psychological warfare," the British "political warfare," and the Germans, in perhaps the most telling expression of all, "Weltanschauungskrieg" ("worldview warfare")… By the early 1950s, agencies such as the Department of Defense, the U.S. Information Agency, and the CIA were spending "between $7 million and $13 million annually for university and think-tank studies of communication-related social psychology, communication effect studies, anthropological studies of foreign communication systems, overseas audience and foreign public opinion surveys, and similar projects. (Zenderland 1994, 264)

Without request, explanation, or even acknowledgment Black America was to be projected internationally as an image of an expanding and free United States. Domestically, that projected image was of Black America as a newly forming consumer market to be discouraged from political struggle and encouraged toward middle-class aspiration as part of what Frances Stonor Saunders has described as a *Cultural Cold War* (1999/2013).

This Cultural Cold War, as Saunders describes, was designed to "… to nudge the intelligentsia of Western Europe away from its lingering fascination with Marxism and Communism towards a view more accommodating of 'the American way.'" The "American Way" was euphemism for capitalism protected by a highly managed public opinion itself buttressed by a wide-ranging, multi-form, and multi-dimensional dissemination of manicured imagery and messaging. This attempt involved the covert federal government development of academia, art, literature, music, journalism, entertainment, and celebrity all meant to project an overwhelming positive image of the United States and of capitalism abroad. Though focused primarily on popular White participants, there were specific forms targeted directly at Black populations and image with the purpose of projecting a falsely harmonious view of the country to the world. For one example:

> The problem of race relations in America was much exploited by Soviet propaganda and left many Europeans uneasy about America's ability to practice the democracy she now claimed to be offering the world. It was therefore reasoned that the exporting of African Americans to perform in Europe would dispel such damaging perceptions. An American military government report of March 1947 revealed plans "to have top-rank American negro vocalists give concerts in Germany. . . . Marian Anderson or Dorothy Maynor appearances before German audiences would be of great importance." The promotion of black artists was to become an urgent priority for American cultural Cold Warriors. (Saunders 18)

By 2019, the Department of Defense, CIA, and FBI had been involved directly in the production of thousands of television and films all designed to present the world with "American-centric solutions to international problems" and to depict law enforcement and the U.S. military positively (Alford & Secker 2017, 2). But this is merely the logical conclusion of an industry origin so closely intertwined with state interests as to make any other outcome unlikely. Before its inception resulting from the 1947 National Security Act, the CIA had already been promoted in three 1946 films, including *O.S.S.* in which the script read, "'we need a central intelligence agency,' promoting this idea before the CIA even existed" (Alford & Secker, 30). Further, at 1943 memo from the OSS made clear the value held by the state in what is encouraged be seen as mere entertainment. Films, according to the memo, are among "'the most powerful propaganda weapons at the disposal of the United States' and 'a potent force in attitude formation' that 'can be employed on most of the major psychological warfare fronts' including the domestic civilian and military population" (Alford & Secker, 31). One function, directed domestically to Black America, was to promote an illusion of inclusion, a tactic suited perfectly to Johnson, the Black commercial class, and to the concept of buying power. As explained by the CIA:

> One report, dated January 24, 1953, concentrated on the problem of black stereotyping in Hollywood. Under the heading "Negroes in pictures," [CIA Agent Carelton] Alsop reported that he had secured the agreement of several casting directors to plant "well dressed negroes as a part of the American scene, without appearing too conspicuous or deliberate. 'Sangaree' which is shooting doesn't permit this kind of planting, unfortunately, because the picture is period and laid in the South. It will consequently show Plantation negroes. However, this is being off set to a certain degree, by planting a dignified negro butler in one of the principal's homes, and by giving him dialogue indicating he is a freed man and can work where he likes." Alsop also reported that "some negroes will be planted in the crowd scenes" in the comedy film Caddy (starring Jerry Lewis). *At a time when many "negroes" had as much chance of getting into a golf club as they had of getting the vote, this seemed optimistic indeed*. (Saunders 1999/2013, 244, emphasis added)

Johnson's *Selling the Negro* was a perfect domestic fit and performed the precise function desired by all manner of U.S. leadership at the time. What Johnson provided was a perfect vessel through which commercial and government interests could similarly distribute, and profit from, an image of an open, free, inclusive, democratic-capitalist society ready to lead the world.

In the decades following World War II, there would be both a rise and eventual decline of labor movement strength coupled with advances of new and ever-more-pervasive television and radio media technology expanding into households and vehicles everywhere allowing for more to be reached by even more messaging. Embedded in those ubiquitous messages were inducements to spend more and to develop more and more credit which by the 1970s was replacing real wage increases for workers as a way to allow people to continue shopping without actually being paid higher salaries. For Black consumers messaging targeted consumption and name brands as status now, after long last, finally available. But quite unlike any other community Black-targeted encouragements to spend took on decidedly political connotations and would continue to be redefined as genuine power.

The heavily promoted amounts of spending evolved with an attendant claim that these collective expenditures could be equated to a potential freedom similar to that found among individual private wealth or managed national federal budgets. In other words, the concept of buying power, initially developed to help the federal government manage social unrest created by an inequality between labor and ownership by *literally* keeping the gap small[er] between what workers earned and the cost of what they could buy, would become, especially when directed at Black America, a mythologized claim that all that is spent by Black people on goods and services could be used differently to lift them out of inequality and into genuine power. Buying power would be made fully synonymous with political power.

Buying power would also become a crucial part of the mechanism of managing Black rage and potential up rise in the years following the release of Johnson's marketing product. Relative advances in the national economy after World War II allowed for more Black women and men to find work, particularly as many moved South to North in another wave of the Great Migration. These new urban centers of Black life provided a sense of there being a localized economy and, to some, the appearance of an internally held separate Black economy, one which could be marshaled to benefit the community (or at least a relatively elite segment). Black print journalism expanded and Black radio emerged as a new dominant media force within Black America all of which aided the construction of a genuine sense of separateness.

Of course, these media were mere supplementary agents themselves sublimated to the primacy of both legal and extra-legal segregation. The forced physical displacement of entire Black communities and the creation of segregated worlds are what imposed an initial sense of an apparent power of an internally circulating Black dollar. However, disconnected from any meaningful participation in the broader economy those Black dollars could not become capital and, thus, could not expand. Without expansion as capital investment with returning profits, those small amounts of Black dollars circulating among other mostly poor Black people would never, have never, and can never generate wealth. But, unlike dollars which lose strength when circulating only within one community, myths in heavy circulation, as is the case with buying power, gain strength exponentially.

By the early 1960s, the commercial mainstream press in the United States, *The Wall Street Journal, Business Week, The New York Herald Tribune*, etc., would all be extolling the virtues of an increasing Black buying power that could specifically be called upon as a method of moving discussion of Black inequality away from militants and more toward moderate civil rights concerns for more Black employment, positive media representation, and access to mainstream politics. As

Stacy Kinlock Sewell explains, “A presumably new ‘Negro market’ had emerged, *according to management, retail, and advertising literature*” with an “annual purchasing power of $20 billion, ‘almost equal to that of all Canada.’” And this meant there was no longer a need, nor an ability, to refuse employment to Black workers because their presence would further entice Black consumerism from an increasingly unthreatening community. Not only was welcoming this buying power good for the calm of the country it was good business. And importantly, consumption was further concretized as liberating:

> The *democratizing potential of consumer culture* was not lost on one market researcher, who concluded that the purchase of quality items represented ‘one of the reads leading to what [the African American] regards as his rightful place in society… *Spending money is a direct weapon for achieving Negro rights*. (Sewell 138, emphases added)

Once an increasingly emboldened Black liberation movement took more of the national political center stage, the corporate world saw as one response greater inducements. And so it was that “[a]fter the beginning of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, economic conditions of minority consumers became a concern in American society…” and “[m]arketers were under much pressure to consider integrated advertising…” and to develop “‘A New Measure of Responsibility for Marketing’” (Cui 2001, 24).

The marketing was successful. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), and the National Urban League (NUL) would, even with their own political disagreements, all championed (still) variations of the claim of buying power to drive up advertising dollars spent in Black media, encourage White corporations to hire more Black employees, and promote their own political definitions of Black Power and progress over those of more radical or to their political Left. But those more militant organizations would also adapt their own politics to the same buying power mythology. But unlike previous use of the concept by the 1960s, buying power was increasingly being promoted a more commercial Black press itself supported by increasingly penetrative media technology. And no leader before or since has ever made better use of, or been more welcomed by, a national media than Malcolm X who as one of the most popular Black nationalists in history still has his references to buying power reverberate in Black media and public spheres. As he is often quoted as saying:

> Today [1960] the black man, according to the government economist, has spending power of $20 billion per year. We feel that with the black man spending $20 billion per year, not creating any businesses, not creating any industry, not creating any job opportunities for his own kind, he's not in a moral position to point the finger at the white man and say that he's discriminating against him for not giving him a job in factories that he himself set up. If the black man has $20 billion and these so-called Negroes are such geniuses that they can integrate white restaurants and white factories and force themselves into that which the white man has set up, they should use that same ingenuity to show the black people how to pool our wealth and set up something of our own. (Savali 2018)

Elements within more mainstream civil rights groups like CORE also championed buying power as proof of a need for more militancy. Baltimore CORE leader Danny Gant said in 1968:

> We must come to the defense of our black brothers and sisters when we see the white man mistreating one of them. When the white racist knows that you will defend yourself, and sees that black people are ready to stand together, and white people are laying dead in the streets, he will not love you, but he will begin to respect. Look, man, we have been articulating and philosophizing for years and nothing happens. We've been living for 400 years in bias and degradation. The progress is minimal, so menial. Here we are 22 million people with $25 billion buying power and we don't own a damn thing. (Gant 1968)

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at the end of his life, a point at which several have noted his advanced political radicalism, acknowledged the value of supporting Black business ultimately challenged the myth of buying power:

> Just as the Negro cannot achieve political power in isolation, neither can he gain economic power through separatism. *While there must be a continued emphasis on the need for blacks to pool their economic resources and withdraw consumer support from discriminating firms*, we must not be oblivious to the fact that the larger economic problems confronting the Negro community will only be solved by federal programs involving billions of dollars. One unfortunate thing about Black Power is that it gives priority to race

> precisely at a time when the impact of automation and other forces have made the economic question fundamental for blacks and whites alike. In this context a slogan "Power for Poor People" would be much more appropriate than the slogan "Black Power." (emphasis added)

King would go on:

> In short, the Negroes' problem cannot be solved unless *the whole of American society* takes a new turn toward greater economic justice. In a multiracial society no group can make it alone. It is a myth to believe that the Irish, the Italians and the Jews-the ethnic groups that Black Power advocates cite as justification for their views-rose to power through separatism. It is true that they stuck together. But their group unity was always enlarged by joining in alliances with other groups such as political machines and trade unions. To succeed in a pluralistic society, and an often hostile one at that, the Negro obviously needs organized strength, but that strength will only be effective when it is consolidated through constructive alliances with the majority group. (King 1968, pp. 50–51, emphasis added)

King was not oblivious to the limited value of Black consumption, boycotting, or of the "pool[ing] of economic resources," but he was also well aware that none of this would be enough. King's statement here was a critique of the conservative, Nixon rebranding of "Black Power" as "Black Capitalism," and his call for "constructive alliances with the majority group" was a politically progressive recognition that wealth distribution, not creation, was the problem. What would be necessary for an appropriate redistribution of the tremendous wealth produced annually by everyone's participation in the economy would be national political policy mandate, the "whole of American society," and such a mandate does indeed require alliances. This latter point was King's clarity around the inability to "gain economic power through separatism." Black capitalism is a fantasy which feeds and grows from social, political, and geographic separation. However, actual economic growth requires mobility and global access which can never occur in Black capitalist separatist illusions.

Encouragement, inducement, however, that Black politics move rightward toward Black capitalism would culminate by the early 1970s in President Richard Nixon's policies of promoting business and electoral politics as a means of rebranding Black Power away from its more radical and threatening pan-Africanist, nationalist, and socialist varieties (Ball 2018). As Robert Allen once described, "{Nixon declared} that the country must give black people a better share of economic and political power or risk permanent social turbulence… 'By this,' Nixon said, 'I speak not of black power as some of the extremists would interpret it… but … the power that comes from participation in the political and economic processes of society.'" In short, as Allen summarizes, "black capitalism" (Allen, pp. 227–228).

The existing traditions of Black capitalism, banking, and buying power would be given new life and levels of codification by the Nixon administration. The combination of their active promotion by first a leading Presidential candidate and then sitting President, combined with rapidly advancing new media technology (television, radio, including portable radios, cassettes, etc.), new stages of Black political movements, themselves influencing and influenced by other movements around the country and world, all helped to further concretize these ideas more than an any other time, and with lasting effect. Nixon's campaign made promises to support the development of Black capitalism, which involved government support for Black businesses through tax breaks and promises of investment, and though dismissed (accurately) by many as a mere tactic for election, the pre- and post-election focus on the project by the administration made a lasting impression.

In 1969, Nixon's administration launched the Office of Minority Business Enterprise (OMBE) housed within the Department of Commerce, but it was not long before lack of government investment, lack of Black businesses, and a lack of money within the Black community sufficient enough to propel those businesses meant that the project, as a method of improving the material conditions of Black people, could not succeed. The selected Black business and academic advisors forming the President's Advisory Council On Minority Business Enterprise offered a wide-ranging report in 1971 suggesting primarily that Black "economic integration" as a goal was best achieved by moving "minority business" from being a "marginal operation" to becoming more involved in the broader economy with its "higher growth and profitability potential." The council explained that "… the concept of 'minority enterprise' … grew from" the previous "… concept of 'black capitalism'" and that this should be extended to the "… larger concept of 'expanded ownership'" with a focus on this "providing a greater stake in the economic system for all socially and/or economically disadvantaged persons" (OMBE, 1).

The OMBE was gently making aware the fact that simply calling for support for Black business in Black neighborhoods was insufficient and that "economic integration" into the broader economy was the only way for any business to survive. As Baradaran said during our interview, "you can segregate people, but you cannot segregate money." Her's was a similar response to and critique of the claims still made today that Black people can improve themselves and their collective lot by shopping Black, investing Black, and "making the dollar rotate in our communities as it does in others." As Baradaran explained, wealth cannot be generated in this way because: (A) wealth is created by investments in the broader national and global economies, not by circulation within one isolated group or economy, and most relevant here, (B) Black people do not have enough money to generate, support, and sustain enough businesses who themselves can satisfy the consumer needs and wants of an entire Black community. When asked specifically, "has there at any point in Black history been a time when if all Black people pooled their wealth and used it collectively that they could have overturned their persistent inequality?" Her answer came quickly and was simple, "No" (Baradaran 2017).

The OMBE's reference in their report to the importance of "purchasing power" is itself important because its use refers back to the origins of the concept. The council's call that "purchasing power be utilized by both public {government} and private {corporate} sectors" to support Black businesses powerfully recognizes capitalism's dirty secret of the need for public/government backing and, particularly, how government investment in private business played a tremendous role in "… creating new market areas, particularly since World War II…" (OMBE, 4). It is also important to note here that the council appropriately defines "purchasing power" as the ability to subsidize businesses by specifically calling attention to the government's "$100 billion" annual expenditure for "goods and services" (34). Here, quite unlike today, Black leadership was targeting the buying power of the U.S. government for redistribution of tax dollars back to Black business as opposed to targeting the severely reduced relative (and mythological) buying power of Black people themselves to address economic inequality. But even then, and from even among the council membership itself, the program's viability was questioned. Darwin W. Bolden, executive director of the Interracial Council for Business Opportunity and member of the Advisory Council on Minority Business Enterprise, said not long after that, Nixon's Black capitalism was "non-existent" and "… he accused the Nixon administration of not following up on promises" of federal funding support (Johnson 1971).

This is precisely what many critics of Nixon's proposal say was the true goal of his proposed Black capitalism; promise support, as Baradaran has said, offers only "tax breaks and incentives," but with no meaningful investment, "Wanting a black capitalism without capital is exactly Mr. Nixon's legacy…" Rebranding and propagating the myth of Black capitalism were more to "… secure the support of white Southerners and to oppose meaningful economic reforms proposed by black activists" than it was meant as any meaningful attempt to redistribute access to resources or the wealth they produce (Baradaran 2019). Specifically, while there have always been competing Black political variations, there has also been a preference among the powerful that Black politics go in any direction away from all forms of the Left. The Leftist elements representing socialism, pan-Africanism, radical internationalism, and nationalism, even those promoting more mainstream liberal or progressive integration, were supplanted or simply run over by the promotion of more conservative alternatives. And Nixon, who felt that a burgeoning radicalism and Black Power movement was, "… a major threat to the internal security of the United States…" promoted his brand of Black capitalism and the OMBE as part of a deflective insulating response:

> Moreover, although OMBE provided only limited assistance to Black businesspeople and none of the numerous independent proposals for Black economic development came to full fruition, *the period's discourse regarding Black capitalism helped Nixon accomplish his larger ideological objective of "containing" potential domestic Black radicalism*. Despite the efforts of Foreman (1969), R. L. Allen (1969), Boggs (1971), and Ofari (1970), most African Americans apparently either gravitated toward the various derivatives of Black capitalism or toward Brimmer's call for complete integration into American society. (Weems & Randolph 2001, emphasis added)

Nixon's desire for "containment potential domestic Black radicalism" was simply his adherence to existing national policy. It was his internal Cold War. Already in motion was the Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), designed by J. Edgar Hoover and his Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and which was designed to attack all varieties of Left politics. Targeted specifically at the Black liberation movement, its expressed goal was to, in part, "prevent the long-range growth of militant black nationalist organizations, especially among youth," to "discredit" those deemed as "… [black] rabble-rouser leaders of these hate groups from spreading their philosophy publicly or through the communications media" (Churchill & Vander Wall 1990, 110). The subsequent "law and order" policing and a "war on drugs" policies of the Nixon administration, which were only more recently admitted to be Nixon's targeting of his "two enemies: the anti-war left and black people," (Lobianco 2016) were only part of a broader interest in limiting the form Black politics would take. Most relevant here is that these attacks left little room in a rapidly advancing, consolidated, and penetrative new media public sphere for critics of Black capitalism, or buying power.

