

**Univerzita Karlova**  
Filozofická fakulta  
Ústav anglofonních literatur a kultur

Black American Dream as a Clash of Principles: Black Representations of  
the American Dream

Černošský americký sen jako střet principů: Afroamerická zobrazení  
amerického snu

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí práce (supervisor):  
**doc. PhDr. Mariana Machová, Ph.D.**  
Praha, únor 2024

Vypracovala (author):  
**Kristýna Bularzová**  
Anglofonní literatury a kultury

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to doc. PhDr. Mariana Machová, Ph.D. for her valuable advice, illuminating observations as well as patience with all my questions. I am thankful for your guidance. Last but not least, thank you, mom. None of this would have been possible without you.

## Declaration

I declare that the following MA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the source of other university studies, or in order to acquire the same of another type of diploma.

I have no objections to this MA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

Prague, January 10, 2024

Kristýna Bularzová



Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně, že jsem řádně citovala všechny použité prameny a literaturu, a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného či stejného titulu.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

V Praze dne 10. ledna 2024

Kristýna Bularzová



## Abstract

The MA thesis will focus on the representations of the concept of the American dream in Black<sup>1</sup> American poetry. From its origins in the Declaration of Independence (in the “pursuit of happiness”) the concept of the American dream has been seen as problematic, with the idea of an “unalienable right” clashing with its being mutable and fleeting and potentially out of reach.

The main goal of the thesis is to demonstrate that the American dream has been present in the works of Black American poets as a potent, yet schizophrenic concept (with reference to Martin Luther King’s idea of “American schizophrenic personality) for decades, and possibly centuries, and its central ambiguity and the clash of principles has remained essentially the same, only the representations vary. Analyzing poems by Black poets from the 20th century, the thesis will explore the concept of the Black American dream as a myth to which, as James Baldwin put it, “we are clinging [and] which has nothing to do with the lives we lead.”

The thesis is divided into two parts, incorporating not only the poetic perspective on the matter, but also the ideas on the topic by key African American thinkers from different historical periods (such as Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, or Martin Luther King Jr.). That way the ground for the close readings of the poems is set. Additionally, using the Declaration of Independence as the defining document of the American dream, the Founding Fathers’ perspective on slavery will be included at the beginning of this section as well.

A selection of poems by Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker, Amiri Baraka, and Lucille Clifton will be discussed.

Key words: American dream, Black American dream, African American poetry, African American thinkers, Declaration of Independence

---

<sup>1</sup> In Nancy Coleman’s article on why *The New York Times* decided to capitalize the letter ‘b’ in the words ‘Black’, it is stated that “for many people the capitalization of that one letter is the difference between a color and a culture.” And briefly put, I personally agree. Hence my decision to use the capitalized version throughout my thesis.

More via <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html>.

## Abstrakt

Předložená diplomová práce se zabývá reprezentací konceptu amerického snu v černošské poezii. Již od svých počátků v Deklaraci nezávislosti (v tzv. „honbě za štěstím“) byl koncept amerického snu vnímán jako problematický a myšlenka „nezcizitelného práva“ byla konfrontována vlastní proměnlivostí a pomíjivostí, která ústí ve své praktické nedosažitelnosti.

Hlavním cílem práce je demonstrovat přítomnost „amerického snu“ v dílech černošských básníků jakožto slibný, nicméně schizofrenní koncept s odkazem na myšlenky Martina Luthera Kinga o „americké schizofrenní osobnosti“. Ústřední nejednoznačnost a střet principů zde zůstávají po desetiletí a možná i staletí v podstatě stejné a liší se pouze ve své reprezentaci. V diplomové práci jsou na základě uvedených východisek analyzovány básně černošských básníků 20. století a koncept „černého amerického snu“ je zkoumán jakožto mýtus, na kterém, slovy Jamese Baldwina, „lpíme [a] který nemá nic společného s životy, které vedeme.“

Práce je strukturována do dvou částí. Nejprve je zde nastíněna celá problematika tématu a myšlenkový základ práce zahrnující úvahy na dané téma od klíčových afroamerických myslitelů z různých historických období (například Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois či Martin Luther King Jr.). S použitím Deklarace nezávislosti jakožto dokumentu určujícího povahu a dostupnost amerického snu je zde rovněž zmíněn pohled otců zakladatelů na otroctví.

Konceptuální část pak tvoří východisko pro samotnou analýzu vybraných básní Langstona Hughese, Margaret Walkerové, Amiriho Baraky a Lucille Cliftonové.

Klíčová slova: americký sen, černošský americký sen, afroamerická poezie, afroameričtí myslitelé, Deklarace nezávislosti

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction .....	8
2. Black American Dream .....	11
2.1 Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence: Beginning of the Great American Paradox .....	11
2.2 African American Thinkers and their Perception of the Black American Dream across American History .....	23
2.2.1 18th Century African American Intellectuals and the Declaration of Independence .....	24
2.2.2 19 <sup>th</sup> century and Frederick Douglass .....	31
2.2.3 W. E. B. Du Bois and the Transition from the 19 <sup>th</sup> to the 20 <sup>th</sup> Century.....	41
2.2.4 20 <sup>th</sup> century and Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Baldwin .....	45
2.3 Reflection on the Black American Dream in the 20 <sup>th</sup> -century Black American Poetry.....	54
2.3.1 Harlem and Black Chicago Renaissance: Langston Hughes and Margaret Walker.....	57
2.3.2 Black Arts Movement: Amiri Baraka and Lucille Clifton .....	72
3. Conclusion .....	80
4. Bibliography .....	84

## 1. Introduction

The American dream<sup>2</sup> is one of the key elements defining American identity. Jim Cullen calls it “a kind of lingua franca, an idiom that everyone – from corporate executives to hip-hop artists – can presumably understand.”<sup>3</sup> Judging by the nation’s founding document, the Declaration of Independence, and its promise of the “unalienable Rights, [...] among these [being] Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,”<sup>4</sup> the American dream seemingly holds a great potential which allegedly is denied to nobody. Yet, when studying the Black American dream in particular, one recognizes the limitations applied to the Black community and their chances to build good lives. As emphasized by Cullen, “Ambiguity is the very source of [the Dream’s] mythic power.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, the American dream, and especially the Black American dream represent a concept innately rooted in ambiguity, duality, and also hypocrisy, promoting the myth of its accessibility to all Americans regardless of their economic, social, or ethnic background.

This MA thesis focuses specifically on the Black American dream and its inaccessibility, addressing what Martin Luther King, Jr. calls the “American schizophrenia;” meaning the great American paradox, which has pervaded the American and African American both intellectual and poetic history since the foundation of the USA. The analysis is treated chronologically with the intention to support the main argument of this study, that being the illusion of evolution as far as the Black American dream is concerned. The sense of continuity and consistency in topic is recognized, ultimately proving on both the intellectual and poetic level that the initial impression of progress is, in fact, false. The Black American dream is built on racial discrimination and inequality, which is an inherent part of the concept as implied already in the Declaration of Independence, followed by a number of African American intellectuals from the 18th century and onwards who called for the fulfillment of the Dream’s promise and potential.

The study is divided into two parts. Apart from the chronology mentioned above, the analysis incorporates two additional angles: conceptual (2.1, 2.2) and interpretative (2.3). The former consists of two main subchapters, one presenting and discussing the founding values of the USA, using Thomas Jefferson as a representative of the Founding

---

<sup>2</sup> Further also referred to as “the Dream”

<sup>3</sup> Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Jefferson, Declaration of Independence, *Archive.org*, accessed ONLINE on June 2nd, 2023, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

<sup>5</sup> Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*, 6.

Fathers and their ideas of the Black people and slavery (2.1), the other commenting on the intellectual response to the hypocrisy of both the Declaration of Independence and the American dream provided by some of the important African American voices across the African American history, for example, Lemuel Haynes, an anonymous African American known as the “Vox Africanorum,” Benjamin Banneker, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr. or James Baldwin (2.2).

The latter, namely subchapter 2.3, then deals with the interpretation of the issue’s presentation in selected 20th-century poetry by some of the key African American poets such as Langston Hughes and Margaret Walker (2.3.1), or Amiri Baraka and Lucille Clifton (2.3.2), using some of the key 20th-century cultural movements, namely the Harlem Renaissance, Black Chicago Renaissance, and the Black Arts Movement as the building blocks influencing the African Americans’ idea of the Black American dream in a profound, yet perhaps not as effective way. The ultimate goal of this analytical discussion is to demonstrate that despite a certain shift occurring in the seeming evolution of the Black American dream, more specifically in the Black community’s perception of the Dream, or the level of accessibility shifting slightly, too, the cycle has not been broken. In other words, this thesis comes to the conclusion that regardless of the Black people’s continuous effort to fight the hypocrisy and duality of both the USA and the American dream by addressing not only the empty promise, but also the need for the white Americans’ recognition of themselves being the source of this issue, the repetitive pattern of racial injustice limiting the Black American dream is ever present.

The arguments presented in the thesis are to be supported by a number of secondary sources, which include not only academic and critical essays, books, articles, interviews, but also archival documents and other material. Each section, or area of interest, is assigned to a specific material which is then used as the main secondary source of knowledge. When talking about the American dream from a general perspective, Jim Cullen’s *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* is used as a point of reference. Focusing exclusively on the Black American dream, Jennifer L. Hochschild’s *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* is incorporated. As far as the Founding Fathers, the Declaration of Independence, and their approach to slavery is concerned, Paul Finkelman’s *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson* serves as the primary source of information.

The African American intellectual scene is predominantly consulted with the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, and lastly the final section providing the



analysis of African American poetry is largely supported by Laura Ramey's *A History of African American Poetry*. When making a selection from the extensive list of African American poets and their work, the anthology *Angels of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*, edited by Charles Henry Rowell is used in order to choose the most relevant and revealing pieces of poetry. This step, meaning the choice of one particular book for a particular section, is considered essential in keeping the thesis as focused as possible.

## 2. Black American Dream

The American dream is a concept of great complexity. It is generally perceived as the backbone of American mentality, deeply embedded in American consciousness. Reeve Vanneman and Lynn Weber Cannon call “the image of America as the Land of Promise [...] an indelible part of the national heritage,”<sup>6</sup> Jennifer L. Hochschild pronounces the American dream “a central ideology of Americans.”<sup>7</sup> When examining the origin of this national concept, its principles and motives are present already in the beliefs of the first settlers coming from Europe to the New World in pursuit of a better life. As pointed out by Jim Cullen in his book *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*,

the Pilgrims may not have actually talked about the American Dream, but they would have understood the idea: after all, they lived it as people who imagined a destiny for themselves. So did the Founding Fathers. So did illiterate immigrants who could not speak English but intuitively expressed rhythms of the Dream with their hands and their hearts.<sup>8</sup>

Following the early history of America, the first official document addressing the American dream dates back to the Founding Fathers and the year of 1776 in which the Thirteen Colonies gained independence of the British monarchy, in other words to the ratification of the Declaration of Independence and the official foundation of the United States of America.

### 2.1 Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence: Beginning of the Great American Paradox

The Declaration of Independence (1776) reads, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>9</sup> Robert Darnton calls this well-known phrase “the rhetorical climax to Thomas Jefferson’s

---

<sup>6</sup> Reeve Vanneman and Lynn Weber Cannon, *The American Perception of Class* (The Temple University Press, 1987), chap. “The American Dream,” 257, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv941wv0>.

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer L. Hochschild, preface to *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* by Jennifer L. Hochschild (New Jersey: University of Princeton, 1995), xi.