It is the political and class arrangement between more conservative variants of Black nationalism and adherents to Black capitalism with the Nixonian-brand of Black Power which has propelled adherence to the myth of buying power over the earlier critiques or their evolving variants of Black radical politics and the like today. It is simply access to more organized and penetrative media (and punditry) that has clouded discussions of buying power, and capitalism more broadly speaking. That is, the contemporary form and popularized concept of buying power originates in desires of Black business wanting more advertising dollars for their media outlets, and today, it is the very descendants of that early Black-owned and Black-targeting media who now follow the same precise patterns of thought. From there, existing limitations and flaws prevalent in the dominant media environment take effect further circulating the mythology absent any vetting.

From its origins in government and business statistics meant to manage a rapidly unequal society buying power was largely reshaped in the mid-twentieth century by a Black commercial media and business class, encouraged and carried today, implanted deep within the Black political consciousness as an economic solution to inequality. Though not alone, John H. Johnson's originating promotional materials and print media empire consisting of *Ebony* and *Jet* were followed a generation later by another Johnson, Robert, no relation. This Johnson, and his multimedia empire consisting of Black Entertainment Television, along with media mogul Cathy Hughes' Radio One and Television One networks, and with the assistance of popular media personalities most notably Tavis Smiley and Tom Joyner, the myth of Black buying power would somehow create a forced inherency of sorts, and a new powerful ubiquity. As Joyner's sponsors have made clear:

> ABC [Radio Networks] signed Joyner in 1994. “When you have talent that has a loyal and dedicated audience, advertisers will pay a premium for that,” says [Traug] Keller. “We identified early on the Urban marketplace as an underserved area. *We focused on it because the buying power of African Americans, estimated at more than $572 billion*, is growing faster than the general market.” Today, there’s a waiting list to advertise on Joyner’s show and associate with his events. “Joyner has shown a flashlight on some of the ugly little secrets in our business,” explains Deborah Gray-Young, vp and director of media and strategic services for E. Morris Communications, which currently buys Joyner’s show for Wal-Mart. “He has pulled the cover back. There are still marketers that don’t understand the unique proposition of this segment and are always going to think that they can use mass media to capture the African-American consumer. (Bachman 2002, emphasis added)

Joyner, who announced his retirement in 2019, spent 25 years as a leading Black media figure whose own routine promotion of the myth is logical given that from the beginning his presence in commercial radio was tied inextricably to buying power’s promise. Though often ignored by scholars and activists due to its largely “older, working-class black audiences who are its base” (Leonardo 2008, 3), the *Tom Joyner Morning Show* (TJMS) was enormously popular and commercially well supported and, “[a]t his peak, Joyner said he was pulling in $14 million a year” (CBS News 2019). Be it as part of ABC Radio Networks, or any number of other corporate sponsors specific to the show itself, or Joyner’s co-ownership and syndication arrangement with Cathy Hughes’ Radio One and Reach Media, TJMS was part of a Black commercial media apparatus that helps generate and benefits from the myth of Black buying power. As will be discussed further in Chapters 3 and 4, today’s leading purveyors of the myth itself are the Black commercial press whose goals in this regard remain the same; promote a false Black economic reality to secure revenue.

For one example, during the height of Joyner’s run, in 2012, the true purpose of buying power was announced as part of a press release which included Joyner and Radio One’s Reach Media and an All-Star lineup of Black commercial press and public relations leaving little wonder how the concept is so heavily circulated. The headline read:

> BET Networks Partners with HuffPost BlackVoices, Black Enterprise, Burrell Communications, Cable Communications, Cable Advertising Bureau, Essence Communications, GlobalHue, Inner City Broadcasting Corporation, KJLH Radio, Johnson Publishing Company, National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters, Nielsen, North Star Group, National Newspapers Publishers Association, One Solution, Radio One, TV One, Interactive One, Reach Media, Steve Harvey Radio, TheGrio, The Root, The Africa Channel, Uniworld Group, Vibe Media and Walton Isaacson To Create History Making Black Media and Marketing Consortium.

As the press release continued:

> The consortium will use its collective resources and strength to speak to the advertising community and consumer audience to raise awareness and create a sense of urgency around the economic opportunity the black consumer segment presents. African American media has the unique ability to reach the African American consumer base directly and is an important resource in identifying and establishing trends within the black community. #INTHEBLACK aims to amplify the value of engaging African Americans through black targeted media and agencies. African Americans represent over 42 million strong consumers, product talkers and brand influencers *with a buying power of nearly one trillion dollars annually*. By 2015, African American buying power is estimated to gain a whopping 35% hitting 1.2 trillion dollars, up from $913 billion in 2008.* African Americans are mega consumers beating out all other ethnic groups in the consumption of automobiles, wine & spirits, baby care products, groceries, health and beauty products, personal care products, apparel, electronics, movies and travel and entertainment. (PR Newswire 2012, emphasis added)

Buying power is, on the one hand, properly defined as the ability to be "mega consumers" of routine commercial products. On the other hand, it is this constellation of Black commercial press and media which help, as is shown below, to promote this consumption as Black collective political power. The commercial press and media bias of procuring ad revenue is promoted to Black audiences as community economic and political power. But they have not been alone. It is not only the more conservative business and commercial press class alone who confuse or fall victim to the mythology.

Across the political spectrum, the myth, itself taken from the previously described media apparatus, is made performative via pundits, activists, economists, journalists, preachers, etc., carrying it to even more penetrative depths within the community. That no other community has buying power so heavily promoted, at all, never mind as a particular pathway to collective advance, gives Black buying power a uniquely pernicious and weaponized weight unmatched anywhere else. Enormously popular scholars and activists have helped carry the mythology throughout the Black grassroots political spectrum, via their meetings, books, and lectures (carried also for decades on cassette and VHS before moving online). Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan, Claud Anderson, Jawanza Kunjufu, the National Urban League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and countless others, many of them covered by the commercial Black press, have incorporated into their work the myth of buying power and have helped the myth circulate within the Black public sphere for decades. And after decades of the myth's promotion by 1994, and the emergence of reports from the Selig Center, buying power was ready for full inception into the Black political mind.

If there is a single exemplar of Black movement academics and politics adopting the myth of Black buying power, it is Dr. Amos Wilson. Perhaps no single intellectual as done more to influence elements of the Black radical activist, intellectual underground of the twentieth century. And none have put the myth to more influential use. Few involved in nearly all varieties of Black politics, particularly those Left of mainstream politics, and most particularly those within various African-centered, nationalist, academic, intellectual, even Black conscious entrepreneurial circles would not have by now read or come to know the work of Amos Wilson. Be it through his numerous books or lecture tapes distributed across a vast network of Black bookstores, websites, or activist group discussions, and academic presentations, Wilson's work is among the most discussed. And his *Blueprint For Black Power* (1998) is for many his most culminating body of work and a central point of reference still to this day. It is also through Wilson's body of work that many have found their most enduring and legitimating source for the support of the myth of Black buying power.

Wilson's determination to develop an all-encompassing cultural and material plan for Black people makes him still a central figure in the transfer of the earliest applications of the mythology described earlier by those seeking methods for circumnavigating the maze of U.S. White supremacy and capitalism to the modern era. And it is no surprise then that Wilson was among the earliest to make reference to the first report from the Selig Center. In his *Blueprint…* chapter on Black consumerism Wilson develops upon the very tradition previously mentioned and expands the economic platform described by W. E. B. DuBois in his own 1940 autobiography *The Dusk of Dawn*. Specifically, Wilson was attempting to build his approach to Black buying power from DuBois' call for a Black cooperative economic effort designed to address the needs of Black consumers. Wilson's reading of DuBois would be worthy of its own separate assessment; however, it is only mentioned here to point out that while most familiar with Wilson would likely associate him more with Marcus Garvey, a proponent of the concept himself, it was DuBois' variant from which Wilson worked showing again that when it comes to buying power there is relative agreement across an expanse of the Black political landscape.

The preceding decades of promotion of buying power likely eased the process by which Selig Center reports would seemingly make official those long-held claims. Wilson, like many before and since, accepted the conclusions presented by Selig with dissimilar definitions of the concept but a similarly insufficient investigation. By organizing pre-existing government (BLS) data into popularly distributed reports touting a latent economic strength in Black consumers the Selig Center gave credence to what Wilson, liked those before him, misread as meaning what it did not. "The Selig Center study," Wilson wrote, "demonstrates the growing importance of Black consumers, whose spending can make the difference between business success and failure" (589). And, like many before and since, Wilson applied an activist potential to the concept of buying power with his misreading of the Selig Center report and advocated buying power as a driving force of an economic plan he argued would lead to an eventual "capture [of] greater proportions of the Black consumer dollar…" said then to be headed toward $399 billion. From there, Wilson continued, once Black businesses capture more of the Black consumer dollar, they would be able:

> … more importantly, to capture greater proportions of "mainstream" consumer dollars and capital formations. These achievements will provide the economic platform for launching the Afrikan American community into the mainstream of international trade and commerce and thereby permit it to provide substantially greater employment and economic opportunities for its constituents as well as other Americans, and Afrikans across the diaspora (591).

Wilson's ideas and plans for helping advance Black collective interests involved much more than this, including increased political organization and effecting public policy through electoral politics. However, his acceptance and promotion of the Selig report as accurately describing the economic potential of Black people confused his own and confuses still today those picking up his work often without other aspects of his overall radical platform. The purpose here is only to note his early adoption of the Selig report, and how Wilson's adaptation of the myth of buying power is one powerful example of how this diffusion occurs across the Black political spectrum helping to give the concept a dangerous ubiquity. Nationalist, capitalist, socialist, communist, African-centered, pan-Africanist, and variations of them all are able to direct this imaginary pool of money to plans which, with that as a base, cannot fully stand. Wilson is truly a grand exemplar for the extra-institutional, community-based, autodidact intellectual dissemination of the myth given his own tireless work in those spaces and the posthumous persistence of his presence in those spaces today. He is referenced routinely by radio, blog, and Internet video hosts, in nearly every space where Black politics or economics are discussed, and represents more than anyone how universally applied and penetrative the myth remains.

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CHAPTER 4

The Myth's "Big Three" Modern Purveyors: Reviewing Selig, Nielsen, Mckinsey

Abstract Whatever its origins,the myth of Black buying power today has apparently added a third primary source of origin, creating a new "Big Three." The Selig Center for Economic Growth, Nielsen consumer surveys, and more recently, McKinsey & Co. now comprise a majority of the source material used in promoting the myth but more as silent partners to commercial press, media, and punditry. All are clear not to attach claims of Black political or economic power to the myth, but they do provide intellectual cover to those who do, and they are both involved in the myth's overall promotion. And because their expressed goal is to connect media with ad revenue and not to clarify any actual economic conditions, Selig and Nielsen are able to develop unclear methods which produce results inconsistent with economic analyses used to assess the actual material and lived experiences of Black and other communities.

Keywords Nielsen · Selig Center · McKinsey & Co. · Advertising · Journalism

What appears to be the initial report from the Selig Center for Economic Growth at the Terry College of Business housed in the Bank of America Financial Center in Athens, GA. in 1994, marks a moment in history when an esoteric marketing concept kept mostly among those for

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whom buying power actually means anything went viral. That is, viral for the 1990s. Though suffering the limitations of twentieth-century media technology buying power did begin to take on a new life. For the next 30 years, and counting, Jeffrey Humphreys, the lead author, and the Selig Center would become the single most referenced source on the subject. And as will be detailed below the center is referenced routinely. However, outside of this current work, there has been no critical investigation into the claims contained in those reports or those from its primary partners in myth propagation, the Nielsen company and McKinsey & Co., forming today's.

Big Three of buying power myth promotion. In each case, methods used to determine or extrapolate consumer spending habits are confused by subsequent reporting and, it must be said, not enough effort to be clear by those tasked in representing those reports, into a belief that the numbers shared represent an economic strength which simply does not exist.

The Selig Center produces buying power reports to assist businesses target their advertising purchases. Nielsen has worked for years with the Black press to produce similar reports to assist Black commercial media outlets in justifying their own claims that more ad revenue be spent among them as they promise to help bring Black consumers to White corporations. When I raised this contradiction with Dr. Ben Chavis, current President and CEO of the NNPA, he assured me that this is no longer the case (personal communication April 1, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb0KKevgR6b/). But as of December 31, 2022, the very front page of the NNPA website it continues to read:

> NNPA MEDIA SERVICES IS THE GATEWAY TO NEARLY 230 REGIONAL AND LOCAL NEWSPAPERS WITH MORE THAN 22+ MILLION READERS PER WEEK.
>
> The buying power of the African American community is $1.3 trillion, *according to Nielsen Media Research* and NNPA research services. (https://nnpa.org/, emphasis added)

And finally, McKinsey & Co., who for more than a century have been advising companies how best to maximize profit and manipulate public policy to suit their interests, have more recently added themselves to the buying power echo chamber.

The uncritical circulation of buying power mythology encourages pundits and activists alike to accept and appropriate the myth for their own purposes allowing for even those who make routine criticism of capitalism and White supremacy to mistakenly infuse the false concept of buying power into their analyses. Chapter 5 will demonstrate more the poor journalism and worse media environment both of which ease (and benefit from) the wide distribution of buying power mythology. However, it is important to first emphasize three facts: ((1) Not everyone cites a source for their reference to the buying power claim but all who do cite one of these Big Three with Selig leading the way since the early 1990s, 2) each of the Big Three use roughly the same methodology in making their buying power claims which may be acceptable for attracting and allocating advertising revenue but is illogical when explaining the actual economic condition of any community, and (3) an almost imperceptibly few pundits or journalists bother to check this methodology, its accuracy in design, or the accuracy of its claimed outcomes.

Simply put, and beginning with Selig whose reports are discussed in more detail below, each of the Big Three, primarily Selig and McKinsey, misuses government data, primarily from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), to extrapolate large spending totals meant to help direct ad spending but that are then misreported as genuine economic reality and as power. Nielsen, whose business model involves selling their survey data on consumption (goods, services, and media) to corporations looking for assistance in targeting audiences with ads, simply refers to Selig as their source when making claims of buying power and then proceeds to attach the claim to their own reports regarding media and product consumption meant only as aids to corporations looking to direct ad revenue. What results is a self-referential echo chamber of marketing data packaged as at times even radical Black economic and political analysis.

In 2018, I asked reporter Elly Yu about her National Public Radio Marketplace story and its reference to both Nielsen and Selig in claiming that, "Black women own about 1.5 million businesses in the country, according to the latest U.S. Census figures, generating more than $42 billion in sales in 2012" (Yu 2018). I asked if she could share, beyond reference just to the reports themselves, where those numbers came from. Indicative of the journalistic process which helps propel the myth of buying power she responded in part that, "The Selig Center study, unfortunately, is only available by purchase. I referenced their statistics that they were available in their public *press release*, and confirmed it with

Jeff Humphr[ey]s with of the Selig Center who worked on the report" (emphasis added). My email to Humphreys went without response.

Even more heavily resourced national media simply make headlines of a press release, with confirmation from its author, and with no review or investigation of the claims, methods, or inherent and expressed bias as representing the interests of the business community. For lay readers, a $125 fee for the Selig report is an obvious barrier though it could be argued no such concern should exist for national media who make routine reporting out of the center's work, particularly when their expressed mission is, "… to raise the economic intelligence of the country" (Marketplace).

However, once the barrier of cost, and of an incurious press, is overcome, there remain barriers of methodology, accuracy, context, and clarity. On the one hand, as mentioned, the Selig report is indeed straight forward in defining buying power as a concept and explaining its actual function. According to the latest available report titled *The Multicultural Economy: 2017*:

> Simply defined, buying power is the total personal income of residents that is available, after taxes, for spending on virtually everything that they buy, but it does not include dollars that are borrowed or that were saved in previous years. It is not a measure of wealth, and it does not include what tourists spend during their visits. *Unfortunately, there are no geographically precise surveys of annual expenditures and income of all the nation's major racial and ethnic groups. Even estimates of expenditures by race or ethnicity are difficult to find, especially for individual states.* (emphases added)
>
> The Selig Center addresses this problem by providing estimates of black, Native American, Asian, white, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic buying power for the nation, the fifty states, and the District of Columbia. These current dollar (*unadjusted for inflation*) *estimates and projections* indicate the growing economic power of various racial or ethnic groups; measure the vitality of geographic markets; help to judge business opportunities for start-ups or expansions; gauge a business's annual sales growth against potential market increases; indicate the market potential of new and existing products; and *guide targeted advertising campaigns.* (Humphreys 2017)

As previously highlighted, Selig acknowledges that it was, "Created to convey economic expertise to Georgia businesses and entrepreneurs, the

Simon S. Selig, Jr. Center for Economic Growth is primarily responsible for conducting research on economic, demographic, and social issues related to Georgia's current and future growth." With that as its mission, and not the production of research whose purpose is the accurate assessment of any actual economic condition, it follows reasonably that the report would acknowledge itself not to be a measure wealth. Instead, Selig offers "estimates" and "projections," which cannot be based on "precise" data regarding "annual expenditures and income," and which ultimately are meant only to "guide targeted advertising campaigns." These statements alone disqualify any real understanding of their subsequent reference to a "growing economic power."

Further, the report's own numbers show that Black buying power accounts for only "8.7 percent" of the national whole meaning, far from any real power, and relative even to a mythic buying power, that even the myth reflects a smaller proportion than the percent of the national population held by Black people at roughly 14%. But, again, just how do they arrive at their "estimates and projections?" In 1954, Secretary Weeks tied the assertion directly to the overall income of the Black community. We've already seen how this is unsound, especially relative to an increased claim today of $1 + trillion when Black people earn no more than $800 billion collectively. That is, the BLS counts as the national "labor force" those over the age of 16, who are "civilian non-institutionalized," and who are not serving in the military. They estimate that there are roughly 20 million Black members of the national labor force who, they also estimate, are earning, as of the third quarter of 2019, "$727" per week. 727 × 52 (weeks) × 20 million workers is $740 billion annually. That is $460 billion less than the reported $1.2 trillion in buying power. Of course, this would also then require a popular redefinition of the term "power" to mean spending more than every penny earned (Rolen & Toosey 2018).