<sup>8</sup> Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Jefferson, Declaration of Independence, *Archive.org*, accessed ONLINE on June 2nd, 2023, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

enunciation of natural rights and revolutionary theory.”<sup>10</sup> Here, two facts must be noted. Firstly, in the final document, the Dream is not mentioned explicitly. However, the phrase “pursuit of happiness”, in particular, is a clear indicator of this “curiously quicksilver phenomenon, known as the ‘American way of life.’”<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, on the one hand, this statement in the very first document establishing American identity seems to be suggesting that, in Cullen’s words, “in the United States anything is possible if you want it badly enough.”<sup>12</sup> The Dream’s potential is defined as endless. It is presented as unlimited and accessible to anyone and everyone. On the other hand, when pondering the particular and presumably deliberate word choice of “the pursuit of,” one has the realization that the opposite is, in fact, true, meaning not only that the success is not guaranteed regardless of the effort and determination invested, but also, and more importantly, not every person living in or coming to the North America has equal opportunity when it comes to this pursuit. In the United States, not “all men are created equal.”<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly enough, where Jefferson speaks about “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” the standard phrasing in the political debates of the English-speaking world during the 17th and 18th centuries was “life, liberty, and property.”<sup>14</sup> In the context of the topic of this thesis, “property” being replaced by “the pursuit of happiness” appears as, again, a deliberate choice, crucial for the understanding of the undertone and true intention of the Declaration of Independence. Examining people and texts which influenced Jefferson and his process of writing helps to clarify Jefferson’s way of thinking when bringing the Declaration to existence. One of the key influences is said to be John Locke, and specifically his *Second Treatise of Government* (1690) and *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (1689). For that reason, among other things, Locke is considered by a number of scholars to be the grandfather of the Declaration of Independence.<sup>15</sup> The following part of the thesis will briefly introduce the British philosopher’s views which are important when discussing the creation of the Declaration of Independence.

In his *Second Treatise of Government*, Locke comments on the standard triad of the Enlightenment, “life, liberty, and property”, dedicating one chapter to the last

---

<sup>10</sup> Robert Darnton, “The Pursuit of Happiness,” *The Wilson Quarterly* 19, No. 4 (Autumn 1995), 46-47. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40259050>.

<sup>11</sup> Darnton, “The Pursuit of Happiness,” 44.

<sup>12</sup> Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Jefferson, *Declaration of Independence*.

<sup>14</sup> Darnton, “The Pursuit of Happiness,” 47.

<sup>15</sup> Darnton, “The Pursuit of Happiness,” 47.

component which, as mentioned earlier, was later changed by Jefferson into “pursuit of happiness.” In chapter V, section 27, Locke states, “Though the Earth, and all inferior Creatures be common to all Men, yet every Man has a Property in his own Person. This no Body has any Right to but himself.”<sup>16</sup> In section 44 of the same chapter, he elaborates,

From all which it is evident, that though the things of Nature are given in common, yet Man (by being Master of himself, and *Proprietor of his own Person*, and the actions or *Labour* of it) had still in himself *the great Foundation of Property*; and that which made up the great part of what he applied to the Support or Comfort of his being, when Invention and Arts had improved the conveniences of Life, was perfectly his own, and did not belong in common to others.<sup>17</sup>

In chapter VII, section 87, Locke then writes,

Man being born, as has been proved, with a title to perfect freedom, and an uncontrolled enjoyment of all the rights and privileges of the law of nature, equally with any other man, or number of men in the world, hath by nature a power, not only to preserve his property, that is, his life, liberty and estate, against the injuries and attempts of other men; but to judge of, and punish the breaches of that law in others, as he is persuaded the offence deserves, even with death itself, in crimes where the heinousness of the fact, in his opinion, requires it.<sup>18</sup>

All three passages presented above emphasize a sense of freedom, and property is used in the sense of one’s ownership of not only material goods, but also of oneself. As Darnton puts it, from Locke’s perspective, “Property in one’s person implied the liberty to develop the self, and self-development.”<sup>19</sup> Additionally, they imply a sense of equality among people, all this being the qualities found in the concept of the American dream.

In spite of the fact that it may seem as if Jefferson replaced the idea of “property” by a notion of his own, it must be noted that “the pursuit of happiness” was extracted from one of John Locke’s texts as well. In his *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, Locke talks about one’s pursuit of happiness, stating,

---

<sup>16</sup> John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (January 2005), Chapter V, section 27, Early Modern Texts, <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/locke1689a.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Chapter V, section 44.

<sup>18</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Chapter VII, section 87.

<sup>19</sup> Darnton, “The Pursuit of Happiness,” 47.

As therefore the highest perfection of intellectual nature lies in a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness; so the care of ourselves, that we mistake not imaginary for real happiness, is the necessary foundation of our liberty.<sup>20</sup>

He continues,

The stronger ties we have to an unalterable pursuit of happiness in general, which is our greatest good, and which as such, our desires always follow, the more are we free from any necessary determination of our will to any particular action, and from a necessary compliance with our desire, so upon any particular, and then appearing preferable good, till we have duly examined whether it has a tendency to, or be inconsistent with, our real happiness: and therefore, till we are as much informed upon this inquiry as the weight of the matter, and the nature of the case demands, we are, by the necessity of preferring and pursuing true happiness as our greatest good, obliged to suspend the satisfaction of our desires in particular cases.<sup>21</sup>

What is meant exactly by “the pursuit of happiness” is a question of an endless debate. However, as presented by Locke , “[i]t is also the freedom to be able to make decisions that results in the best life possible for a human being, which includes intellectual and moral effort.”<sup>22</sup>

Finally, in the context of this thesis, when pondering the shift from “property” to “the pursuit of happiness,” initially, it may appear as a change in favor of Black people, especially those in bondage. In other words, without examining what the idea of “property” in this sense encompasses, one is misled by the supposedly positive connotation of “the pursuit of happiness.” However, after careful analysis, keeping in mind the fact that Jefferson was inspired by John Locke and his ideas, it becomes clear that by exchanging those two concepts, Jefferson chooses the vaguer one arguably as the safer option. And by doing so, he seemingly offers Locke’s “pursuit of happiness” as the promise of equal chance for everybody in life and prosperity without any specific definition, which is found in Locke’s idea of “property,” as demonstrated above.

---

<sup>20</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2004), section 52, Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/10615/10615-h/10615-h.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*.

<sup>22</sup> “John Locke,” *Pursuit of Happiness*, accessed September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023. <https://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/john-locke/>.