Wealth, not income, is a far better determinant of economic condition. Income is acceptable if the goals are ad revenue and not assessment or analysis, which may explain why, even after close examination, the methods involved in arriving at the conclusions reached by the Selig report are no clearer than before. Quoting at length from the report's "Methodology":

> Because there are *no direct measures of the buying power* of African Americans, Native Americans, Asians, Whites, and Hispanics, these estimates were calculated using national and regional economic models, univariate

> forecasting techniques, and data from various U.S. government sources. *The model developed* by the Selig Center integrates statistical methods used in regional economics with those of *market research*. In general, the estimation process has two parts: estimating disposable personal income and allocating that estimate by race or ethnicity based on both population estimates and variances in per capita income.
>
> The Selig Center's estimates of disposable personal income (the total buying power of all groups, regardless of race or ethnicity) are reported in Table 7. Total buying power for 1990-2016 equals disposable personal income as reported in the National Income and Product Accounts tables by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis [BEA] in March 2017. Based on the data provided by the Commerce Department, the Selig Center prepared projections of total buying power for 2017–2022.
>
> Defined as the share of total personal income that is available for spending on personal consumption, personal interest payments, and savings, disposable personal income measures the total buying power held by residents of an area. In 2016, 91.6 percent of *disposable personal income was used to purchase goods and services* (personal consumption expenditures); the remaining 8.4 percent represents personal savings, nonmortgage interest paid by persons, or personal transfer payments to either government or to persons living abroad.
>
> The Selig Center's estimates are consistent with the concepts and definitions used in the National Income and Product Accounts (NIPA). *Readers should note that buying power is not the equivalent of aggregate money income as defined by the Census Bureau. Because the Selig Center's estimates are based on disposable personal income data obtained from the BEA, rather than money income values issued by the Census Bureau, the result is significantly higher estimates of buying power.* There are several reasons for this lack of correspondence. First, the income definition used by the BEA is not the same as the definition used by the Census Bureau. Second, Census income data are gathered through a nationwide survey sample of households, and respondents tend to underreport their income, which accounts for much of the discrepancy. Finally, the population universe for the Census money income estimates differs from the universe used by the BEA. *It should also be emphasized that the Selig Center's estimates are not equivalent to aggregate consumer expenditures as reported in the Consumer Expenditure Survey that is conducted each year by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*. (emphases added)

While the Selig report never demonstrates, defines, or shows their "model developed" to assess buying power what they do share, and especially the final claims themselves do provide important keys to understanding the performance of the myth today. First, what is defined as "disposable income" must be addressed as it remains unclear and confuses often what is understood about Black income. That is, if, for example, it takes, "44% of income to make rent in predominantly black communities" (Kurtz 2017) and all told the Black community earns roughly less than $800 billion annually, how then is there so much "disposable" left for purchasing goods and services?

Second, Selig acknowledges now, unlike the myth's 1954 origins, that, "buying power is not the equivalent of aggregate earned income as defined by the Census Bureau. Because the Selig Center's estimates are based on disposable personal income data obtained from the BEA, rather than money income values issued by the Census Bureau, the result is significantly higher estimates of buying power." They then also say that, "It should also be emphasized that the Selig Center's estimates are not equivalent to aggregate consumer expenditures as reported in the Consumer Expenditure Survey that is conducted each year by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics." In other words, Selig "estimates and projections" cannot be based on calculable numbers of actual incomes and actual expenditures. They must be generated by unclear methods to satisfy even more confused claims which never include public mention of the center's function to produce reports meant for targeting ad revenue and not explaining the actual conditions of any group.

Further, Selig's use of data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) speaks to both flaws in its method and demonstrates a point of origin for the popularly disseminated and equally false idea that Black buying power should be equated to national economies and their Gross Domestic Product (GDP). BEA studies are of national economies and GDP which assists the confusion in heavy rotation that Black buying power is the equivalent of any number of top 25 national economies. However, these are not studies meant, again, to assess the actual conditions of various communities within those countries. GDP only measures the value of goods and services purchased in a given year, meaning that GDP measures the wealth generated *for those who own those goods and services* and says nothing about the relative condition of those doing the spending. GDP does not measure inequality within any given national economy and, therefore, cannot measure the cavernous gaps between what Black people earn and then spend on goods and services produced by (White) corporations. In fact, as shown in the Pew Research chart below, inequality actually can and does increase as does GDP. When someone buys a sandwich, they have contributed to the national economy and GDP. But their relationship to the value created by that purchase is nothing compared to the owner of the sandwich shop or those who own the process of bringing food from farm to table, or processing lab to grocer shelf, and it is this difference which is *not measured* by GDP. Further, as Demos points out, it is again about distribution:

> Despite being a broad measure, there are several things that GDP does not measure that are essential for both the economy and society. Most glaringly, *GDP does not capture the distribution of growth and, as a result, cannot reflect inequality*. Since 1979, the bottom 20 percent of earners saw their income increase by 18 percent.5 Over the same time period, the top twenty percent of earners saw their incomes increase by 65 percent and the top one percent saw their incomes increase by an astonishing 277 percent. The U.S. GDP, meanwhile, more than doubled over the last 30 years with no ability to reflect the growing income inequality. As the graph below shows, as GDP has increased, so has the level of inequality. (Cha 2013, emphasis added)

While GDP offers up attractive numbers and provides speakers with an applause line and jaw-dropping speech highlights, it is not known by economists as the preferred method for assessing inequality among specific groups within a given country.

As a junior partner to Selig perhaps when it comes to producing buying power numbers, for decades it has been Nielsen most prominent in carrying those claimed numbers to audiences. Discussed further in Chapter 5, Nielsen has been engaged in a long-term and close relationship with the Black press in creating reports making reference to the claim but offering no accurate explanation of their purpose. Unfortunately, the commercial Black press continues to largely ignore the flawed methodology and uncritically, falsely, report the claims of buying power to a wide and unwitting audience. For example, a recent Nielsen report, titled, "Resilient, Receptive, and Relevant: The African-American Consumer Report," co-authored with the National Newspapers Publishers Association (NNPA), the leading association of Black newspaper publishers in the country, states clearly that the two have:

> … strategically collaborated for three years to present an annual in-depth analytical report on the African-American consumer unsurpassed by any

> other similar product on the market. The reports have become widely respected, industry chronicles touted for their exclusive insights, data, trends and perspective that *better prepare markers and brands to connect with this audience segment*. By *concurrently sharing the report with millions of readers around the country we have also helped create conscious consumers*, who are aware, now more than ever, how their *economic power has a direct impact on the marketplace* overall. We are proud that the combined Nielsen and NNPA resources have *galvanized corporations and consumers alike to think and behave differently* toward valuing the African-American consumer and their economic impact on the U.S. marketplace. (Nielsen 2013, emphases added)

Interestingly, while this and reports like it make reference to numbers produced by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, they do so only as a source for Black unemployment rates. This is noteworthy given that the BLS origins of the concept, as described previously, had a very different purpose. Here, because as the report acknowledges, it is to help corporations and "brands" reach their targeted Black market, the concept of buying power becomes something else, mythological. Parenthetically, it is interesting to read the admission in the report that it has as its mission that corporations and consumers be "galvanized." It was, in fact, Edward Bernays who defined propaganda (public relations, psychological warfare, marketing, advertising) as the creation of a "… reciprocal understanding between an individual and a group" (Miller 2005, 161). Put differently, the "reciprocal understanding" is that the target audience come to agree with the generated message. In this case that message is an acceptance by the Black consumer of the marketing, and the transfer of what is available for them to spend White corporations. Of course, further and most damaging is the acceptance of this process as exemplifying some kind of genuine Black power.

It should also be noted that the economic picture painted of Black America in this report, like most of its kind, does not reflect the actual conditions previously described. Its goal, following the trend given elevated life in 1954 by John H. Johnson, is to promote to White advertisers that despite historic inequality the Black consumer is "resilient" and always able to come back ready to spend. Data are poorly interpreted to justify the claims and to reframe reality in such a way as to not dissuade ad revenue from flowing toward Black presses and punditry which enjoy those dollars most. Were this left to the marketing community alone that would be one issue. But, as the report proudly acknowledges, with the propulsion of the Black press itself distorted claims regarding Black economic conditions are encouraged as reality by members of the community and promoted to the community as fact.

For example, without evidence or vetting, the report simply repeats, and attributes to it, the Selig Center claim of Black buying power "… rising from its current $1 trillion level to a forecasted $1.3 trillion by 2017" (Nielsen 2013, 4). Supporting the claim are references to "impressive gains" made by Black women in education and business ownership, Black consumers being loyal to name brands and beauty supplies, how social media "continue to engage" Black consumers of all ages, and that not enough ad dollars are spent on television targeting Black audiences who by percentage of population watch more than anyone in the country. Perhaps most disturbing, however, is the call, from among Black media and journalists specifically, for a "southern strategy" to target marketing toward the numbers of Black people moving back South in a "reverse migration." This use of the phrase "southern strategy," with quotations around the phrase as if to acknowledge the fact, disturbingly harkens back to the intentionally racist media strategy of the Republican Party, first with Barry Goldwater, then Richard Nixon, and on to Ronald Reagan—a campaign which targeted the anti-Black, White supremacist attitudes of White southerners to attract their votes (Maxwell 2019)—making that phrase an even more interesting choice for use in marketing material attempting to connect Black consumers to White companies.

McKinsey & Co. have in recent years become a loud voice and partner in the Big Three of promoting falsely the claim of Black buying power. Circumventing Selig and Nielsen, McKinsey has updated its century-plus corporate advising business and gone ahead to launch its own "Institute for Black Economic Mobility" which is merely a repackaging or rebranding of the existing methods of determining and then promoting the myth of Black buying power. For instance, and true to form, a recent report from McKinsey began, "Black consumers' collective economic power is set to expand dramatically, from about $910 Billion in consumption in 2019 to $1.7 trillion (in nominal dollars)—equal to the projected GDP of Mexico—in 2030." The numbers are eerily similar, the claim the same, but a quick look under the hood of their citation and we find equally eerily similar flaws created by precisely the same mission.

McKinsey, like Selig and Nielsen, is not in business to help Black people, or anyone else, understand their actual economic condition or to provide data meant to help audiences develop an accurate analysis of their material reality. For more than 100 years, McKinsey has been in the business of consulting corporations, at high cost, to create conditions favorable to themselves, often to the detriment of workers and the environment. McKinsey's history of service to the largest companies and U.S. intelligence agencies has led them to be described by a former McKinsey consultant thusly, "To those convinced that a secretive cabal controls the world, the usual suspects are Illuminati, Lizard People, or 'globalists.' They are wrong, naturally. There is no secret society shaping every major decision and determining the direction of human history. There is, however, McKinsey & Company" (Bogdanich & Forsythe 2022, 277).

So in the end, when it comes to reporting the myth of Black buying power McKinsey does as the others misreports data helping to create a false understanding of economic reality. And in the footnote of the aforementioned McKinsey claim of Black buying power, we see the exact same flawed methodology, never reported, never examined by the claimants or its targets, and yet paradoxically plain as day:

> This number, rounded up from \$906 billion, is a departure from the \$835 billion calculated in Michael Chui, Brian Gregg, Sajal Kohli, and Shelley Stewart III, "A \$300 billion opportunity: Serving the emerging Black American consumer," McKinsey Quarterly, August 6, 2021, McKinsey.com. *This latest calculation uses data from the 2019 US Census and 2019 Consumer Expenditure Surveys (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, bls.gov) and includes the full population of Black Americans*, which the \$835 billion figure does not. We also use households as the unit of analysis for the purposes of this report. (Noel et al. 2021, emphasis added)

Again, as previously noted, the BLS disavow these conclusions, do not claim to be making an assessment of Black people's (or anyone's) economic condition, and merely compile reported survey data on incomes and spending. McKinsey has merely added themselves to the producers of economic propaganda and given a [Black] commercial media environment another flawed toy with which to play.

Buying power is a phrase developed by marketers to attract advertising revenue. The numbers read as immense and impressive but, in context, reveal themselves to be reflective only of what wealth is being generated for the owners of production. Large sums of buying power dollars do not reference or reflect the autonomous power of any group to use that money as they would choose, monolithically, and to the benefit of any whole. But when reports of and reporting about buying power are examined and juxtaposed with simultaneous but largely ignored economic analyses what becomes most apparent is the process by which myth becomes reality. We can now look at the myth at play.

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CHAPTER 5

The Myth at Play: A Most Suitable Environment

Abstract Despite appearances, the media system in the United States is far more commercial, consolidated in ownership, with content-driven by advertising, and which is far more pervasive, and penetrative than many realize or are made aware. It is a media environment designed specifically for the purposes of propaganda and, therefore, most suited to that function. The myth of buying power relies heavily on this media environment and thrives accordingly as a result. This point will be demonstrated via the coverage/promotion of buying power, and related subjects, conducted since 2009.

Keywords Journalism · Media · Reporting · Advertising

A recent expose about the relationship between Fox News and the current White House quoted a former head of the Federal Communications Commission responding to the idea that the news channel had created the Trump presidency. "As [Reed] Hundt sees it," said the story, "Murdoch didn't invent Trump, but he invented the audience. Murdoch was going to make a Trump exist. Then Trump comes along, sees all these people, and says, 'I'll be the ringmaster in your circus!'" (Mayer 2019). The century-long construction of our media environment designed to reduce and equate citizen to consumer has made all-but meaningless nominal

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differences in ownership with audience creation the perfect circus for buying power mythology to ringmaster. With everyone chasing the same multi-billion-dollar advertising pool, commercial media become more suited to those commercial interests be they labeled Black media or White. Myths, like Black buying power, require the audience we have all largely become, an audience held captive from birth, and one primed for all that nicely wrapped commercially packaged messaging.

The previously mentioned fishbowl in which we find ourselves serves quite well the function of propaganda. Our creation as McLuhan's fish allows more easily our creation as an audience susceptible, prepared for, accepting, even falsely aware of, the messaging impacting our daily behavior. Brand management, labeling, and an apparent endless amount of choice for our media diets have made awareness of the constructed nature of our environment more difficult to identify. But, despite appearances, today, fewer own more pervasive and penetrative media power with an impact that is vastly under-appreciated than at any point in human history. Nearly all we see, read, and hear is determined by corporations and/or private equity groups themselves interlocked and largely politically in accord with one another. It is precisely this problem, an arrangement of a commercial media environment and journalistic practice, that has aided, if not entirely propelled, the myth of buying power.

In what she describes as, "a plague… of news sources and modes of circulation," Nancy Cott has appropriately summarized the evolution of our current media environment as being developed largely over just the last roughly 25 years and in "two phases." Phase one, the initial 1990s commercial capture of our national cable networks by Fox, MSNBC, CNBC, and Bloomberg, and then the second phase of the new millennium Internet and social media rise of Google, Facebook, and Twitter. Most relevant here is that what Cott concludes we are left with is a kind of personalized tailored view of the world provided for each of us in ways we have been constructed to accept. As she says:

> The essential network aspect of the "web" means that any information easily reproduces itself and generates links that connect it to similar or related information. The making and the promulgation of news are tied together perhaps more tightly than ever before, in that whatever becomes most intensely circulated and replicated through instantaneous media becomes the most pressing "news." Thus, circulation makes the

> news, more than simply transmitting it… This multiplication and fractionalization leads away from the creation of "common knowledge" and toward division of the populace into "niche" publics whose knowledge-worlds intentionally seek replenishment from sources that reinforce accustomed attitudes and partisan leanings. (Cott 2017)

Another microcosmic example of the impact of this media environmental arrangement summarizes the issue well:

> A study that encapsulated the crisis [in corporate controlled media]. was released by the Pew Center for the People and the Press in 2010. It examined in exhaustive detail the "media ecology" of the city of Baltimore for one week in 2009. The object was to determine how, in this changing media moment, "original" news stories were being generated, and by whom. They tracked old media and new, newspapers, radio, television, websites, blogs, even Twitter "tweets" from the police department. What did they find? The first conclusion from the researchers was an unsettling one: Despite the seeming proliferation of media, the researchers observed that "much of the 'news' people receive contains no original reporting. Fully eight out of ten stories studied simply *repeated or repackaged previously published information*." And where did the 'original' reporting come from? More than 95 percent of original news stories were still generated by old media, particularly the Baltimore Sun newspaper. In other words, a great many of the much-heralded online sites – even some that proudly labeled themselves as "news" operations – simply disseminated what was being produced by traditional old media. It gets worse: *The Sun*'s production of original news stories was itself down more than 30 percent from ten years ago and down a whopping 73 percent from twenty years ago. The bottom line is this: Old media outlets are downsizing and abandoning journalism and new media are not even beginning to fill the void. (McChesney 2012, emphasis added)

Circulating stories consumed by isolated and segmented publics and without sufficient vetting make fertile ground for the development of myth into axiom.

Tracking, as I have since 2009, the transmission of the myth of Black buying power it is readily apparent that Cott's "knowledge worlds" are easily developed today to include significant segments of the Black community who accept it without question. The Big Three sources of the myth, Selig, Nielsen, and McKinsey have their claims circulated endlessly and used to promote an economic power Black people simply do not have, or at best which cannot be conveyed in terms of buying power. Peeling back layers since 2009 has uncovered a "plague of news sources and modes of circulation" which propel and protect the myth of Black buying power by what has felt at times to be an impenetrable barrier.

From my initial commentary, it was clear that widely reported claims of Black buying power went both unchecked and were themselves contrived of some truly spurious methods. First, there was the problem of presentation. The myth that year, as is routine, was presented by the African American/Black Market Profile (AABMP) as "news" but noted at that time it was not reported by any outlets carrying the news release that the AABMP was clear that its goal was to "… gather and synthesize the most recent findings from dozens of sources *in order to help marketers communicate more effectively with these important consumer segments*" (emphasis added). And, again, the claims were based on projections and wild extrapolations like, for instance, claiming power could be associated with the amount of Black people earning $50 k annually finally crossing the 30% mark when the already oddly low poverty line of $20 k annually for a household of 4 set an artificial standard. Further, I noted then that Selig's justification for suggesting a Black "economic clout" was in the ability for Black consumption to "energize the U.S. consumer market as never before" (Ball 2009).

The report would go on to further support its conclusions with equally unscientific methods, if the goal is to assess actual economic or material conditions, such as:

> 1. Black population growth, 2. Increased job opportunities, 3. More education for Black America, 4. Only 8.1% of Black America is over 65 years of age or at "career pinnacles" at which point wage increases "decelerate," whereas, whites are 13.5% over 65, 5. Black people spend more than "non-blacks" on natural gas, electricity, telephone services and footwear and a higher proportion of their money on groceries, housing and women's and girl's clothing, 6. And this author's personal favorite, that despite "a substantial gap in homeownership rates" this "suggests a possible opportunity for market expansion in the years ahead." (Ball 2009)

What appeared at the time as an inconsistency by now is understood as inevitable; consumer spending rebranded as "economic clout" with "news" of an economic power among Black people defined as the ability to energize the economy is precisely what buying power as a concept was developed to do. As was previously said about GDP, to energize the economy is to enrich those who own what is purchased and does not help explain the actual condition of the purchaser.

What was particularly striking at the time was that not long before the release of that particular Selig report the Economic Policy Institute published a relatively under-promoted, circulated, or referenced report of their own describing more accurately the "permanent recession" faced by Black Americans saying:

> Even when the national unemployment picture is good, the black unemployment rate is more than twice that of the white unemployment rate. This means that in what looks like good economic times nationally, most of black America is still experiencing a recession. When white America is in recession, black America is in an economic depression. (Austin 2008)

Reports like these from the EPI get far less media or press attention than do the more heavily propagated headlines professing Black buying power especially when so much of the commercial Black press is involved and invested in producing those headlines and the reports they mention. Traditional class, business, or anti-labor biases in commercial media are often involved leaving plenty of room for public relations and marketing claims such as those promoting buying power.

For instance, and only related to a timeline created by my initial commentary on buying power and not at all meant to ignore a tradition of long pre-existing critical research on related subjects, right around the time of that 2009 commentary came a report from Darrick Hamilton, a well-regarded economist and researcher of Black economics. That report read in part that:

> *The wealth gap is the most acute indicator of racial inequality*. Based on data from the 2002 Survey of Income and Program Participation, white median household net worth is about $90,000; in contrast it is only about $8,000 for the median Latino household and a mere $6,000 for the median black household. The median Latino or black household would have to save nearly 100 percent of its income for at least three consecutive years to close the gap. Furthermore, 85 percent of black and Latino households have a net worth below the median white household. Regardless of age, household structure, education, occupation, or income, black households typically have less than a quarter of the wealth of otherwise comparable white households. (Hamilton 2009, emphasis added)

But in a media environment where our content is largely (entirely) determined by *advertisers*, and not owners, editors, producers, etc., there is little room for reports like those from Hamilton to be covered and discussed. Instead, more popularly covered marketing reports are promoted, supported by the commentary of many leading Black spokespeople, with no investigation of the claims, their origins, or the methods used to reach their conclusions. Not long after Hamilton's report came the following from BET, a Black-targeting media outlet owned by Viacom which claimed:

> The percentage of blacks in America is growing, and so is the amount of money blacks have available to spend on goods and services, according to a study released this week. The "African-Americans Revealed" study, based on a BET survey of 80,000 black consumers over 18 months, showed a 10 percent increase in America's black population between 2000 and 2008 and 55 percent increase in black buying power over the same period. According to the survey, black buying power is estimated now at about $913 billion and is projected to increase to $1.2 trillion by 2013. A similar study released in November by the Selig Center at the University of Georgia estimated that black buying power would be about $1.1 trillion by 2014, with current spending power for blacks at about $910 billion. (Hodges 2010)

Further, the original story's inclusion of a comment from Boyce Watkins, believed by some to be a leading economist of the Black condition, as if to knowingly further concretize the myth's most dastardly claim said of the report that, "Unfortunately, when African-Americans make money, we spend it. We don't use it to invest or produce… When we get our tax refund, we go straight to the store" (Ball 2010).

On some level, it has to be considered that buying power goes unquestioned by even those who some might think should know better in part because of the myth's longevity and its pervasiveness. In addition to the historic rise of the myth and its acceptance by the entire Black political (and class) spectrum, the myth has garnered tremendous press coverage from within that troubled media environment designed itself to serve interests which are the commercial and domestic equivalent to psychological, worldview warfare. So, for example, from what appears to be among the first reports offered by Jeffrey Humphreys of the Selig Center in 1995, "Black Buying Power by Place of Residence, 1990–1995," through 2018 there were more than 600 news stories carried nationally which specifically reference both “buying power,” in conjunction with Black America and the “Selig” Center. And there are many more thousands where only “buying power” is mentioned where either the reference is to Nielsen or where none is offered at all. And beyond that, there are hundreds of thousands of stories annually where buying power is discussed for what it is, a marketing reference targeting every known segment and formation of society, business, and municipality. But as it pertains specifically to Black America, that is 25 stories, minimum, carried nationally in news outlets big and small, every year, for the last 25 years all referencing reports from Selig and, with tremendously rare exception, without a single question about the veracity or meaning of the buying power claim.

Further, it is important to note that the numbers of researched references to buying power in print publications is of just that. ProQuest database searches are of mostly print publications and do not count thousands of web page references to buying power with little evidence of any of these references offering any critique of investigation of the claim or its origins. Nor does the database track the incalculable references to buying power made in speeches, sermons, activist meetings, and other forms of media, radio, or video productions.

As it pertains to the Black press, both presses owned by Black people or which target Black audiences, one of the more popular outlets *The Root,* described as one of three (*The Grio* and *Blavity*), “…digital outlets [which] have some of the highest readership numbers among Millennials and Generation Z age groups” the only identifiable critiques of buying power are in two pieces both of which reference me or my work (Braningin 2018). As for the National Newspapers Publishers Association (NNPA), “the more than 70-year-old trade association for America’s Black press—currently lists 158 members, representing 205 publications across 29 states and the District of Columbia” whose collective reach is, “… more than 20.1 million readers per week, and NNPA papers online garner 35 million page views per month on social media,” have no identifiable coverage or inclusion of critique of the concept. Of course, as discussed, the NNPA helps produce buying power reports.

However, what is also demonstrated by the NNPA’s relationship to the construction of buying power reports and the subsequent form taken by commercial press coverage of their claims is the broader historical concerns surrounding commercial interests taking precedence over journalistic ones. For another example, in 2013, I was contacted by Stacy

Brown, reporting then for the *Washington Informer*, an NNPA member, and asked about my work on buying power. After the story's publication, I wrote Ms. Brown and mentioned one or two errors in quoting me. But as I said:

> … my only issue is that you didn't leave room for any of the studied critique of how they reach these really misleading numbers which makes my quote about a system seem like just talking. You don't link to my piece or reference any of the real research I put in to debunk the numbers these "studies" keep claiming. This leads to more confusion about how poverty works and you end up supporting the myth that we just spend ourselves out of opportunities (even as you quote accurately studies that demonstrate how Black homes are purposely devalued which exposes the lie that poverty is anything but the result of intentional discriminatory practices against Black (and poor) people). Deadlines, editors, etc. I get it but I do admit to having had higher hopes.

Brown's response, "Dr my intention certainly was to properly represent your thoughts I will review with my editor as originally much of your comme" ends abruptly there. Ten minutes later she added only, "Much of your comments were redacted my sincere apologies." The story itself has been removed from the website. But Brown was back again recently with a piece for the NNPA Newswire, albeit titled with a bit more accuracy, "Marketers Should Show More Respect for the Black Consumer, According to a Report." Within the article Brown references, again uncritically, another Nielsen executive and her claim of the "$1.3 trillion" in buying power (Brown 2019).

Shortly thereafter another similar press encounter occurred this time within the White mainstream. Popular repetition of the myth, without attribution, explanation, or investigation of the claims occurs nearly without exception allowing both commercial Black and White presses to promote the myth over historic or existing criticism and for their own overlapping political and economic interests. This was indeed the case, again, in February of 2014 when National Public Radio's "Marketplace" contacted me to discuss buying power in light of yet another reported claim of its existence and increase. As had happened before (and since) with various media outlets, I was initially invited to give a pre-recorded interview about Black buying power but was not told of any other guests or what they might say. As it turned out my comments were cut short and more time was made for Cheryl Pearson McNeil, a senior vice president at Nielsen, who was there to talk about their own report (Lazarus 2014). For McNeil, buying power meant an odd mixture of reality and myth. That is, on the one hand she was right when claiming buying power is evidenced in the appearance of more Black people in commercials. This, of course, is where the myth of buying power originates, in advertising and marketing campaigns targeting Black consumers to transfer their dollars to the sellers, owners, and producers of those goods and services; some Black, but mostly White companies.

But McNeil also, on the other hand, took up the mythic or fallacious side as well in arguing that these overtures by White companies in advertising to Black consumers was an extension of the boycotts, sit-ins, and other general work of those like Dr. King. The interview was taped in February after all. Her's was a continuation of a tradition or pattern of having commercial forms or definitions of buying power be those that supplant historic or contemporary critique. McNeil, of course, did not discuss Dr. King's increasing radicalism, frustration with the lack of progress of boycotts and non-violent protest, or his evolving preference for socialism, or at minimum, massive government intervention in the redistribution of wealth. McNeil did not raise King's own published, and previously mentioned, critique of buying power, or his clear condemnation of consumerism as a pathway to equality. This demonstrates the power of propaganda and the myth's propulsion via both the myth's creators in commercial media and the myth's more easily and broadly digestible inherent politics.

Timely, it was then again that not long after, May of 2014, the PEW Research Center put out their report demonstrating another of the myth's more misleading components, one accepted just before by McNeil herself. For instance, as we have seen, both Nielsen and Selig base their claims largely on "estimates" and "projections" often connected to spending patterns with claims that Black consumers spend more than other communities on low-level goods like electronics, clothing, and personal care items and that this translates to power. It is one more reflection back to the origins of the myth and a focus on Black consumers preferring name brand items which can demonstrate an overt societal advance. In other words, Black people want to look good so, as the marketing argument goes, it is to that reality that advertising should be directed. But as PEW showed, the costs of those very base and easily accessible items continue to plummet while the costs of life saving and altering healthcare, education, and childcare have all "soared" (DeSilver 2014). Of course, then, people buy what they can afford, have access to, or items for which they have been given specific credit.

The practice of journalism has always involved forms of political, ideological, and commercial struggles and it has not gone unnoticed that one feature of those contests is those which involve class or labor. The need for commercial presses to generate as much revenue from the business ad-buying community has often set limitations on how much, and from which frame, issues of finance, and labor are covered. One outcome of this arrangement is that often these issues are reported from the perspective of business leadership or the commercial class leaving not a lot of room for nuance, depth, but plenty for the big, headlines and easily repeated simplifications, or myths. And when it comes to buying power, and the 20 plus years of its claim being reported unchecked, it becomes much faster for journalists to, at best, repackage, rewrap, and deliver again. In September of 2014, having little time, and a structured biased disinterest in covering what is too far beneath the surface, the claim that Black America somehow equates to other national economies grabbed headlines again. Only this time, I was contacted and could experience firsthand the immaterial forces at play impacting the final reported outcome.

Larry Elder, a veteran Black conservative political pundit, while engaged in a back and forth with then CNN host Marc Lamont Hill, and in what was an odd buying power twist, used the myth as it was originally intended, as evidence of an absence of societal racism. In their argument over police violence in Ferguson, MO. Elder claimed that media were taking political advantage by over dramatizing what is, to him at this point, a diminished or ineffectual, leftover kind of racism, nothing like what used to exist. Upward mobility was not an issue as much as, again, Black people simply not taking better advantage of what are endless possibilities. He went on:

> "This is what happens in America," Elder said. "If black America were a country, it would be the 15th wealthiest country in the world. For crying out loud, this is not our grandfather's America, and we ought not act like it is." (Tsang 2014)

PunditFact contacted me regarding Elder's claim and their investigation provides a really nice example of the process described thus far. My comments would not make the final published story, only reference to my work would be noted, a point I raised in a post-publication email exchange with its author. I wanted to point out that while their story concludes that Elder's claim must be rated as "False" they do so at the expense of what actually made it so. My argument was/is that buying power is not a concept based in factual data or numbers, but extrapolations of spending which does not explain or demonstrate the real economic condition of the consumer(s). Elder's regurgitation of the old national GDP comparison is without merit in that; first, again, the numbers claimed regarding buying power are not tied to any actual measurement. Second, GDP does not detail inequality within an economy, and importantly, Black people do not collectively hold power over the supposed collective sums they spend with an ability to use those funds as they choose. And, as previously noted, GDP does not explain a national relationship to a global economy, i.e., colonial relationships. What ultimately results from such claims are attitudes that Black people remain unequal as a result of their own poor decision-making.

PundiFact agreed with the fundamental critique of GDP as an inappropriate method for determining the condition of individuals or groups within a given economy but only spoke with an economics professor at NYU who suggested they use per capita income instead and not that they challenge, or even investigate, the claim of buying power or comparisons between Black spending and national economies. What made the claim "False" for PundiFact in the end was merely that Elder got his placement of Black America wrong. First, they note that by his own calculations Black people would have ranked "16th," rather than 15th, but that using the suggested per capita income approach concluded that the ranking would really be "44." My discussion of the numbers themselves being false, misused, or poorly interpreted, or that buying power is altogether just a marketing tool for advertising purposes only, all were omitted. And yet much remains revealed.

First, and for instance, the PundiFact story shows some of the previously discussed process. As they would write, "Elder referred us to an annual report by Target Market News called 'The Buying Power of Black America,' which publishes the only estimate we could find of the total earned income of African-Americans. In 2011, the report he provided us, Target Market News put the income spent by African-Americans at $836 billion" (Tsang 2014). Immediately, the piece demonstrates the transmission of what is initially a claim of the Black commercial media business class whose interests are capturing more advertising revenue by promoting to White corporations a fantasy of Black economic potential, through a Black media outlet, Target Market News, and Black political punditry, Elder, carried out via mainstream (White) commercial media to the world, CNN.

Second, by conflating, as is done just above, "total earned income" with "income spent," and calling that "$836 billion" buying power for comparison to other national economies (GDP) shows, once more, the limitations of the method. Saying that Black people literally spend every penny they earn is somehow to be considered "power" can only confuse. Of course, this is not, for PundiFact, what makes the claim "False." Only the poor placement on the GDP depth chart. As the story's author wrote me in response:

> My editor and I thought it would be demonstrative to carry through the per capita calculation to show that there was more wrong with Elder's statement, statistically, than just the buying power =/= GDP distinction. *I also figured that the 44th for "black America" versus 7th for America overall was a good way of demonstrating inequality without pontificating too much on the issue*; we're not revising so much as pointing out an addition flaw with Elder's point, besides the buying power =/= GDP (emphasis added).

What is shown here is how the imposition of buying power into the conversation powerfully limits analyses and interpretation. The author demonstrates an intense contradiction by saying on the one hand that one should not use GDP to study the condition of a community but then uses the per capita figure to put Black people right back on that GDP scale only with a more "accurate" and lower ranking. This adjustment of chart position is considered a "good way" to "demonstrate {sic} inequality." Not only does this continue to reaffirm the use of a GDP scale but, most importantly, continues to accept buying power as a concept, and worse than that, reifies the myth of an economic or political agency that does not exist. By suggesting, even at a lower rank, that Black collective earnings can be equated to national policy decisions regarding national economies is misleading. To suggest, as buying power does, that Black people can make collective decisions about their consumption in such a way as to equate them with national economies, or enormous sums of private wealth is, again, a distortion. What makes Elder's claim "False" is its inherent acceptance of buying power and its mythological (political, ideological) tentacles of distorted economic realities, potential, or the residence of real wealth, and the role public policy plays in determining that address.

In September of that same year, 2014, I co-hosted an interview with economists Dean Baker of the Center for Economic Policy and Research, and Janette Huezo of United for a Fair Economy (UFE) who had conducted workshops in conjunction with that year's report, "Healthcare for Whom? Enduring Racial Disparities." The purpose of that interview was to primarily engage the two on their work and to show existing overlaps in that work as they relate to the actual economic condition of people within the United States. My other primary interest was to ask them about buying power. Each demonstrated how their own work, without particular intent to do so, challenges or discredits the myth of consumption as a means to equality. My roll then as radio host also, beyond the wonderful ability to produce and select guests, allowed me to take the opportunity to ask each about how their work related to my own on buying power. In each case, the guests were incredulous at the idea that buying power was anything other than false representation of economic realities. Neither were particularly familiar with the myth itself, but neither were also, given their areas of expertise, Baker general national economics, and Huezo the specific conditions of Black and Latina/o workers, convinced that no such power could exist or be described as such.

Baker recognized the histories of oppressed groups making use of boycotts and having Black, as he said, "purchasing power" effect some change. But he also acknowledged this as being "limited" in its impact and as having nothing to do with redistribution of wealth or the closing of income gaps. In fact, Baker said, that buying power and boycotts have "little to do with the overall economic state of the African American community in the United States." Huezo, for her part, made clear that these concepts have nothing to do with broader myths of gender and racial groups closing gaps and detracts from the "real thing [of] inequality" (Ball 2014).

2015 began with more interesting news regarding a critique of buying power's myth. The global poverty injustice group Oxfam released a report in which they argued that by 2016, "The combined wealth of the richest 1 percent will overtake that of the other 99 percent of people next year unless the current trend of rising inequality is checked…" (Oxfam International 2015). It was my argument then that, though this report was not specific to buying power or Black economics per say, Black buying power must be reconsidered, once more, in light of a global economic reality which was witnessing such massive transfers of wealth upward. In other words, where is power to be derived by consumption in such an increasingly unequal world? But such questions struggle for answers in a media marketplace or public sphere so dominated by the precise kind of article which would appear just four months later in the *Washington Informer*, a prominent Black press outlet. Titled, "The Solution for Blacks," the article was representative of press coverage of related matters and showed again the myth's function and impact. Its argument, there is nothing but Black financial illiteracy impeding progress and "the solution," is for Black people to become "successful American capitalists":

> What's wrong with Black Americans is our lack of accomplishments and understanding of collective capitalism. Blacks here bill themselves as "the richest in the world." But our status may be comparable to that of being the "brightest kids in the dumb row." Whites' median household worth is 12.9 times that of Black households - $141,900 to $11,000. It's become commonplace that the annual state of Black America is always "bad" or worse. The solution for the plight of Blacks in America will not come from Whites, but from within. The key for Blacks is for us to become "successful American capitalists." (Reed 2015)

And, more specifically:

> Blacks must develop habits to "Buy Black" "Bank Black" and use political power collectively to promote Black-based-and-oriented issues and legislation. First and foremost, Blacks' habits and mindsets must change. According to a 2007 study performed by the *Selig Center for Economic Growth*, African American buying power totals $1.1 trillion. Factor in our income, and American Blacks are the 20th "richest nation" on the planet. So, why doesn't each of us make a resolution to "Buy Black? Each Black household should make, at least, a monthly commitment to make a $100 or more purchase of gasoline, groceries, liquor, clothing, dry-cleaning, furniture, recreation, dining, etc. from a Black merchant. (Reed 2015, emphasis added)

But this was merely 1 of at least 19 more national print news items, just in 2015, which reference buying power connected specifically to the Selig Center's claims. If the ProQuest search variables are changed to "buying power" and "African American," more than 130 newspaper and magazine results return. These are just print journalism numbers, for one calendar year, January 1, 2015, through December 31, 2015, and do not count references made in radio, television, podcast, web videos, activist meetings, or pulpits.