Before proceeding any further, it is essential to start by asking some of the core questions in relation to this matter: Who is really allowed to pursue the seemingly accessible-to-everyone American dream? And what does it take to become a part of this Dream? As implied above, the USA has been known as “the land of opportunity.”<sup>23</sup> According to Hochschild, “millions of immigrants and internal migrants have moved to America, and around within it, to fulfill their version of the American dream.”<sup>24</sup> But when examining the African American dream in particular, one must keep in mind that the act of migrating to America was not everybody’s free choice. Hochschild writes, “Millions of other immigrants — predominantly but not exclusively from Africa — were moved to America despite their preferences and have been forced to come to terms with a dream that was not originally theirs.”<sup>25</sup> In his *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin writes, “I am not a ward of America; I am one of the first Americans to arrive on these shores.”<sup>26</sup> This is crucial in understanding the Black community’s perception of the Dream and what it represents to African Americans, the descendants of those forced to dream a dream which was everything but accessible to them and theirs.

The perception and understanding of the American dream changes as the time progresses. The Dream’s meaning shifts in relation to the context in which the individual, the group, or the minority experience it. In other words, it is constantly in the process of adjusting itself to the American nation’s historical, social, cultural, political as well as economic evolution. When it comes to the Black American dream specifically, the meaning adjusts slightly from one generation to another. Nevertheless, as argued in this thesis, a progression is not necessarily the defining characteristic feature of the African American dream’s inherent nature. There is a number of everlasting themes pervading the history of the Black American Dream such as the lack of freedom, identity, equality, or opportunity.

These four themes are interconnected to a certain extent. In this thesis, they are recognized generally as what Jennifer L. Hochschild calls “the first tenet,”<sup>27</sup> meaning the Dream’s quality of the “fair treatment for all.” In her book *Facing Up to the American Dream*, Hochschild talks about four tenets in total, acknowledging them as the principles

---

<sup>23</sup> Reeve Vanneman and Lynn Weber Cannon, *The American Perception of Class* (The Temple University Press, 1987), chap. “The American Dream,” 257, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv941wv0>.

<sup>24</sup> Jennifer L. Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (New Jersey: University of Princeton, 1995), 15.

<sup>25</sup> Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 98.

<sup>27</sup> Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*, 56.

on which the American dream is built. The other three are “economic success,” “self-reliance,” and “helping the less fortunate,” in other words being virtuous. For the purpose of this study, the thesis mentions tenet one exclusively, since not only is it a relevant choice to sustain the focus of the thesis, but also, as suggested by both Hochschild and this thesis’ reference to the Declaration of Independence, the first tenet, meaning “fair treatment of all,” is “the foundation of [American] nation’s faith in liberty and equality for all.”<sup>28</sup> From this point of view, recognizing the lack of the first tenet in the Black American dream, its very foundation is built on what one may call “the great American paradox”<sup>29</sup> – the inevitable and enforced necessity to accommodate to something one does not have the basic rights and tools to be able to accommodate to in the first place.

As suggested above, one of the most frequently discussed notions in connection with the Black American dream is the lack of opportunity, more specifically the fact that the “opportunity” of the Promised Land is not the same for America’s Black population<sup>30</sup> due to racial discrimination. Coming back to the great American paradox, meaning America’s as well as the Dream’s hypocritical nature, on the one hand, a great number of African people were forced to leave their homeland, and later to create a new sense of identity, adapting to the foreign country’s way of life. On the other hand, the same people were continuously denied almost everything the country offered. According to Brian W. Thomas, ever since “being forcibly brought to the New World as slaves, Africans and their descendants have struggled to define their place in North America.”<sup>31</sup> Historically speaking, for several centuries, Black community was not allowed to benefit from the potential the USA presented and praised. As stated in the Declaration, the possibility and ability to pursue the American dream is one of the key rights of a legitimate American. As a result, by being denied this right, Black Americans are denied their American identity as well.

In many ways, this is as relevant today as it has been since the arrival of African slaves in the New World in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout the history, the Black people’s

---

<sup>28</sup> Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*,

<sup>29</sup> This specific term is to be discussed in more detail in later in this chapter in relation to Thomas Jefferson and the Founding Fathers’ views on slavery. In that part of the MA thesis, Edmund S. Morgan’s idea of “the great American paradox” is to be presented and elaborated on. At this point the term is used to acknowledge a general feeling and not the specific definition and understanding of Morgan’s.

<sup>30</sup> It must be acknowledged that racial discrimination as well as the inaccessibility of the American dream applies to not only African Americans, but also other communities of people of color. For the purpose of this thesis, the research extends to Black people exclusively in order to sustain the thematic focus of this study.

<sup>31</sup> Brian W. Thomas, “Struggling With the Past: Some Views of African-American Identity Struggle of the Past,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 6, no. 2 (June 2002): 143, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20852996>.

feelings towards the Dream have been mixed. In Jennifer L. Hochschild's words, for African Americans, "the [D]ream is a taunt, a condemnation, an object of fury — also grounds for hope, renewed striving, and dreams for one's children."<sup>32</sup> Based on the long experience of discrimination and injustice, they understandably tend to both doubt it and believe in its hopeful undertone, as this thesis will later demonstrate on the examples of particular poems commenting on this issue. The following part of the study returns to the Declaration of Independence, providing a discussion about Thomas Jefferson as a representative of the Founding Fathers and their approach to Black people in the context of this thesis, among other things elaborating on the great American paradox and its role in the concept of the Black American dream. It starts with showing the early critique of the instability of this American ideology.

In his essay *Taxation No Tyranny* (1775), Samuel Johnson asks, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?"<sup>33</sup> By asking this question, the British author addresses directly not only the institution of slavery, but also the American paradox itself.<sup>34</sup> As far as the USA is concerned, remembering the passage from the Declaration of Independence presented in chapter 2, it is undeniable that the American country as well as society have been built on a foundation made of contradictions pervading the American history to this day. In 1972, Edmund S. Morgan states,

the rise of liberty and equality in this country was accompanied by the rise of slavery. That two such contradictory developments were taking place simultaneously over a long period of our history, from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth, is the central paradox of American history.<sup>35</sup>

This fact can be observed even later, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in Martin Luther King's notion of "American schizophrenia" which is to be discussed in detail later in the thesis. In his *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson* (1996), Paul Finkelman argues that "the denial of the 'blessings of liberty' to slaves profoundly

---

<sup>32</sup> Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*, 38.