In fact, another of those national news items came just one month later, during Black History Month. Nielsen produced a fresh video promoting their "Conscious Consumer" campaign featuring Black millennials excitedly describing how their buying power was a reflection of an advancing Black consciousness and pride. The video performs with near perfection the previously described goal of redefining "Black Power" as commercial consumption, or shopping. The objective could not be more overtly expressed than it was in the Nielsen video description:

> Nielsen is honoring Black History Month by celebrating the culture, influence and increasingly significant role of African-American consumers. In our video series, four millennial Conscious Consumers discuss their buying habits as it relates to *this new "Black Power."* Check out the first video below, and share your thoughts on Facebook and Twitter using the hashtag, #ConsciousConsumer. (Nielsen 2015, emphasis added)

Nixon's plan to redefine Black Power as Black capitalism could not have found a more competent contemporary. Black control over localized, segregated Black economies, no matter how flawed or limited that concept may have been/may be, or more radical forms of Black Power expanding to mean, Pan-Africanism, and scientific socialism, are old. The "new Black Power" is spending money, even in one's own neighborhood where ownership and redistribution are not at all required.

The happy, beautiful, exuberant Black young women and men in the video promoted an economic power and political consciousness in stark contrast to the State of the Dream report from United for a Fair Economy (UFE) which was released just one month earlier and which, coincidentally, also receives far less press coverage than do routine unfounded claims of buying power. For example, ProQuest searches returned only 3 magazine references to UFE reports since the first of their annual publications in 2004; 2 from 2012 in *The Crisis;* and 1 in 2008 in *Essence*. None were about the issue of buying power. Searching *BlackPressUSA,* "the joint web presence of America's Black community newspapers and the NNPA News Service—the last national Black Press news wire," there are only 6 references since 2004 to the UFE, and none since 2014, while there is a seemingly endless list of references when the search variable is changed to "buying power."

Beginning in 2004, UFE have produced annual detailed economic analyses of African America demonstrating full reversals or painfully slow gains with little ultimate positive impact on the whole since the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. Hence, the name, State of the Dream. Most of what these UFE reports detail is what would be King's own often suppressed legacy of criticism of the limited progress made during the Civil Rights Movement, or his ultimate reference to his dream as having become a "nightmare." Part of King's conclusion was the result of his realization by 1968 that change had been more symbolic than material and that new levels of heightened struggle would be necessary if anything more meaningful was to take place. And while Nielsen was promoting in 2015 a new Black power the "Conscious Consumer," the UFE State of the Dream report in 2015 was titled, "Underbanked and Overcharged." Reflecting King's own criticism summarized in part that:

Dreams are powerful things. Dreams reveal that which is most human about us: our hopes, our fears, and our vision for a better tomorrow. Even though it has been 51 years since Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously shared his dream of an America made available to all, regardless of skin color or economic status, we are still fighting for many of the same principles that the Civil Rights Movement stood for—and many are seeing and experiencing much of the social strife that rises to the surface when people unite to challenge the status quo.

> We know exactly who today's dream killers are: banks on Wall Street, payday lenders, check cashers, auto title lenders, those in the student loan business—all the companies that drain the wealth of marginalized individuals in the name of profit or shareholder returns. The workers that are economically preyed upon—these dreamers—deserve better. (Leyba 2015)

In 2013, the report continues, "White households had $141,900 median wealth, while African-American families had just $11,000 median wealth and Latino households had $13,700 median wealth" (Leyba 6). This equates to Black America having roughly 7% or less than half the median wealth relative to Whites held in the initial UFE report from 2004. In that report, they wrote, "In 2001, the typical Black household had a net worth of just $19,000 (including home equity), compared with $121,000 for whites. Blacks had 16% of the median wealth of whites, up from 5% in 1989. At this rate it will take until 2099 to reach parity in median wealth" (Muhammad et al. 2004).

A ProQuest search of for "United For a Fair Economy" during the 2015 calendar year (January 1–December 31) returned 12 results, none from the Black press. There is less money generated for Black media owners, or owners of media targeting Black consumers, in discussions which reflect a much more dire economic reality and one which, according to those same UFE reports, calls for more government, public policy solutions, as opposed to, a focus on spending habits. From the perspective of the state, from dominant White commercial interests, this kind of reporting imbalance serves both the earliest initial intent, at least the portion of reducing the likelihood of labor unrest, by simultaneously having the reporting and subsequent discussions of Black inequality be couched largely within discussions of Black self-help, and self-imposed poverty.

In August of that same 2015 Minister Louis Farrakhan, it was reported, spoke with "50 black publishers and editors" about the "$1.3 trillion" in buying power Black people could be spending more wisely and using 10 percent of which to deposit in Black banks which could then in turn be used to invest in businesses, hospitals and colleges (Huskisson 2015). The message was similar and tracked the previously described precedent of using unattributed numbers as basis for grand political pronouncements promising possibilities which do not exist. This was also another example of the implicit argument being Black inequality having anything to do with bad economic habits or more wasting of opportunity.

For instance, just prior to that August discussion was more reporting from Algernon Austin of the Economic Policy Institute, "The Cost of Being Black" (2015). Austin's was a kind of parody of the claims indirectly associated with buying power where, for example, the price for entrance into Blackness would be $130,900 or the difference in median wealth between Black and White people. Or the $11,556 charge for the difference in median income, a reality where Black people are twice as likely to look for jobs but not find them, or to be twice as likely killed by police, and so on (Austin 2015). Similarly, not long after those relatively well-reported comments of Minister Farrakhan was new reporting reflecting an old reality that the land he and others often recommend be purchased with a redirected buying power is already owned, 98% to be precise, by "White American families." In fact, it only takes the top 5

White landowners to eclipse all the land owned, which is "less than one percent" of all U.S. land, by all of Black America combined (Gilbert et al. 2002; Moore 2015). And later that same year, in December, yet another report was released demonstrating the limitations on the potential for parity (or anything approaching parity). According to the Institute for Policy Studies, one need only count the top 100 wealthiest people in the country to eclipse all the wealth held by all of Black America combined (Harkinson 2015).

These comparisons are not meant to create a false standard of Whiteness, or material definitions of success. The contradistinctions find their greatest value in demonstrating what potential there is or is not. Tremendous accumulation of percentages of land, wealth, stock (as will be discussed below), and other assets, including income disparities, and previously described penalties for Blackness, such as over-policing, also limit potential. One cannot buy land that is already owned and not for sale even if one could theoretically afford its value. Further, these are the precise disparities the initial BLS studies were meant to balance. The origins of buying power in "Cost-Of-Living" surveys by the Bureau of Labor Statistics were meant to ease potential social unrest by alerting workers what their wages were actually worth in the national economy and making business and government aware to manage those wages and the prices of available goods to assure labor could afford products brought to market. This is perhaps the most insidious aspect of the myth in its current form. Now Black buying power is used to compel Black working people that persistent, even worsening, inequality is correctable by redirecting a non-existent pool of wealth into an equally non-existent place within the national economy.

Interestingly, Labor Day in 2016, as would be the case almost exactly one year later, brought fascinating, but under-reported stories which indirectly dispel the myth of Black (all) buying power and directly challenged the repeated claims that Black people could better use their incomes to improve their communities. During their special in 2016 for Labor Day, *CounterSpin*, the radio component to Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR), discussed with Holly Sklar of Business for a Fair Minimum Wage, the growing concerns among corporations that working people could no longer afford to buy their products. In fact, Sklar, by properly contextualizing buying power, actually exploded its mythology:

> The biggest thing businesses have complained about in recent years is that they're just not seeing enough consumer demand; *they're not seeing enough consumer buying power; they need more*. You know, you need people to buy what they are making in order to sustain the business and to grow the business, and there's obviously a direct connection—I say obviously, but folks like Donald Trump, ideologically, don't want to see it as obvious—you need people to have enough wages to be able to buy what they need. And if you are going to have a growing middle class, you need people to be able to buy more than just the bare necessities, right? And that's what we've lost sight of. (Jackson 2016, emphasis added)

The problem for companies is actually and increasingly that, in an almost perfectly beautiful and symmetrical contradiction, they have become victims of their own messaging. The propaganda promoting a mythological buying power is actually beginning to negatively impact those for whom the myth was originally intended; the companies seeking best use for their advertising dollars. People are not earning enough to buy all that they help produce and which the companies selling those products need bought. The heavy promotion of the myth of buying power increases ad expenditures, which increase sales expectations, and those expected sales are, of course, driven up to match the advertising dollars spent largely as a result of the promise of power held among those targeted by those ads to buy what is sold. As Charles Mills once wrote of White supremacy, the fantasies created by racism (or advertising) invent "… an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites [marketers] will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (Mills 186).

Worse still, from the stand point of those spending advertising dollars, Labor Day 2017 featured venture capitalist Nick Hanauer saying on National Public Radio that the country had already reached the point where Starbucks employees are not currently paid enough to afford Starbucks coffee, an imbalance he assured means, "the pitchforks are coming…" (Johnson 2017). Hanauer was very clear. He is no socialist revolutionary. Capitalism, as a multi-billionaire venture capitalist, is good for him. For now, his concern is that, as was put by Sklar, there is not enough buying power meaning people cannot afford the lifestyles promoted to them and for which they work and work hard. As was precisely the initial purpose of the BLS reports, the concern for Hanauer is that when countries become “radically and unjustifiably unequal” either there is “revolution… [or a] police state.” Hanauer, while being clear not to equate his position with socialism, did say that those like him who are in power must raise the minimum wage closer to $21 an hour, and dismissed as a “trope” the claim of his elite colleagues who argue that raising wages “kills jobs.” “Capitalism,” he went on, “is a good system or it’s not…,” it can either allow working people to “lead stable and dignified, secure lives” or it needs to be replaced. He, of course, does not want that. What he does want, what benefits his class most, harkening back to Bernays, is a “secure middle class and a stable democracy.” This, he says, demands strong buying power.

But it is also as Sklar and Hanauer made clear in two consecutive Labor Day media specials across multiple platforms; buying power is the ability of consumers to purchase what is made available to them by those who own their means of production. More importantly, as both stories demonstrate well, buying power is defined, by dollar value, the ability of corporations and marketers to extract whatever dollars exist for their own enrichment or advanced influence. Hanauer spoke in more stark and direct terms, reflecting his own class-biased concerns, and specifically for his own safety, but each, he and Sklar, was similarly clear that there is a growing concern among the wealthiest that an insufficient buying power will threaten their position in society. This, maybe more than any other, is the most provocative evidence against any claim that buying power reflects a real racial, class, societal, balancing of power. Black buying power cannot mean or reflect the possibility Black people have to overturn existing inequality as it is literally a measurement of the ability of Black people to enrich a minuscule Black bourgeoisie en route to truly helping a far more prominent, and mostly White, power structure further enrich and protect itself.

Consistent with previous critiques of a Black bourgeoisie promoting buying power for its own interests is the Black press reporting of those claims as a matter of pride. Not long before Hanauer’s clarion call to his own classmates the Black press was championing buying power as driving diversity in hiring. Individual gains used to convince the collective of an illusion. That such stories target Black women specifically is of particular concern given the consistently precarious economic condition facing this group. Consider, in 2017, “the median annual earnings for full-time year-round black women workers was just over $36,000—an amount 21 percent lower than that of white women…” (Banks 2019).

Further, collectively, "The immense disparity in wealth between white and black households has reached its highest level since 1989; for every dollar of wealth owned by the typical white family, the median black family owns only five cents." And for Black women, levels of education, experience, and age do not come with commensurate levels of pay or access to wealth and at its most extreme, "black single mothers experience the largest wealth disadvantage with a median wealth of zero" (Zaw et al. 2017).

But these realities are less identifiable when so much (Black) press promotes stories telling of something a bit more mythological exemplified that later that same year, July of 2017, in a story about Lisa Brown, the diversity and inclusion consultant for Volkswagen Group of America. As the story concludes:

> "I've been with Volkswagen for 18 years and worked in after sales as an operation manager," said Brown. "I was the first female of color and only the second woman who held that position." Brown continued: "Now there are a lot more women in the region teams. When I started there were one or two and now there are three or four women per region and five women in our leadership executive position." Along with increasing the amount of women in leadership and the workforce at Volkswagen, the company has also partnered with organizations and universities to ensure that the company has access to a highly qualified and diverse talent pool. Brown stated, "We have partnered with the School of Business at Howard University, the National Black MBA, both the D.C. and Detroit chapters, and Inroads Inc. We also have an executive mentoring program for women." Brown said that because of the strong buying and consumer power in the African American community, African-Americans must be conscious of how inclusive these companies are. *Due to the fact that the Black community has such strong buying power, the automotive industry must cater to the Black demographic,* Brown added. Companies need to market to the African-American community and have African American leadership, said Brown. Brown continued: "There's a value and appreciation for understanding the partnerships we can create and we have to make sure we have a direct link to the African American community." (Stone 2017, emphasis added)

Again, buying power is represented here in its reality, in that it is used to (re)define "cater" as individual hires of Black executives and the capture of more Black customers for Volkswagen. The myth is also represented insofar as buying power is conveyed as an economic strength of the Black communal whole. Fitting too is that Jay-Z's *4:44* was released that same month, July 2017, where it also recirculated the myth. As was reported:

> [Jay-Z] summons black people in general to stop thinking as mere consumers and capitalize on the *staggering buying power* by supporting our own. 'What's better than one millionaire? Two,' JAY-Z said on 'Family Feud.' 'Especially when they from the same hue as you,' he continues as he tells them to buy black and build black. (Vaughn 2017, emphasis added)

Later that same year, in September, it would again be the Black press, either owned or targeted, and this time *The Grio* making reference to Nielsen, extolling the virtues of Black women, and #BlackGirlMagic, but only to the extent that these women drive sales for jewelry, social media, and their ability to run businesses, and be brand loyal (2017). The old trope of Black brand loyalty is represented here as somehow new as Black women "increasingly" demonstrate their fidelity to products. And Black women are credited with advancing as business owners despite more sound research which demonstrates that most have no paid employees and are run as an alternative to what would otherwise be unemployment. For instance, it has been reported in 2012 that all told, "… 2.5 million black-owned businesses had no paid employees, an increase of 38.9 percent from 2007…" (Andrews 2018). Instead, so much more focus drawn to reports like the one which came shortly thereafter in November of that same year. This time with news of a "Black Wall Street" app and claims that it would direct all the Black buying power to these Black businesses which in turn would "stabilize communities by providing jobs, paying taxes and keeping money in the community where they live" (Rosales 2017).

There are many other associated fantasies packaged in claims of dollars circulating in communities, or, "keeping money in the community." Among others would be the fantasy that there are enough Black-owned businesses in Black communities large enough to serve the consumer needs and wants of that community. Again, buying power is a concept developed by advertisers for advertisers where the goal is not to have money remain in any given community but to move from that community into the pockets of the advertisers and the owners of the products being marketed. The goal, as Nielsen points out, is that notice be taken by corporations of the power Black people have to make them more money:

> Companies should take notice of even the subtle shifts in spending, because black consumer brand loyalty is contingent upon a brand's perception as authentic, culturally relevant, socially conscious and responsible. (Nielsen 2018)

The "power of Black dollars" is in their ability to flow outward. There are few Black-owned companies and less capital in Black communities to develop them large enough to serve Black consumer needs. Buying power does not represent the potential within any community to develop business, procure assets like land or stock, or invest in any developmental programs. Buying power represents the outflow potential to enrich owners of companies large enough to serve national populations.

Finally, even when the (Black) press gets part of the equation correct, their frame, or interpretive lens, has already been preset to formulate a terribly flawed conclusion. At the end of 2017, *Black Enterprise* magazine ran a rare commentary which began with the correct "Black Buying Power is Not a Measure of Real Wealth" (Edmond 2017). But from there, and the accurate assertion that income is not the same as wealth, the article returns to form and even demonstrates its own contradictory logic. After the promising distinction being made between income and wealth, the article somehow argues then that what needs to happen is that Black people move from lifestyles of "Poverty-Creation" to "Wealth-Creation" and bases this solely on the associated buying power tropes of saving, spending less on frivolity, and more on "appreciating assets" like stock. But, as mentioned, people buy what is available to them for purchase and, in this case, as was previously described regarding land, there is no stock available for purchase even for those who may be able to afford some:

> In terms of types of financial wealth, in 2013 *the top one percent of households had 49.8% of all privately held stock*, 54.7% of financial securities, and 62.8% of business equity. *The top ten percent had 84% to 94% of stocks, bonds, trust funds, and business equity, and almost 80% of non-home real estate*. Since financial wealth is what counts as far as the control of income-producing assets, we can say that just 10% of the people own the United States of America; see Table 3 and Figure 2 for the details. The only category which is not skewed severely toward the upper class is debt. (Domhoff 2017, emphases added)

If 1% have nearly half of all the stock, and the top 10% have "84% to 94% of stocks, bonds, trust funds, and business equity," what is left for purchase? Similarly, the *Black Enterprise* piece answers its own contradiction and, in many ways, simplifies the entire argument over buying power. As the piece claims:

> By the way, as of the 2010 U.S. Census, there were 42 million black people in America (including multiracial African Americans). That means $1.2 trillion equates to about $28,600 in spending power per person. (Edmond 2017)

This previously discredited formula simultaneously, dangerously misleads, adds to the myth's propulsion, and also demonstrates the myth's flawed logic. If Black median *household income* has only just reached $41,511 in 2018 (Berube 2019), it makes impossible the figure quoted above of $28,600 per person in "spending power." First, of course, of the 40 + million Black people, not all are working age, or have their own income revenue. Second, the $1 + trillion figure is itself a figment, as previously described, of marketer imagination, survey data extrapolation, and curious math. What is evident here, again, is the power of the myth to create false realities and frames of reference from which proceed the most flawed arguments and conclusions. If the median *household income* is not quite $42 k annually, how then could it be described as "power" that each person would be said to then be spending nearly all they make?