<sup>33</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Taxation No Tyranny: an Answer to the Resolutions and Address of the American Congress* (London: Printed for T. Cadell, 1775), 89.

<sup>34</sup> Mark Maloy, "The Founding Fathers Views on Slavery," *Battlefields.org*, accessed May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/founding-fathers-views-slavery>.

<sup>35</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, "Slavery and Freedom: The Great American Paradox," *The Journal of American History* 59, No. 1 (June 1972), 5-6. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1888384>.



affected the formation of the nation.”<sup>36</sup> In respect of this statement, the analysis of Thomas Jefferson’s viewpoints on the matter follows.

As acknowledged by William W. Freehling, “the ideological stance of Jefferson and other Founding Fathers on slavery [...] was profoundly ambivalent.”<sup>37</sup> To which, he adds, “On the one hand they were restrained by their overriding interest in creating the Union, by their concern for property rights, and by their visions of race war and miscegenation; on the other hand they embraced a revolutionary ideology that made emancipation inescapable.”<sup>38</sup> Such ambivalence is prevalent especially in the writings and actions of Thomas Jefferson. Finkelman writes,

Because Jefferson was the author of the Declaration of Independence and a leader of the American enlightenment, the test of his position on slavery is not whether he was better than the worst of his generation but whether he was the leader of the best, not whether he responded as a southerner and a planter but whether he was able to transcend his economic interests and his sectional background to implement the ideals he articulated. Jefferson fails this test.<sup>39</sup>

According to Finkelman, Jefferson was “the most important politician of the era. [...] A slave owner”<sup>40</sup> who “feared the negative effects that slavery had on the society, [but who] feared emancipation and the presence of freed [B]lacks even more.”<sup>41</sup>

At the time of the writing of the Declaration of Independence, including the premise which the document was built on, meaning the promise of all men being created equal, as well as their inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, Jefferson was “personally depriving nearly two hundred men, women, and children of their liberty.”<sup>42</sup> Out of the six hundred people he enslaved in total, Jefferson freed only ten.<sup>43</sup> In David Brion Davis’ opinion, “Jefferson had only a theoretical interest in promoting the cause of abolition.”<sup>44</sup> This claim is supported, for instance, by a passage from the Declaration which

---

<sup>36</sup> Paul Finkelman, preface to *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson* by Paul Finkelman (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), ix.

<sup>37</sup> William W. Freehling, “The Founding Fathers and Slavery,” *The American Historical Review* 77, No. 1 (February 1972), 84. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1856595>.

<sup>38</sup> Freehling, “The Founding Fathers and Slavery,” 84.

<sup>39</sup> Finkelman, *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson*, 105.

<sup>40</sup> Finkelman, preface to *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson*, x.

<sup>41</sup> Finkelman, preface to *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson*, x.

<sup>42</sup> Morgan, “Slavery and Freedom: The Great American Paradox,” 4.

<sup>43</sup> “Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: A Brief Account”

<sup>44</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Ithaca, 1975), 178.

was omitted from the final document and shows a clear ulterior motive rooted in Jefferson's hypocritical approach to Black people in America and their struggle within the American society.

Joe Janes said about the Declaration of Independence that it is "a story about grand and noble language and ideas, which have stirred souls for generations, and, within, a silence, which nonetheless speaks volumes, still."<sup>45</sup> For the purpose of this research, it must be acknowledged that prior to its omission, in the Declaration, there was a paragraph which stated,

He [King George III] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian King of Great Britain. [...] And that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people on whom he has obtruded them: thus paying off former crimes committed against the Liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.<sup>46</sup>

When thinking about the Declaration, the deleted passage is rarely considered. Nevertheless, in the context of this thesis, it is crucial to take it into account. As pointed out by Yohuru Williams, "[its] omission would create a legacy of exclusion for people of African descent that resulted in centuries of struggle over basic human and civil rights."<sup>47</sup>

The passage presented above addresses the British King at the time, George III, and specifically his support of slave trade. If reading the text for the first time, especially as a contemporary reader, one's initial interpretation may be that what Jefferson judges is the King's continuous encouragement of slavery, which could then be understood as Jefferson's way of showing his disagreement with and opposition to the institution.

---

<sup>45</sup> "Declaration of Independence Deleted Passage, 1776," *University of Washington*, accessed June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023, <https://ischool.uw.edu/podcasts/dtctw/declaration-independence-deleted-passage>.

<sup>46</sup> The deleted passage of the *Declaration of Independence* (1776), accessed ONLINE on June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/declaration-independence-and-debate-over-slavery/>.

<sup>47</sup> Yohuru Williams, "Why Thomas Jefferson's Anti-Slavery Passage Was Removed from the Declaration of Independence," *History.com*, accessed May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2023. <https://www.history.com/news/declaration-of-independence-deleted-anti-slavery-clause-jefferson>.

However, as suggested earlier in this paragraph, Jefferson's call is related to the slave trade, rather than slavery itself, meaning that it was written to benefit the Founding Fathers as well as the rest of the white Americans rather than be attempting to help creating a better living situation for Black people in America, especially for those in bondage.

After further reading and examination, it is evident that Jefferson's concern expressed in the omitted passage is rooted in fear; not for the Black people, but for the white American supremacy which he himself was a part of. At first, Jefferson addresses the "cruel war against human nature itself."<sup>48</sup> But then continues, stating,

[...] he [meaning George III] is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people on whom he has obtruded them: thus paying off former crimes committed against the Liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.<sup>49</sup>

Reaching this part of the deleted excerpt, one comes to the conclusion that here Jefferson shared the real reason behind the fear feeding his concern, that being the Black slaves joining the British army to fight against the USA. In this context, without explicitly considering the white Americans, himself included, as the group of slaveholders actively participating in keeping Black people enslaved, denying them their basic human rights, Jefferson judges King George III for making Black people "to purchase that liberty of which he [meaning King George] has deprived them." From that point of view, this represents one of the key examples of demonstrating, again, the hypocrisy as well as duality in the Founding Fathers' approach to slavery as well as to Black people and their right to live a free life in America. In other words, the Founding Fathers' perception of the early Black American Dream.

In addition, it must be emphasized that in the USA, slavery used to represent a significant economic capital. In Steven Mintz's words, "in the pre-Civil War United States, a stronger case can be made that slavery played a critical role in economic development. [...] Slavery paid for a substantial share of the capital, iron, and manufactured goods that laid the basis for American economic growth."<sup>50</sup> This fact supports the idea mentioned

---

<sup>48</sup> The deleted passage of the *Declaration of Independence* (1776), accessed ONLINE.

<sup>49</sup> The deleted passage of the *Declaration of Independence* (1776), accessed ONLINE.

<sup>50</sup> Steven Mintz, "Historical Context: Was Slavery the Engine of American Economic Growth?" *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*, accessed on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/teaching-resource/historical-context-was-slavery-engine-american-economic-growth>.

above, namely the Fathers' conflicted and hypocritical interest in cancelling the slave trade but not slavery as a whole. Here, Jack Rakove contributes, pointing out that "Virginians [...] knew that their slave system was reproducing itself naturally. They could eliminate the slave trade without eliminating slavery."<sup>51</sup> Such a recognition can be found not only in the passage omitted, but also, for example, in Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*. According to Finkelman, "When [Jefferson] did speak of the institution, as in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, it was at the prompting of others or to serve his polemical purposes (most notably in denouncing British tyranny) or when his business dealings required it."<sup>52</sup> As acknowledged by Finkelman, too, "slavery was the most valuable form of privately held property in the United States at the end of the Revolution"<sup>53</sup> and, alongside other slaveholders, Jefferson was aware of this fact.

Finally, in order to provide a comprehensive study, when examining the American Dream in general, pondering the core motto "all men are created equal" established in the Declaration of Independence, it must be acknowledged that ever since 1776, its meaning has been shifting with each new generation emerging. Therefore, for the purpose of this thesis, one must look at the phrase, and what it represents, solely from the perspective of the time it was framed, meaning the American Revolution time. To clarify, interestingly enough, when discussing the shift in meaning, Rakove proposes,

when Jefferson wrote "all men are created equal" in the preamble to the Declaration, he was not talking about individual equality. What he really meant was that the American colonists, *as a people*, had the same rights of self-government as other people, and hence could declare independence, create new governments and assume their "separate and equal station" among other nations.<sup>54</sup>

He continues,

after the Revolution succeeded, Americans began reading that famous phrase another way. It now became a statement of individual equality that everyone and every member of a deprived group could claim for himself or herself. With each

---

<sup>51</sup> Jack Rakove, "How the Meaning of the Declaration of Independence Changed Over Time," interview by Mellisa de Witte, *Stanford News*, July 1, 2020. <https://news.stanford.edu/2020/07/01/meaning-declaration-independence-changed-time/>.

<sup>52</sup> Finkelman, *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson*, 106.

<sup>53</sup> Finkelman, preface to *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson*, x.

<sup>54</sup> Rakove, interview.

passing generation, our notion of what that statement covers has expanded.<sup>55</sup>

As readers with a 21<sup>st</sup>-century mindset, not only do we subconsciously tend to forget the original purpose of the Declaration, meaning to declare the national sovereignty of America and its equality to Britain, but it is also easy to forget the mindset of the white American supremacy which framed this document. In Jamelle Bouie's opinion, "The story of the changing meaning of the Declaration should be a reminder, [...] that we had more than one founding — and far more than just one set of founders."<sup>56</sup> However, based on Rakove's notion, and the evident progressive need for the "individual equality" found already in the post-Revolution time of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it is clear that, as Rakove put it, "It is that promise of equality that has always defined our [meaning America's] constitutional creed."<sup>57</sup>

As suggested above, on some levels there has been a shift in the meaning of the American dream as a general national concept. One's understanding of it changes depending on the point in history one comes from. However, in spite of the fact that this means a slight change for the Black American dream in particular as well, this thesis will continue providing evidence on the fact that, again, regardless of the seeming progress, the core issue remains the same. As far as African American history is concerned, slavery is the initial point of reference when talking about the limited, or in the case of the 18<sup>th</sup> century a rather non-existent Black American dream. And from that point of view, slavery must then be understood as the defining element of not only the foundation of the United States in general, but also the further evolution of the Black American dream in particular. If Donald Earl Collins calls "plantation slavery the first American dream"<sup>58</sup> of white Americans, then the first American dream of the enslaved Black people was to break free from the slavery's chains.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Rakove, interview.

<sup>56</sup> Jamelle Bouie, "America Had More Than One Founding and More Than One Set of Founders," *New York Times*, accessed September 5th, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/04/opinion/declaration-independence-antislavery-movement.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Rakove, interview.

<sup>58</sup> Donald Earl Collins, "Plantation Slavery, the First American Dream," *Aljazeera.com*, accessed June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/8/29/plantation-slavery-the-first-american-dream>.

<sup>59</sup> Realistically speaking, it is important to keep in mind the fact that at that time there were both African American slaves wanting freedom and African Americans not necessarily aware of the fact that there could be a life for them outside slavery. Also, already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were African Americans who were born free. Therefore, the statement made above is a generalization used to emphasize the general struggle of Black people in America since the very beginning of the American history.

## 2.2 African American Thinkers and their Perception of the Black American Dream across American History

Brandon R. Byrd writes, “African American intellectual history is a distinct field with its own origins, objectives, and methods. [...] Marginalized for too long, African American intellectual history matters for the present and future reimagining of intellectual history writ large.”<sup>60</sup> Following the tone established in the preceding chapter, this chapter provides a detailed commentary on selected African American thinkers and their perception as well as understanding of the Black American dream. In such a theoretical context, the discussion is opened with the views of African American thinkers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, David Hackett Fischer, writes in his book *African Founders: How Enslaved People Expanded American Ideals*, “We have hundreds of writings [...] by individual people from the very beginning of American history. This country that we have, this great Republic, grew from their purposes. And my book is to help people remember those founders and what they were trying to do, and also to understand that diversity is the key to our liberty and freedom.”<sup>61</sup> This part of the discussion is a direct reaction to the notions presented in chapter 2.1 in relation to Thomas Jefferson, the Founding Fathers, and their writing of the Declaration of Independence, and is then followed by the analysis of ideas by African American thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century such as Frederick Douglass, and those of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, Martin Luther King Jr. and James Baldwin.