And yet the formula, albeit with some rebranding, remains intact. As shown earlier, McKinsey & Co. have circumvented Selig and Nielsen by simply repackaging government consumer data and have given buying power an updated public relations image. The purpose, however, is unchanged. For example, and as part of their celebration of August as "Black Business Month," one outlet proudly cited the latest edition of the Big Three and for just the right reason:

> August is Black Business Month, *a time to celebrate and cherish the many African American owned businesses across the country*. In 2019, there were 134,567 Black-owned employer businesses (businesses with more than one employee) in all sectors of the U.S. economy, an 8% hike from the 124,551 Black-owned employer businesses in 2018, according to the Annual Business Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau. This is important as we are seeing a shift from big box retailers to smaller community-based shopping in most communities. It is also important when understanding African Americans'

> buying power of $1.2 trillion dollars. According to the McKinsey Institute for Black Economic Mobility, "healthy Black-owned businesses could be a critical component for closing the United States' Black–white wealth gap, which we project will cost the economy $1 trillion to $1.5 trillion (in 2018 dollars) per year by 2028." (McKinsey 2022; Myers 2022, emphasis added)

2022 and there is no sign the myth of Black buying power is slowing. McKinsey's increased involvement in promoting the myth suggests there is continuing, perhaps increasing, value to the very classes, Black and White, who have historically created and benefitted most from its circulation. In other words, McKinsey's repackaged myth promotion is easily absorbed into the existing media environment.

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CHAPTER 6

Cryptoganda: The Newest Bottle for Very Old Brandy

Abstract An updated form of the buying power myth has emerged targeting specifically Black investors in cryptocurrency. This "cryptoganda" has itself found a welcome home in an existing commercial media environment convincing many of its potential to solve existing, persistent, and worsening material inequality and specifically to give Black people a chance at developing a new relationship to the economy and society. Cryptoganda is simply what I have called the application of buying power mythology to the promotion of cryptocurrency and blockchain technology. This chapter summarizes that process while intentionally avoiding the arguments surrounding cryptocurrency and blockchain technology's ability to solve the inequality Black people face. In other words, the focus of this chapter is the messaging. Arguments over defining the technology, the currencies themselves, or the validity of their claims are beyond the scope of this book.

Keywords Cryptoganda · Propaganda · Bitcoin · Cryptocurrency · Blockchain

The fact that I write this amid a record collapse of the cryptocurrency and NFT (non-fungible token) market, with particularly painful losses recorded among Black investors (Lowery 2022), is irrelevant to my

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specific point of how those losses were (are) encouraged by a targeted marketing campaign that parallels buying power mythology. The cryptocurrency market may bubble up again, perhaps via a new mechanism given the apparent failure of NFTs, but it is the messaging I am concerned with here and which I am arguing must be overcome by those interested in actual solutions to persistent (worsening) material inequality. My own bias against cryptocurrency or any other form of investment as a solution to political problems of wealth definition, creation, and distribution, or anyone's disagreement or bias in favor of the opposite, is also irrelevant here. My intent, as stated earlier, is ultimately to table those disagreement over politics and interpretation for a focus on the objective realities of marketing, narrative, and (v.) economic data.

Within the previously described media environment, there are at least two other areas and/or systemic barriers defending the mythology of Black buying power and Black capitalism more broadly that have only become more clear since the initial publication of this book and which demand at least some attention. One is the more traditional mainstream media practice of either omission or reporting within the false constructions of "objectivity," and "professionalism" where reference at all requires uncritical "balancing" with the established and equally mainstream concept. The other is the expansion and rise, particularly post-COVID-19, of Black commercial digital media platforms and podcasts which have added further rebranding and distribution of the mythologies. These platforms have found the existing media environment to be quite welcoming in terms of algorithm and advertising most overtly, but also in terms of the previously discussed political or immaterial benefit to power.

Naming the phenomena as I do, "cryptoganda," is not so much that I think the world needs one more "ganda" applied in an attempt by an academic to do what we are often encouraged; identify and coin references to "gaps" in existing research. Cryptoganda, simply, on one hand, refers to the broader context of the rise of "crypto," and as Lana Swartz has written, " … I use 'crypto' to refer to the larger surround of cryptocurrencies, blockchains, and related sociotechnical and economic projects…" (Swartz, 2022). By "ganda," on the other hand and as will be further explained, I mean that I do consider the messaging around cryptocurrencies to be propaganda, or that which, "… involves strategically communicating information selected on the basis of a prior agenda"

(Hayward 2022). However, my real intent is to demonstrate the continuity of specific attempts to target Black America for a particular form of propaganda meant to move Black people away from organizing for political power in favor of mythologies of Black capitalism, entrepreneurialism, and associated lesser, immaterial "powers" such as "buying, market, symbolic." "In other words, cryptoganda extends the previous work of rebranding the "elaborate conspiracy," described by James Turner, to deprive African people {"Black" people in the U.S.} of political rights and economic security through control of the land" (Brown, 2016, 269). Absent an appreciation for this particular context of Black people in the United States, it becomes impossible to appreciate the form, intent, or impact of that messaging given the cultural and political memories that media reference and recall.

Initially, the messaging of cryptoganda targeting Black people is consistent with, and a stylized form of, that which has its own form constructed for domestic and international subjects as well. That is, the core mythological tenets are presented equally to all and include but are not necessarily limited to: (a) Satoshi Nakamoto and the Bitcoin White Paper marked revolutionary breaks with conventional economic activity and organization, (b) existing economic inequality being positively addressed at both micro and macro/national levels by the adoption of cryptocurrency, Bitcoin in particular, and blockchain technology, (c) autonomy, anonymity, and security will all increase and be improvements upon existing systems of banking and exchange. However, essential to the particular form this messaging takes when targeting Black audiences are also, (d) specific references to cryptocurrency as liberation, revolution, freedom, or change and (e) that these positive shifts are best brought about through financial literacy and entrepreneurialism as opposed to struggles over political power.

Nakamoto's vaunted white paper is little more than a technical/technological sermon inviting new interest in what was already existing blockchain technology and Bitcoin with the idea that they would be free market solutions to a 2008 free market collapse. As Black capitalism is a propagated subset of capitalism, with buying power a propagated subset within, cryptoganda is itself an emergent subset of the broader mythologizing of capitalist solutions to the contradictions *caused* by capitalism. Because Nakamoto's white paper purports to be an improvement (replacement) over existing banking and monetary systems allowing for pseudonymous, irreversible exchange, and a fixed total of coins preventing devaluation, a mythology has arisen (been constructed) that these are protective measures against future economic collapses caused by banks, hedges against inflation or the devaluing U.S. dollar, and ground floor opportunities for Black people to obliterate existing (and worsening) economic disparities. Again, the inaccuracy of these rebranded libertarian/capitalist talking points is less my concern currently than their redeployment because neither those arguments nor Nakamoto's legendary paper, of course, say anything of redistribution, or how the already existing market when performing "well" exists as a nightmare of global exploitation and inequality. Similarly, nothing in Nakamoto's vaunted white paper describes what happens to the overwhelming majority of the wretched once Bitcoin becomes the adopted dominant currency creating immediately an even more "… oligarchic, more exploitative, more irrational, and more inhuman…" wasteland where we are somehow more beholden to our crypto overlords.

The white paper attributed to the ambiguous, anonymous (fictional?) Nakamoto does not do well to demonstrate its own claims never mind those made by the mythologies evolved since on the paper's behalf. And while my own focus is on the messaging as it corresponds to material reality, there has been strong evidence presented that present competent challenges to both the white paper and its related mythologies. Specifically, peer-to-peer, pseudonymous, irreversible exchanges taking place on privately-owned and concentrated platforms, with permanent public records kept on blockchains do not solve problems of material inequality or redistribution. Consumers, workers, and the poor are not empowered by systems that protect sellers and offer no consumer protection and insurance for assets kept on exchanges, which are themselves highly concentrated among private ownership. The existing banking system may not benefit these communities but does offer relative protections through federal insurance, consumer protection, and some level of accountability. And whatever are the varied, and very real, horrors imposed on the world by the existing banking system and its fiat currency, none of them are solved by the world of crypto.

Understanding at all the particular features of propaganda targeting African America—and their meaning—does require an appreciation of just how important Black capitalism is to the project of White settler colonialism, empire, or capitalism. Generally, there is a well-documented history of the use of media, culture, and symbolic redefinition of social movements in the UnitedStates as methods of managing those movements domestically while promoting that adoption via foreign policy as a means of demonstrating some overall positive global influence (Ball 2011; Saunders 1999). A more recent form of the same has been described as a "woke imperium" or the "… newest iteration of this process is the adoption of social justice causes and rhetoric as the explicit goals of the United States' foreign policy." In other words, U.S. policy is redefined to reflect the concerns of those struggling within the UnitedStates to signal some effective change within its borders and to project the same via U.S. policy abroad as a progressive intervention in the world.

Recall that upon word of his invitation to Biden's cabinet, Anthony Blinken announced his intent to use the horrific experiences of his fellow Jews in World War II as justification for increased U.S. influence over global affairs. Or as Christopher Mott describes, the U.S. mainstream liberal establishment rebranded arch rival conservatives as rational actors upon Trump's election (re)casting the likes of William Kristol as reasonable and would report the more recent protests in Cuba as responses to that country's residual "anti-black racism," or the rightwing, coup-leading Bolivian leader Jeanine Anez as a "women's activist." These tactics have for as long been directed internally toward Black communities often in the narrative form of Black capitalism, financial literacy, and now cryptocurrency can all "close the racial wealth gap," or deliver finally the "freedom" and "revolution" so desperately needed. No one need to engage political struggle as all are meant to see their aspirations as achievable in capitalism. The messaging is as clear as it is unstated; the problems caused by an existing socio-economic model can only be solved via the maintenance and expansion of that model. Indeed, the new "woke imperium" has a new media environment even more powerfully suited to very old traditions of messaging upon which to build.

Today's sophisticated media environment complicates recognition of propaganda, specifically the levels at which it operates, and the intent it means to mask. The examples below of the spokespeople for Black capitalism, and even the recent cryptocurrency commercials and their rampant, even popular criticism, demonstrate the point. Celebrity (including what has formerly been considered punditry, journalism, and even academia) is largely capable of either attracting consumers and followers or offering an outlet for satire, and even the ire of targeted audiences. However, celebrity often allows either response without any particular criticism of, for instance, capitalism, myths of wealth equating hard work or genius, or, most specifically, the particular impact of those messages on Black people. Confining, indeed assuring, this acceptable impact of celebrity is made easier by the established media environment which affords rampant distribution of, in this case, Black capitalist solutions to very political problems.

Invitations to cultural inclusion and deployment of "market power" (Nembhard 2014), "buying power" (Ball 2020), "Black symbolic power" (Halliday 2022) a state-sponsored "woke imperium," and an explosion of Black capitalist podcasting demonstrate the shortcomings of previous mythology promoting the Internet as leveling economic playing fields, and to [Black] capitalism's rebranding capability. There is simply no real media or online competition to the "capitalism is good and will save us," "start a business" messaging supported by the state, advertising community, and their attendant online algorithms all of which protect and propel the anti-Black information, counterinsurgency warfare.

For example, beyond the more easily criticizable—and yet dangerously effective—use of paid influencers and celebrity to push capitalist mythology, are the array of differently positioned Black capitalist spokespeople whose presence is framed as expert analyses. Targeted Black populations need not understand NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens) or the blockchain technology upon which they reside in order to be convinced that the creation of new investment opportunities for capital and lottery-style winnings for the handful of artists these investors choose to support is all somehow new and revolutionary. In fact, quite the opposite. The more one is convinced of the complicated nature of this brave new world the more likely they are to be bamboozled. Each iteration of the Web has come with advanced forms of the mythology; the "one more bale" theory was the claim that new technology available to now "freed slaves" would allow the wealth and political independence previously denied. And yet, one could rarely catch up, get clear of the imposed debt, and attain any legitimate freedom. Recall also that Web 2 promised a general leveling of the economic and political playing fields, and for Black artists the ability to circumvent the same music industry oligarchy which now runs the Web 3 music world with even more tightly gripped extractive hands. Web 3 contains more of the same promises only which now include crypto as salvation.

NFT (non-fungible token) rap albums, for example, produced by Tory Lanez and Nas which have been presented as industry breaking, revolutionary capture of art and revenue by formerly exploited Black artists are indeed ultimately fronts for still White-owned Ethereum cryptocurrency and blockchain investors like David Kovachs and Vinco Ventures who own the Lanez project, and DJ 3LAU's Royal who owns Nas'. The messaging around the albums, including Lanez's viral exuberance in claiming he "broke the industry," contains similar references to overthrows and game-changing concepts suggesting there has been a shift in the relationship between artist and industry and between Black and White. These arguments are themselves rebrands of endless empty promises of new technology upsetting the relationship artists have to their respective industries and institutions (Ball 2011).

NFT albums and associated Black-targeting social media influencers like Kim Kardashian and Jim Jones promoting cryptocurrency and NFTs to their audiences all become domestic, internally colonialist, microcosmic conduits, "… for ideologizing and solidifying the neo-imperialism on which conventional liberal internationalist goals depend" (Mott 2022). Cryptoganda is merely part of a contemporary rebranding of imperialism meant, in this case, to target an internally held colonized population. It is the media inverse of Malcolm X's still correct view of the police doing locally what the military does internationally.

The form taken by this redirection of neo-imperialism inward, neocolonialism, has been led by political and algorithmically reconcilable figures designed to pervade nearly every corner of the Black public sphere. Hill Harper, Earn Your Leisure, A Million Dollaz Worth of Game, Roland Martin, Karen Hunter, Boyce Watkins, Jay Morrison, and others all represent a Black capitalist promoting media ecosphere which present capitalism as Black power and pride and as a solution to Black political problems and all are supported by, dependent upon, a White corporate, advertising, and investment community that ultimately are themselves supported by the broader interests of the state itself. Directly, there are the formal relationships held between people like Harper who promote investment in Bitcoin, using the very misunderstood history of Black Wall Street to support his Black Wall Street (crypto) Wallet but who are partnered with very White corporations like Plaid and PrimeTrust, or Roland Martin's White corporate sponsored segments on Black economics and investment. Indirectly, however, is the support these outlets receive from White ad revenue, advertiser-driven algorithms pushing their online content to the top, and a state who has itself long adopted practices of corrupting radical movements with symbolic overtures and redefinition (Ball 2020).

An unattributed reference to a social media comment responding to the Matt Damon's Crypto.com Super Bowl commercial reads, "There's a sucker Bourne every minute." Respecting the pun it is worth noting that "suckers" are less born than they are intentionally manufactured. One is less likely a fool than one is to be fooled. And any successful attempt at fooling often requires preying upon previously developed, imposed, and extant material conditions, self-concepts, and worldviews. The Damon commercial itself, an extension of his mythologized tough guy Jason Bourne image, whose own effectiveness has been ridiculed into wide question, does still demonstrate the intent to evoke long-evolved concepts of Whiteness, imperialism, Manifest Destiny, and again, the White Man's Burden. In stark and revealing contrast, the same company's commercial featuring Lebron James paralleled Damon's in terms of both its Super Bowl premier and its evocation of Black tropes of colonial immaturity, a perennial infancy, financial illiteracy, and hope for a new found power.

While presented more as a traditional business solution to White audiences, just another asset to consider, another territory to conquer, Black audiences are routinely told that cryptocurrency is the opportunity previously denied that will allow for a collective advance, a stand-in for political struggle or somehow itself an assumption of political power. Hence, in Damon's infamous commercial the initial cold, imperial all white background, dominant, paying direct homage to Manifest Destiny with proud genocidal reference to Columbus, the conquering of nature represented in the Wright Brothers, and astronauts—one literally named Satoshi—representing an imperial full spectrum dominance, and Damon, projecting Bourne, makes reference to "fortune favoring the bold and brave."

Juxtapose the messaging in the Damon commercial to that which appears in the one featuring Lebron James and for the very same platform. James is found in a dim room, small, immature, a child's room, a stark departure from the standing, walking, brash talking representation of empire we get from Damon. James, on the other hand, is in his childhood bedroom talking to his younger self. Demure, reserved, hopeful, the future is "crunk," and here is the sly working of the cryptoganda, not because James becomes the rarest of talents in professional basketball, no. James' reference to the future is meant to reflect the hopes of an oppressed community powerless, beyond pop cultural symbolism, to effect change, left only to hope, wish, pray, or becoming financially literate. James, who paradoxically is likely to be worth more than Damon, who has physically dominated his way since high-school to being considered among the best ever in his craft and has intellectually maneuvered his career into resulting in his being a billionaire. However, this physical and intellectual prowess is depicted still as childlike, soft, juvenile. James' being clearly the more domineering of the two is depicted, again in juxtaposition to Damon, as weak, as he is meant to reflect the condition of his people. Damon's reflection is equally fraudulent but more in step with prevailing imperial narratives of race, class, and gender.

In each case, traditional modes of influencing target populations are deployed. That is, logic is discarded in favor of appeals directly to previously socially constructed concepts. The absence of direct reference to the actual advertised product (cryptocurrency trading platforms or exchanges) is more than made up for, in Damon's case, by appeals to Whiteness, Manifest Destiny, White manhood. James references long-imposed narratives of inequality stemming from Black financial illiteracy and now formerly existing barriers to inclusivity.

The subtle differences in these two commercials reflect much of the broader trend where the messaging targeting the world majority (so-called people of color) overtly references cryptocurrency investment as "revolutionary," as is the case also of Spike Lee's for the crypto ATM, or Digital Currency Machines (DCMs), Coin Cloud, owned by a routinely White Chris McAlary. And these are only one component of the ecosystem driving Black involvement in crypto framing such involvement as the long-awaited, and previously inaccessible, opportunities in U.S. capitalism. It may be that many are unaware of the ubiquity and uniformity, even the common origin, of the messaging allowing for greater success.