The goal of this chapter is to present an overview of the African American intellectual scene and the seeming evolution in their perception of the Black American dream across the American history. As pointed out by Timothy Sandefur, “Believing in the reality of the American Dream today does not require us to ignore the history of racial oppression or other wrongs in American history. In fact, our awareness of our past failures is itself a function of our commitment to the Dream — and it makes possible a future that more closely approaches the principles of that Dream.”<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Brandon R. Byrd, “The Rise of African American Intellectual History,” *Modern Intellectual History* 18, no. 3 (2021), 835. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244320000219>.

<sup>61</sup> David Hackett Fischer, “African Thinkers: The Black Thinkers Who Shaped the U.S.” interview by Olivia B. Waxman, *Time*, June 1, 2022, <https://time.com/6183265/americas-african-founders-history/>.

<sup>62</sup> Timothy Sandefur, “Frederick Douglass and the American Dream,” *Cato Journal*, accessed October 5, 2023. <https://www.cato.org/cato-journal/winter-2020/frederick-douglass-american-dream>.

### 2.2.1 18<sup>th</sup> Century African American Intellectuals and the Declaration of Independence

When considering the African American intellectual field, one's initial association usually is that with names from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, often recognizing that time in history as the beginning of Black American intellectual voices. However, in reality, there was a number of African Americans already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century who contributed to being the spokesmen of Black population in the USA, especially with regard to the Declaration of Independence and slavery. As pointed out by Jamelle Bouie,

Read today, the Declaration of Independence is a freedom document. It stands for absolute human equality and represents the highest ideals of the American republic. [But] The Declaration [...] was forged by struggle. Not the struggle with Britain but the struggle within the independent United States for freedom and equality against the weight of the Constitution and the American political system. As you might imagine, the key that shaped our understanding of the Declaration was the fight to end slavery.<sup>63</sup>

In his *From Homicide to Slavery: Studies in American Culture*, David Brion Davis writes, "The Declaration of Independence was the touchstone, the sacred scripture for [...] American abolitionists, for blacks like [for example] David Walter."<sup>64</sup> Some other significant early African Americans, expressing their thoughts on the Declaration of Independence and its meaning for the Black community in America were Lemuel Haynes, an anonymous African American known as the "Vox Africanorum," and Benjamin Banneker.

When discussing Lemuel Haynes and his contribution, one must preface the following commentary by saying that as far as his views on slavery are concerned, Haynes was in fact not as active in participating in the fight against the institution and its injustice against Africans and African Americans. Interestingly enough, as stated by Ruth Bogin, apart from his "'Liberty Further Extended: Or Free Thoughts on the Illegality of Slave-Keeping' and a Fourth of July speech given in 1801, marking the 25th anniversary of American Independence, "Haynes maintained silence on public policy concerning American blacks. This silence is surprising because [at that time] other clergymen, white as well as black, had launched debate and practical programs for improving the lot of free

---

<sup>63</sup> Bouie, "America Had More Than One Founding and More Than One Set of Founders."

<sup>64</sup> David Brion Davis, *From Homicide to Slavery: Studies in American Culture*, 301.

blacks and for eliminating slavery or at least mitigating it.”<sup>65</sup> However, in spite of the fact that his intellectual input is not as broad, in the context of this chapter, it is relevant to mention his pamphlet which does include a number of thoughts on the Declaration of Independence in terms of its treatment of Black people. Therefore, it is also relevant to perceive this material of his as an antislavery text.

In his “Liberty Further Extended: Or Free Thoughts on the Illegality of Slave-Keeping” (1776), Lemuel Haynes asks, “Shall a man’s Color Be the Decisive Criterion whereby to Judge of his natural right? or Because a man is not of the same color with his Neighbor, shall he Be Deprived of those things that Distinguisheth him from the Beasts of the field?”<sup>66</sup> As acknowledged by David F. Guidone, Haynes was “the first person of color to become a licensed minister in the history of America”<sup>67</sup> and a veteran of the Revolutionary War. He reacted to the Declaration of Independence soon after it was signed and adopted by the Second Continental Congress.

Using the specific line from the Declaration of Independence presented in this thesis as an epigraph, he addresses the founding document directly, that way amplifying its misleading nature. Following the epigraph, in the text itself, Haynes then states,

Liberty, & freedom, is an innate principle, which is unmovably placed in the human Species; and to see a man aspire after it, is not Enigmatical, seeing he acts no ways incompatible with his own Nature; consequently, he that would infringe upon a man’s Liberty may reasonably Expect to meet with opposition, seeing the Defendant cannot Comply to Non-resistance, unless he Counter-acts the very Laws of nature.<sup>68</sup>

Calling for equal treatment of both white and African Americans, in his piece of writing, the author also addresses the African Americans’ right to receive freedom. He writes, “I think it not hyperbolic to affirm, that Even an African, has Equally as good a right to his Liberty in common with Englishmen.”<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Ruth Bogin, “‘Liberty Further Extended’: A 1776 Antislavery Manuscript by Lemuel Haynes,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 40, No. 1 (January 1983), 88. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1919529>.

<sup>66</sup> Lemuel Haynes, “Liberty Further Extended: Or Free Thoughts on the Illegality of Slave-Keeping” (1776), accessed ONLINE July 10th, 2023, 3. [http://storage.gilderlehrman.org/dec250/Lemuel%20Haynes,%20Liberty%20Further%20Extended%20\(1776\).pdf](http://storage.gilderlehrman.org/dec250/Lemuel%20Haynes,%20Liberty%20Further%20Extended%20(1776).pdf)

<sup>67</sup> Bogin, “‘Liberty Further Extended’: A 1776 Antislavery Manuscript by Lemuel Haynes,” 32.

<sup>68</sup> Haynes, “Liberty Further Extended: Or Free Thoughts on the Illegality of Slave-Keeping,” 1. [http://storage.gilderlehrman.org/dec250/Lemuel%20Haynes,%20Liberty%20Further%20Extended%20\(1776\).pdf](http://storage.gilderlehrman.org/dec250/Lemuel%20Haynes,%20Liberty%20Further%20Extended%20(1776).pdf)

<sup>69</sup> Haynes, “Liberty Further Extended: Or Free Thoughts on the Illegality of Slave-Keeping,” 1.