Consider, in addition to those mentioned, the combined example(s) and uniformity of messaging, of those most prominently involved in cryptoganda, particularly; actor Hill Harper and his Black Wall Street Wallet (BWSW) application, the Earn Your Leisure (EYL) podcast, Ian Dunlap the "Master Investor," and veteran Black journalist Roland Martin with his Unfiltered platform. Via his prominence as an actor, friend and former classmate of Barack Obama, and then owner and face of the BWSW, Harper garners the routine attention of hundreds of thousands of people. Ian Dunlap is a routine guest on similarly situated platforms, has his own, and his regular visits to EYL and its nearly 900 k YouTube subscriber base, Martin's being roughly the same, and the fact that they all are representative of an even larger media ecosystem, assures their messaging reaches a good amount of Black audiences seeking news, investment advise, and economic analyses. Moreover, each uses variations of an appeal to Black collective history and struggle as part of their presentation and performance as though their work is an extension (or completion) of freedom struggles of the past. As it pertains to an adherence to the cryptoganda and it being grafted onto existing Black capitalist mythology consider the following summary:

On July 3, 2021 Ian Dunlap published a video on his platform featuring himself appearing on the EYL podcast in which he and the hosts Rashad Bilal and Troy Millings can all be heard dropping several prominent catch cryptoganda phrases such as, "going long" on Bitcoin or "hodl-ing" (HODL or Hold On for Dear Life), because investment in Bitcoin meant it was heading "to the moon" in reference to the predicted eventual rise in value of Bitcoin and Ethereum. They even proclaimed that "the party is back on…" meaning investors could expect big returns to come. The following month Hill Harper appeared, with Dunlap, on EYL encouraging every Black person to invest in Satoshis, the smallest unit possible or 1/100 millionth of a single Bitcoin, and that this was essential to Black people owning an "ascending value asset class" that would place them in a position of enormous wealth and power once Bitcoin is adopted as currency and the world is forced to "come through us." This video, which also features Dunlap, remains on the homepage of the BWSW website.

However, since the collapse of 2022 with headlines reading, "Bitcoin, Ethereum crash over 70% from peaks; crypto investors lose over $2 trillion in 8 months," the cryptogandist messaging has shifted a bit but carefully in such a way that avoids acknowledgment of any prior bad advise that would threaten their perceived legitimacy or, worse still, prevailing Black capitalist logic. In fact, just as I am arguing cryptoganda rebrands old arguments in favor of Black capitalism, the corrective post-crash narrative reflects many of the same features previously deployed to protect capitalism and its Black derivation. On July 11, 2022, Dunlap posted a video of his recent visit back to EYL in which he is seen comparing the current crash of the crypto market to that of the 2008 crash of the housing market saying that once again the issue is people and institutions "over-leveraging" themselves and now being forced to sell (or give) all of their assets back to the dominant banks who are now looking to buy up the losses and consolidate the remains for themselves.

While previously promoting cryptocurrency as that which will replace the U.S. dollar and the banks, EYL and Dunlap come back now in July of 2022 to proclaim an earlier prediction that the banks would assist in over-leveraging with the idea that once those loans went into default the banks would be able to buy up all that remained, again, as was the case with housing in 2008. Their "new" solution? A diversified portfolio consisting of blue chip stocks and, wait for it, "real estate." Even more recently, EYL have convened "InvestFest 2022" featuring Dunlap, Charlemagne The God, and other Black capitalist luminaries which features Steve Harvey championing the value in owning real estate. When one bubble bursts promote another, even one formerly encouraged and recently crashed. In other words, these samples exemplify the malleability of messaging required to maintain apparent legitimacy as pundits with an ability to attract paying customers. That is the logic; not an attempt to clarify the economy or the political economy of society, nor is the point to clarify for Black audiences the specifics of their condition.

Beyond the immaterial focus of my argument here is the demonstrably material impact of all this messaging inviting Black people to solve their material woes within this most speculative and un/under-regulated environment. Considered along with pre-existing differences between Black and White socioeconomically, it should be of no surprise to see these differences reveal themselves in investment patterns. As shown below, the only banking or investing category where Black people outpace Whites is in percentage of the population owning any cryptocurrency. White investors, with more resources, and access to capital, have more diversity in their portfolios and investments in stocks of higher value, and, as shown, are targeted differently by advertisers promoting crypto or other financial products. Equally unsurprising, as described below, the over-representation of Black investors in cryptocurrencies does not correspond to the overall accumulation or value of the investments.

As mentioned previously, whereas it might seem, given the recent collapse of the crypto market and even the rise of associated cons in the NFT market, that cryptoganda can no longer be effective, this could not be farther from the truth. The failures of Bitcoin adoption, from the perspective of those already exploited working people or anyone not invested in Bitcoin, in El Salvador, Nigeria, or even Miami stand as testimony. As does the slowly emerging reality of consolidation in currency accumulation, where roughly 92% of Bitcoin are held in less than 3% of wallets, and the use of engagement in crypto as colonial data management, cryptoganda messaging being used for “rebranding predatory capitalism” moving us “backwards on the digital plantation” (Diego 2022).

There is resistance to cryptoganda messaging, as was the case recently with resistance by residents in Brooklyn’s Marcy Projects to a Jay-Z-led effort to bring blockchain classes and investment opportunities. But the attempts to propagandize continue and are in need of further critical review. For, even as some Marcy residents were clear that blockchain courses and investing in cryptocurrencies were no solutions to their institutional poverty, the messaging from Jay-Z and Twitter founder Jack Dorsey and their investment partners remains in high production. Even when there is resistance, it is more important to recognize propaganda, and its political intent, rather than the particular impact on its target audiences. More is revealed in the latter than the former.

The messaging of Jay-Z and his partners may have had varying levels of success in its specific ability to convince each resident, but its goal to offer Black capitalist solutions to the very political problems must be understood. The material conditions of Black people are not changing and, in fact, economically are defined as a “permanent recession” and as having a collective wealth headed by 2053 to zero. Black entrepreneurialism, more than failing, has worked against the collective advancement of Black people as even an increase in business development has seen a decrease in revenue captured. These are not conditions that can be solved by whatever variation of capitalism promoted by sponsors of investment and business. Indeed, as shown, the inequalities often said to not exist in, or to be solved by, the world of crypto are themselves more prevalent within this “revolutionary” space.

All of the contradictions which currently exist socioeconomically are replicated, even worsened, within the crypto world. That is, despite cryptoganda claims to the contrary, (a) no new wealth redistribution occurs, (b) central authorities continue to dominate, and (c) anonymity or privacy is ethereal at best. Even my two debates with the Gentlemen of Crypto and the Black scion of decentralized finance (DeFi) Reggie Middleton, the arguments all feature the claim that crypto now offers an opportunity to Black (and all world majority people) opportunities never before possible. Nothing more is happening than an attempt at rebranding (Ball 2022).

During a recent podcast marketing executive Adam Singer can be heard describing the impressive “digital gold narrative” developed around cryptocurrency given that we are dealing with financial speculation on par with any Ponzi scheme. Singer says, that as a marketer, from a marketing perspective, he is impressed with the rise and global dissemination of a brand, one devoid entirely from any material product, service, or reality, but one that has convinced so many of its viability as the new gold rush, the new opportunity for mass wealth creation, that it is impressive. Singer's judgment is of great value here in that it is from the perspective of cold, calculated market manipulator, from a man who demonstrates an interest in "digital brand warfare," and one explicit in its praise for crypto's ability to entirely misrepresent itself to an enormous audience. It is in this context that so many are swept up by cryptoganda creating ceaseless trouble for those with any alternative messaging, particularly formed around collective or national liberation.

All economic downturns involve a wide array of propaganda offering explanations meant to discourage institutional analysis. Nothing in this regard has changed and is certainly the case during the current recession in the UnitedStates or the "permanent recession" which faces Black people. The same is also true of the current relative downturn or even collapse of the crypto markets requiring a shift in the cryptoganda deployed. Losses are being redefined as temporary, the fault of individual bad investment practices, or some other external (war?) factors none of which allows for much room to discuss the overall corruption of capital or the "elaborate conspiracy" to forever separate Black people from actual political power—the control of land, resources, their productive capabilities, and wealth produced. Cryptoganda is merely the latest rendition of the counterinsurgency required of continued colonial exploitation offering a new safety valve for justifiable rage from among the colonized. Revolution requires some manner of narrative control; the ability to distribute welcomed, interpretable messaging is essential. Cryptoganda must be counted among contemporary efforts to distort, if not destroy, views which are critical of surveillance, the state, capital, and which are more than symbolically critical of Whiteness, specifically calling for political power.

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CHAPTER 7

Freedom Was the Call but "Instead, They Got a Bank"

Abstract Claims that Black people should pool their savings, assets, and wealth with the use of Black-owned banks has a long history of being shown as insufficient in addressing economic inequality. The claim has a particular attachment to the myth of buying power and, therefore, deserves some special attention. If, as the claim goes, there is this pool of money that Black people spend which is calculated as buying power, that money should be deposited in Black banks which would allow those banks to better serve Black communities. However, this myth, being built in part upon another, that of buying power, assures, as its history makes clear, that banking Black cannot solve inequality.

Keywords Banking · #BuyBlack · #BankBlack · #BlackLivesMatter

In the introduction to her scathing critique of Black banking as a solution to the racial wealth divide, *The Color of Money: Black Banks and The Racial Wealth Gap* (2017), Mehrsa Baradaran describes how from the beginning "Northern industrialists," that is, capital and capitalists, have always loved promoting to Black leaders the idea of a "segregated economy" led by Black-owned business understanding the limitations this would ultimately put on Black equality. In fact, as Baradaran points out,

J. A. Ball, *The Myth and Propaganda of Black Buying Power*,
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the imposition of banking on Black people was done with the foreknowledge that banking would only protect White capitalist power *against* efforts by Black people to liberate themselves or to even achieve any kind of parity. Black people may have (still) wanted freedom but, as she wrote, "Instead they got a bank" (3). Black banking is still often promoted along with buying power as a means toward collective advance with a long tradition dating back to the nineteenth century. From the post-Civil War era to the twenty-first century, from the Freedmen's Bureau to #BankBlack, there continues some form of the idea that redirecting existing Black money, buying power, into Black banks can be a collective corrective measure to persistent inequality. Even most recently it was reported that:

> … the stars are aligned… literally… between the bookends of Killer Mike's call to action in July 2016 and Jay Z's 4:44 in July 2017. Both artists are sending the Black community a clear message to use our $1.2 trillion in annual spending more purposefully. Both artists are promoting collective economics! (OneUnited Bank Press Release 2019)

First, it must be noted, again, that the "bookends" of Killer Mike and Jay-Z are meant to represent the breadth of what are acceptable Black politics here used to further the practices of supporting Black business, banking and buying power. Killer Mike is often considered more politically Left, supporting Bernie Sanders, marijuana legalization, and offering at times politically thoughtful lyrics most famously as part of the multiracial duo Run The Jewels. Jay-Z has a far more corporate Democrat, supporter of Hillary Clinton, "Black Republican" song-writing personae. But both adhere to variations of buying power and Black banking and are used by OneUnited Bank in a public relations #BankBlack project which promotes depositing Black dollars into a privately-owned Black bank as "collective economics."

Second, it is also worth noting that rarely do any discussions of banking Black (or that buying power) include references to criticism of the idea, historical or otherwise. The long history of debate around the effectiveness of Black banks to serve the needs of Black communities is further suppressed by the promotion of headline grabbing numbers in part by the very outlets producing the numbers and the headlines. We have seen already how the commercial Black press as largely a subsidiary class functionary of the mainstream helps to produce buying power reports while not offering similar space or time to direct critiques or even indirect reporting which details another economic reality. So, for example, this most current iteration of the call from #BankBlack, much like its nineteenth- and twentieth-century antecedents, encourages saving money in Black banks and uses celebrities to promote the easily digestible call-to-action. However, this largely works to suppress long-existing intellectual and activist debate around the subject and the copious research over the decades which detail, at minimum, a far more precarious history of Black banks as models of Black communal uplift. The implicit, and at times explicit, claims attached to each renewed call contains some form of the associated buying power myth that Black uplift is inhibited largely to the failure of Black people themselves.

Though beyond the scope of this work, there is a tremendous body of literature which has attempted to clarify, from varying perspectives, the history of Black banking. While there may be varied opinion as to the specific causes there is a general unanimity around the insufficiency of Black banks as mechanisms to advance the entire Black community. The unscientific observation that an objective reality filled with persistent inequality (and worse) is proof of the inability of Black banks to solve these problems is supported by the fact that so many for so long have looked to explain why. Be it the previously mentioned work of Ofari (1970), Brimmer (1971), Bates and Bradford (1980), Ammons (1996) or the more recent study 2015 UFE State of the Dream report, "Underbanked and Overcharged," there are themes which run throughout, none of which seem ever addressed in popular #BankBlack-styled calls-to-action.

Among the paralleling themes challenging Black banks are, of course, centuries of exclusion from capital, paid labor, or public policy support for the establishment and protection of Black banks. There are issues of higher labor costs and servicing fees and rates of private versus government deposits. But essentially, while there is debate as to severity, impact or potential, the primary issues facing Black banks are similar to the underlying problem facing claims of Black buying power: Black people do not have enough money. Black people do not have enough to deposit, wealth to offer as collateral, nor the ability to circumvent persistent White supremacist devaluations of Black housing, land, or business to generate the kinds of banking (economic) strength required to serve the needs of a Black community. As has been summarized, "Black banks should be viewed as institutions facing typical small bank problems" (Bates & Bradford, 1980). The primary question here would then be, why should it be expected that any "small bank" could solve the very large economic problems faced for centuries by Black America?

Baradaran details the many flaws inherent to ideas associated with banking as a solution to persistent inequality. It is worth noting again that, as she writes, "Black banking has been an anemic response to racial inequality that has yielded virtually nothing in closing the wealth gap" (2). Summarizing several of her larger points is of value and speaks to the themes which are seen throughout the tradition of criticism of Black banking. The first is that Black banks cannot solve problems of inequality because of the very nature of banking, and ultimately the White supremacy, carried out through public policy, which both limits the income and wealth Black people have historically, and today, been able to accumulate, and which mitigates material gain by devaluing what Black people own. As she points out, for instance, Black people, by racist policy, earn less and, therefore, have less to invest or deposit. The property available to Black people and, due to racist devaluation, the property Black people end up with, cannot generate the kinds of profits banking home loans would be designed to bring back in returns. And because Black banks are too small, containing what is too little wealth held by Black people, the profit banks rely on that would normally come from investing depositors' accounts in the global market, is also unavailable to these Black banks. This, as Baradaran describes, is a "combustible situation over time" (5). In fact, as she writes, and as we discussed during our interview, well-meaning efforts to have Black people move their money over to Black banks actually hurts those banks. Contrary to what is promised by popular calls to bank Black, because these banks are largely isolated from larger economies, and are often dealing with small, incremental deposits and savings, and historically have had less return on investments or loans, all of which costs banks to service, there is little that they can generate to actually perform the community uplift often ascribed to their potential.

For instance, the call to deposit Black income in Black banks does not help small banks, Black banks as is assumed. Deposits, Baradaran points out, "are liabilities" to banks. Deposits become debt which banks must service with interest and have covered and available should any depositor want her money at any given time (Baradaran 2017a, b, November 4). Unlike larger banks working with much larger sums, and with full access to invest those sums in the global economy assuring greater returns, Black banks cannot cover, cannot afford to loan out, and do not recuperate loans at the same rate and with the same levels of profit, as described above. Black banks may want to self-promote as being one with political movements, and with the people, but they, as Baradaran noted, do not really find value in what most Black people can deposit.

This was evidenced more recently, February 10, 2017, when reported that the Black-owned Seaway bank of Chicago closed and was sold off due to, "operations of an unsafe and unsound nature that resulted in inadequate capital to protect its depositors…" (Kenney 2017). As the story continues, "Prior to its acquisition by the State Bank of Texas, Seaway Bank had approximately $361.2 million in total assets and $307.1 million in total deposits, the FDIC's press release stated. *But the institution's heavy involvement in the #BankBlack movement last year still wasn't enough to secure much-needed depositors from the African-American community*" (emphasis added). During the resurgence of the tradition under the banner #BankBlack, it was reported in 2016 that, "The U.S. had 23 black-owned banks, credit unions or savings and loan associations as of March 31, according to the Federal Reserve. The nation's 156 minority-owned banks collectively hold $131 billion in assets" (Bomey 2016). That number would then be down to 22, the precise number of Black banks reported existing in 1969 (Bates & Bradford 1980, 379), and with roughly $360 million fewer in total "minority-owned" banking assets. The reporting misleads, in this instance, by describing collectively the "assets" of "minority-owned" banks as if this were one entity, working in unison, under unified direction, with a unified purpose as would be the case in one bank. The distortion is further compounded by also then not doing the same as it regards White-owned banks.

The reported $131 billion in "minority-owned" banking "assets" would put the collective value held by 156 banks as only 16th among the top U.S.-based banks alone. The top 3 of those banks, J.P. Morgan Chase, Bank of America, and Wells Fargo each alone have assets in the trillions (US Bank Location 2019). One of these banks by themselves has nearly 10 times what all the so-called minority-owned banks have combined and, therefore, can use those assets to create even more vast wealth in ways Black banks never can. The wealth and opportunity these dominant banks generate is routinely used, absent detail, as reference points for the claims that Black banking can in some way create similar realities for Black people. But gaps in society play out at all levels and banking is no different. What myths of Black buying power, banking, capitalism, all deny, aside from real potential, are histories of previous critique. As was mentioned earlier regarding buying power, Baradaran also summarizes traditions of Black attempts to engage Black banking, and criticism of those efforts, and from across the Black political spectrum.

As has been the case with its smaller cousin buying power, Black banking has been supported by the full panoply of Black political varieties and for much the same reason; a fundamental misunderstanding of definition and function has many, even the well-meaning, to assume their ability to make use of these endeavors in ways perhaps even unintended by those who made them available. From Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Jesse Jackson, The Black Panther Party, to Barack Obama, all have, for various reasons, supported the value of Black banking. Today, the bank Black concept is championed by new pundits and leadership, such as, Killer Mike, T.I., and #BlackLivesMatter. But, as remains the case today, and is certainly the case with buying power, criticism of Black banking and capitalism have long suffered an inattention reserved only for those often dismissed as crushing hope or being marginal themselves.

However, there has been a tradition of even mainstream economic critique of Black capitalism and banking the focus of which has largely been that public policy or politics is the primary determinant of wealth creation, distribution, and, specifically, banking. For instance, the work of Andrew Brimmer, a Black, Harvard-trained economist, and first Black governor of the Federal Reserve under Lyndon B. Johnson, described Black capitalism and banking as a, "cruel hoax," "mirage," and as "ornaments." Brimmer's ultimate concerns were simply that Black people have been segregated economically, not just socially, from all wealth-producing mechanisms and, as a result, cannot supply the originating revenue, or have access to global mechanisms of wealth production, to have banks be anything other than sources of "racial pride," but never "… instruments of economic development" (Baradaran 2017a, b, 202).

All of these issues came to a head on July 20, 2016, during an episode of *Voices With Vision* which airs on WPFW 89.3 FM in Washington, D.C. (Ball 2016). I was invited to that show by hosts Netfa Freeman, Jennifer Bryant and Garrett Harris, to discuss Black buying power as part of a larger discussion about Black economics with B. Doyle Mitchell, President and CEO of the Black-owned Industrial Bank started in D.C. by his grandfather. In telling the history of Industrial Bank, almost immediately, Mitchell encouraged Black deposits in Black banks because "… we have tremendous spending power," he said, "but it does us no good because we spend it outside of our community…" "… we go to the club…" he went on to say, and spend all Friday's earnings outside the community "… by Monday." More specifically, Mitchell's calls for more Black banking were, as he said, based on the $1 + trillion reported often as our buying power which he also, as discussed above, made the common error of literally defining, amazingly, as "… our GDP… our income." Once more, GDP is the value of all goods and services in any given country during any given year and is a value which goes to the owners of those goods and services. GDP is not a number depicting the economic strength of various communities within a country, nor is GDP, as Mitchell also said, a measurement of anyone's "income." When I alerted him to this fact, that buying power numbers are not derived from a Black national GDP, Mitchell, like most, unaware of the origins of his own claims, asked, exasperated, "… where do {those numbers} come from?".

My attempt to quickly summarize the origins of these fictitious buying power numbers did not impress Mr. Mitchell whose response was merely to dismiss the critique in favor of a more vague reference to "… some money…" being out there that Black people misuse. Mitchell exemplified the process of Black business interests propelling a mythology to Black audiences. His factually incorrect description of buying power, coupled with his refusal to engage those details while simply repeating claims of potential collective uplift via deposits in his and other Black banks perfectly demonstrated in that moment the process being discussed here. Fundamental misunderstanding and misrepresentation of key facts related to GDP, income, and claims of buying power, by the president of a bank no less, are precisely what leads to so much confusion of these and related issues, as well as, what can be done about them.

So, in fact, Mitchell, during the course of a long and not particularly specific answer to a question posed about how exactly investments in Black banks helps the Black community, explained the very problem I had attempted to lay out during our discussion with, and a point made very well by, Baradaran. Mitchell explained that Industrial Bank "… made loans to the point where we need deposits…" to "fund" the loans made to other customers. Never mind that Mitchell's response seemed more to describe a classic pyramid scheme than any actual community wealth-producing mechanism or process, but as stated, the limitations are inherent to the situation itself. Black people, as a result of a history of White supremacy and economic exclusion, earn less, have what little they own devalued as a result, and, therefore, are given less and more interest-laden loans, which appreciate less simply as a result of becoming Black property, and, therefore, also yield less in value, in no small part due also to the fact that Black people then, as consumers, have less to spend.

But it remains the propaganda side of this issue which carries the most impact. After all, few, Black people no less, need to be told of their material, lived, experience or suffering. What is most needed is a powerful propaganda to manage, as best as can be expected, the potential unrest derived from that suffering which, from the beginning, has been of prime importance. It is the impact of unchecked messaging which requires more attention. So much of the power behind the impact of the myth on Black America is derived not from the myth itself but its messengers. Originating, in this iteration, with the Black commercial press, the myth is carried by the White mainstream back through punditry, even more grassroots media, and political activism, and permeates uncontrollably. And so it had to be then, predictable, inevitable, and consistent that buying power, connected, as is often the case, with the issue of banking Black, would come roaring back with new energy in April of 2017 propelled by #BlackLivesMatter.

The OneUnited Bank public relations statement began, "A historic partnership has been born between OneUnited Bank, the largest Black owned bank in the country, and #BlackLivesMatter to organize the $1.2 trillion in spending power of Black America" (OneUnited 2016). As already noted, even presidents of banks seem unclear as to the meaning of buying power, certainly of its origins, methods, and, apparently, purpose. If Black-owned media and banking institutions, supported by all manner of political and religious pundits, organizations, academics, and activists, misrepresent and popularize the meaning of buying power it stands to reason that newer formations containing younger and more politically inexperienced membership will follow suit. In this instance, it is irrelevant that this effort at banking Black meant generating some revenue for bail payments to help some get out of jail, or to attain some legal assistance. Similarly, it matters little that there is political disagreement over this particular tactic. Most relevant here is how the myth is propagated, goes unquestioned, and is carried across generations and political spectrums. And right on cue is the most current running promotion from that same OneUnited Bank, "Just when you thought it couldn't get no blacker … BLAOW! Turns out that royalty is in more than our DNA; it's in our ATMs, too."

Even better, as if to further the argument being made here, there is an almost perfect depiction of the fictitious cycle; the concept of buying power, itself helped to prominence via the Johnson Black media outlet *strictly for the purposes of attracting White corporate ad dollars*, to one of its modern most dominant promotional mechanisms, Nielsen, to the elite economic news outlet *Fortune* magazine which ran this story, and right back to Black communities via a Black bank/press medium:

> According to Fortune, a 2018 Nielsen report found that the collective buying power of black America is a whopping $1.2 trillion annually, an amount we could get really ingenious with if we stay in formation and support companies that, in return, benefit black issues. (Ewing 2019)

In one fell swoop, whatever genius exists in Kendrick Lamar's "DNA" is extracted and reduced, along with real historical references to a suppressed African presence, and "royalty" in world history, to what is claimed to be in "our ATMs." Again, the powerful usurpation of history via symbol becomes an equally powerful element of propaganda aligned against an unsuspecting audience. No one investigates the claims of Nielsen, nor its method of surveying the spending habits of a relative handful of Black shoppers and, from there, extrapolating a power itself only defined, by them, as an ability to buy advertised products. The claim of buying power's potential is merely then repeated as rote. If Black banks, Black media, and elite White media, government officials, and ad buyers all heavily support and promote a myth what chance do targeted audiences have?

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CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

Abstract The myth of Black buying power suggests often that public policy or politics are to be sublimated to the importance of economic development. As a result, significant damage is done to both an understanding of economics and to the development of strategies for addressing continuing inequalities. Public policy and politics movements must be engaged at greater levels making redistribution of created national wealth a priority and efforts which focus primarily or exclusively on Black capitalism, business, and buying power must be either abandoned entirely or redesigned within a more appropriate context or understanding of the relationship of public policy to matters often isolated as solely economic.

Keywords Public policy · Social movements · Continued influence effect

So much of the response to the original publication of this book involved (involves still) a focus on solutions. If buying power is a myth and Black banking, business, and circulating Black dollars—a paralleling claim which has now been thoroughly debunked (Ball/Too Black 2021)—are all incapable of closing economic divides what then is to be done? However, the absence of a preferred solution, if it can even be called that, is not evidence of inaccuracy or flaw, it is merely that this book ultimately only intends to emphasize that no solution can be based on the levels of inaccuracy baked

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in to the concept of buying power. My argument is at times described as pessimistic but only because it locates optimism elsewhere, not in Black capitalist fantasy but in political organization, movement-building, and the struggle for political power. Said struggles are complicated, involve much more than can be properly summarized here, and most certainly must evolve beyond the reduction of politics to disorganized engagement with existing electoral parties of a "captured" ruling elite (Táíwò 2022). This book has only been meant to clear an intellectual path through the heavily constructed and diverging brush.

The most immediate goal of this book has been to displace and permanently sever any conceptual relationship between buying power and liberation. A secondary goal of the book has been to discourage any further distinguishing between economics and politics. A final goal of the book is to encourage more critical investigation into existing class divisions and the role they play in the kinds of media and journalism which dominate most public spheres. The concept of buying power has been deployed so often, for so long, from so many points of view, and across so many forms of media so as to become more than axiomatic but the very interpretive lens through which so many dangerously prescriptive conclusions or suggested programs for change derive. But that was the evolved goal. The media environment created in the United States over the last century was developed precisely in order that it would produce new Americans as consumers who accept as inextricably linked the concepts of democracy, freedom, and capitalism.

Buying power as a concept works as would any commercial media outlet producing conceptual content meant to capture an audience it then sells generating revenue for its parent company capitalism. As a lure buying power mythologizes possibilities within the "American economic order." But modified by any preface, "Black," "advanced," "late stage," "corporate," "crony," capitalism does not distribute created wealth in such a way as to close material "gaps." In fact, those gaps are prevalent. As Nick Hanauer said, either capitalism will allow people to "lead stable and dignified, secure lives" or it will need to be replaced. If domestic and global inequality are signs, then capitalism needs replacing because fewer everyday are able to lead stable or dignified lives. There are obvious relative differences but capitalism cannot be said to be working for any entire racial, religious, or ethnic group, not even White ones. The effects are showing. As more of the wealth produced domestically and around the world redounds to an ever-shrinking number of (mostly White) people, it still remains that even more Whites are finding it harder to keep within nearly any defined version of the "middle-class." Not unrelated is that more Whites are also reporting increasing rates of depression and suicide. And then they are also arming themselves and reinvigorating old tropes of blaming their worsening conditions on Black people and immigrants (Chen 2019).

But no group has the myth of buying power so heavily promoted to it and from within its own business class making the concept so much more damaging to their political consciousness than Black America. Beyond promoting the mythology alone the propaganda contained encourages an almost unquestioned belief in the ability of capitalism, and the White supremacy around which it is organized, to produce positive results for the whole. When this inevitably does not occur, the myth is there to step in and assure that any failure to materially advance is evidence of an inherent flaw with any given individual or the entire community. Then, of course, the myth of Black buying power is re-introduced into nearly every facet of Black political thought inhibiting tactical platforms from developing in as many organizational spaces.

Two more timely reminders of the true meaning of the Black (all) buying power speak most clearly to the ability of the myth to inhibit an understanding of the national political economy or the role media and journalism play. The recent addition to the mythology from Nielsen titled, "It's In the Bag: Black Consumers' Path to Purchase" (Nielsen 2019) begins again with the claim of Black buying power now reaching "$1.3 trillion" where they, also again, reference the Selig Center (though only by date, no report, title, link, name, etc.). Nielsen also continues to rebrand "power" as the ability to buy products targeted for sale to Black people. For instance, the "power" and "influence" of hip-hop are defined by the ability of today's hottest rappers to promote brands to their audiences:

> … Chance The Rapper for Doritos and 2Chainz for Google's new smartphone Pixel 3A, among others. The Wrangler Lil Nas X Collection illustrates the influence of hip-hop on fashion and culture. Oreo, the cookie brand, created cultural connectivity by creating a 2019 Grammy spot that featured a full song by Wiz Khalifa and a spot featuring him with his son Sebastian, and of course, Oreos (18).

The pattern described above continues, including the suggestion that Wiz Khalifa doing commercials for Oreo is Black collective economic power. Later, the report continues Nielsen's previous targeting of the "Conscious Consumer," but they are very clear precisely for whom these reports are written and just what it means to be "conscious":

> The multicultural market is expected to continue growing. *Companies can't afford to "sleep on" (as Black Twitter would say) this opportunity*. It's low-hanging fruit and available to brands that aren't afraid to embrace it. The first step is understanding how Black consumers shop and make purchases, because not only are African Americans enthusiastic consumers, they are conscious consumers. Being conscious (or awakened) means being attuned to the issues that impact you. We are people who fight against injustices, both physically and financially. Corporations should embrace our passion and desire to ensure that we are shopping with brands who are making an impact in our daily lives. (32, emphasis added)

Once again, buying power is the ability to purchase goods and services mostly produced or owned by non-Black Americans.

Beyond, however, the unrealities produced by Nielsen, Selig, and their compatriots in the commercial presses, there is an update of the concerns expressed previously by Hanuer and Sklar. Persistent and worsening racial wealth and income disparities and the negative impact this increasingly has on Black consumption is being seen as a threat to the entire national economy. As discussed, Black buying power is not about any real strength among Black people, it is a reflection of Black impact on producing wealth for the economy, i.e., read: White elites. According to a recent report:

> The widening racial wealth gap disadvantages black families, individuals, and communities and limits black citizens' economic power and prospects, and the effects are cyclical. Such a gap contributes to intergenerational economic precariousness: almost 70 percent of middle-class black children are likely to fall out of the middle class as adults. Other than its obvious negative impact on human development for black individuals and communities, the racial wealth gap also constrains the US economy as a whole. *It is estimated that its dampening effect on consumption and investment will cost the US economy between $1 trillion and $1.5 trillion between 2019 and 2028*—4 to 6 percent of the projected GDP in 2028… (Noel et al. 2019, emphasis added)

It is truly a return to the beginnings and why the BLS began producing these reports; to gauge and manage the inequality which inevitably arises in the struggle between capital and labor. If Black people are not paid more, just enough to shop more, the entire economy suffers, that is, the wealthy few who own the goods, services, and the processes which bring them to market and market what is brought to the consuming public.

This book is titled as it is indeed because once the myth is exposed there remains the propaganda about the myth which has its own separate enduring impact and influence. As is often the case, even when exposed to contradicting facts, or in the case of journalism, retracted misinformation, the initial messaging can retain its cognitive dominance. That is the power of propaganda, its "continued influence effect":

> In two experiments, we showed that preexisting attitudes codetermine people's reliance on (mis)information. That is, people are more likely to use a piece of information in their reasoning when this piece of information is congruent with their attitudes and beliefs. Unlike some previous research, however, we found that the effectiveness of retractions of misinformation was not affected by attitudes. That is, people's attitudes did not affect the extent to which a retraction reduced their reliance on a piece of attitude-relevant misinformation. To reconcile this finding with the existing literature, we suggested that the effectiveness of *attitude-incongruent* retractions will depend on whether or not accepting the retraction will induce a requirement to change the underlying attitude: When accepting a retraction does not require change in underlying attitudes, it will not be rejected for attitudinal reasons; when a retraction does challenge people's underlying attitudes, they will resist it. (Ecker et al., emphasis added).

New, fact-based information, if presented but contradicts existing views, can be resisted or is ineffective in penetrating constructed realities. And these are the conclusions reached in studies where there are actual retractions published. In the case of Black buying power not only have there been no retractions, but the claims are being supported, even produced, and published by the commercial presses of both the mainstream and Black community and have been for decades. Even where there is criticism it has been, as shown above, diminished, overwhelmed, or entirely removed. This will indeed present a problem, and has for years, regarding the impact of this argument. But it is an argument or struggle that will need confrontation if there is to be progress made or for any suggested solutions to be at all meaningful.

Therefore, if there are to be any solutions, they must include a vigorous criticism of the commercial presses (Black, Whites, all, etc.) and their relationship to political movements and the histories of these movements. More work needs to be done in exploring the impact of class bias on Black commercial presses and media, on class itself as an issue within Black America. It is clear that the political and economic incentive among the most popular commercial presses (Black, White, any, etc.) is to promote a material existence and history which is consistent with their own interests but is often inconsistent with reality. The necessary intellectual and journalistic work is not likely to be welcomed. This is why, for instance, so much of the historical discussion and contemporary reporting regarding buying power and Black politics centers Black capitalism with almost nothing found in commercial Black presses of the histories of socialism, communism, pan-Africanism, anti-imperialism, and radical nationalism. Black historical luminaries are often relegated, when discussed at all within Black commercial media or presses, to their engagement with various entrepreneurial endeavors absent any of their contemporary critics or alternative offerings. This furthers the myth's tacit ability to promote capitalism, while denying current realties, and to constrain thought about what can be done going forward.

The popular position taken associated with buying power or a larger belief that capitalism can be adjusted favorably to work for more or all is that Black people have made the historical mistake of putting too much emphasis on politics and not on economics. If, the argument goes, more time were spent developing Black wealth like "Jews, or the Asians running the corner stores and hair care businesses" in "our communities," then Black people would come up as those groups have. What these perspectives generally miss is that whatever advances these and other communities have made are: (a) not erasing class divisions within any of those communities or their originating countries, and (b) whatever anyone has ever done to improve their economic position has required public policy or government support. Poor people, Black, White, etc., cannot close any societal gaps, economic, or otherwise, without political movements which assume political power and redirect public policy to work for more if not all. Those who benefit most from the economy understand this point well and have developed policies and regulations assuring wealth we all help generate is transferred ever upward.

As an example, recently authors Lindsey and Teles (2019) have described ours as a "captured economy" or one with public policy suffering already from "regulatory capture." By this they mean simply that the wealthiest have taken nearly full control of the apparatus of government and have set public policy to their exclusive benefit. While promoting another powerful myth of desiring "small government," the elite continue to use government in a big way to enact policy which protects their interests. What goods go to market, and at what prices, or at what rates were those goods taxed, or subsidized, what laws regulate banks (or do not), or determine their function, the value of the money in our accounts, who can buy what land and do what with it, what wars are fought to protect which business interests, and who are allowed to privatize publicly funded research turning it into military defense or pharmaceuticals for sale on a global market, and then who gets what share of those generated profits, all is determined by policy. And for a few it is working well. Consider that:

> [b]ack in 1970, 92 percent of 30-year-olds were making more money than their parents did at that age. By 2010, only 50 percent of 30-year-olds could still say the same. And looking ahead, only a third of Americans now believe that the next generation will be better off… the share of total income accounted for by the top 1 percent of earners has doubled from 8 percent in 1979 to 18 percent in 2015—while the share of the top 0.1 percent has quadrupled from 2 percent to almost 8 percent over the same period. (Lindsey & Teles 2019, 1)

At the time of this book's first edition printing, the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) reported the GDP of the United States at around \$21.5 trillion (BEA 2019). As it stands today, that number has only increased to an end-of-year 2022 of more than \$25 trillion (BEA 2022). How these funds are distributed is a matter of public policy, or political power. Even a return to the relatively modest calls of the Nixon-era OMBE that this be the pool of buying power dollars targeted by Black businesses and communities would be an advance over the more prevalent calls today for a redirection of the far smaller and more mythological dollars within the Black community. GDP is real, if not an indicator of inequality, and is something everyone has already contributed to with every penny they spend shopping, paying taxes, and bills. GDP is a measurement of what is actually collected as opposed to "projections" and "estimates" of what is spent. With that amount being generated every year, there should be no one in need and there should be only ever-decreasing gaps in material inequality. However, solutions requiring the asking and answering of different questions can never be developed when the premise is an illusion created by *The Illusionists* (Rossini 2015). Black politics cannot continue to be so heavily dominated and limited by a marketing tool developed and used by a commercial media and business class. The meaning of power must be reclaimed and understood, not as resulting from consumption, but as organized, collective, and mass political action.

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