Similarly to some other early Black abolitionists, Haynes relied heavily on religion in his arguments. As stated by Bogin, “Political theory merged with religious doctrine in the latter years of Haynes's indentured youth.”<sup>70</sup> In the pamphlet, Haynes states, “God has been pleas’d to distinguish some men from others, as to natural abilities, But not as to natural right, as they came out of his hands.”<sup>71</sup> He continues,

Liberty is Equally as precious to a Black man, as it is to a white one, and Bondage Equally as intolerable to the one as it is to the other: [...] But, as I observed Before, those privileges that are granted to us By the Divine Being, no one has the Least right to take them from us without our consent.<sup>72</sup>

Haynes determines racial differences between people as irrelevant, especially if perceived as a substantial reason for inequality and injustice based on one’s race and color of their skin. Additionally, he recognizes this and freedom as a human right gifted by God and, therefore, as one that cannot be taken away by another human being, only by God himself. As pointed out by the author, “If I buy a man, [...] I have no right to Enslave him, Because he is a human Being: and the immutable Laws of God, and indefeasible Laws of nature, pronounced him free.”<sup>73</sup>

In the case of “Vox Africanorum,”<sup>74</sup> presumably an anonymous African American, it must be noted that, interestingly enough, the American Revoution Institute proposes an idea that the author may in fact be white. Despite knowing that there is a clear implication of the writer’s Black origin for example in the pseudonym itself, or in the address in which the author is included (“We, the black inhabitants of these United States, humbly submit the following address.”<sup>75</sup>) as well as understanding that this proposition can hardly be verified, the institute ponders,

It seems unlikely that ‘Vox Africanorum’ was a free black writer. The writer’s knowledge of Latin and skill in building an argument suggests someone with the benefit of a formal education. Moreover, it seems unlikely that the Maryland Gazette would have published an essay by an otherwise unknown black writer. It seems more likely that ‘Vox

---

<sup>70</sup> Bogin, “‘Liberty Further Extended’: A 1776 Antislavery Manuscript by Lemuel Haynes,” 86.

<sup>71</sup> Heynes, “Liberty Further Extended: Or Free Thoughts on the Illegality of Slave-Keeping,” 3.

<sup>72</sup> Heynes, “Liberty Further Extended: Or Free Thoughts on the Illegality of Slave-Keeping,” 2.

<sup>73</sup> Heynes, “Liberty Further Extended: Or Free Thoughts on the Illegality of Slave-Keeping” (1776), 5.

<sup>74</sup> Latin for “the voice of the Africans”

<sup>75</sup> “Vox Africanorum,” “Letter to the Maryland Gazette,” (May 15, 1783), 1, accessed ONLINE on July 14th, 2023. <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/curriculum/2-declaration-and-african-american-history>.

Africanorum’ was a white man committed to the abolition of slavery who adopted a black identity to make his case stronger.<sup>76</sup>

On the one hand, from an objective point of view, this train of thought is worth considering since the Latin pseudonym meaning “the voice of the Africans” is rather general and abstract. There is a possibility that it belongs to a Black man, or a white man, or a woman indeed. On the other hand, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, being the main secondary source used in this part of the thesis, recognizes “Vox Africanorum” as one of the early Black voices. For that reason, it is included in this thesis, too.

Similarly to Haynes, in his, or her letter to the *Maryland Gazette* from May 15, 1783, “Vox Africanorum” also quotes directly from the Declaration of Independence, providing a reflection on this founding document. The author writes,

Liberty is our claim. Reverence for our Great Creator, principles of humanity, and the dictates of common sense, all convince us that we have an indubitable right to liberty. Has not the wisdom of America solemnly declared it? Attend to your own declarations—“These truths are self-evident—all men are created equal; they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” We shall offer no arguments—nay, it would be insulting to the understanding of America at this enlightened period, to suppose she stood in need of arguments to prove our right to liberty.<sup>77</sup>

The writer elaborates, stating,

We attend to your solemn declaration of the rights of mankind—to your appeals, for the rectitude of your principles, to the Almighty, who regards men of every condition, and admits them to a participation of his benefits—We admired your wisdom, justice, piety, and fortitude. To that wisdom, justice, piety, and fortitude, which has led you to freedom and true greatness, we now appeal.<sup>78</sup>

Interestingly enough, in this text, the person seems to be, to a certain extent, praising the virtues, determination, and victory of the American nation becoming independent from

---

<sup>76</sup> “A Plea to End Slavery: The Essay of ‘Vox Africanorum,’” The American Revolution Institute, accessed September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

<https://www.americanrevolutioninstitute.org/lesson-plans/revolution-on-paper/vox-africanorum/>.

<sup>77</sup> “Vox Africanorum,” “Letter to the Maryland Gazette,” 1.

<sup>78</sup> “Vox Africanorum,” “Letter to the Maryland Gazette,” 1.

Britain. It reads, “[...] To doubt would be wickedness in the abstract—it would be sinning against the solemn declarations of a brave and virtuous people.”<sup>79</sup> However, despite this being the case, “Vox Africanorum” is more importantly also vocal about the fact that while America as a nation might be free, there are thousands of people in chains, not even considered as a part of the country and its people. As stated in the letter, “Liberty is our claim. [...] Though our bodies differ in colour from yours, yet our souls are similar in a desire for freedom.”<sup>80</sup> As a result, the text is another demonstration of the 18<sup>th</sup> century perspective on the USA and its conflicted values, amplifying the common interest in reducing the racial discrimination and injustice which are the original reasons behind the limited evolution of the Black American dream.

Lastly, in 1791, Benjamin Banneker, arguably one of the key African American intellectuals of the Founding era,<sup>81</sup> writes a letter addressed to the U.S. Secretary of state at the time, Thomas Jefferson himself which, as acknowledged by Angela G. Ray, “began a new life as a public antislavery tract soon after its initial composition.”<sup>82</sup> Similarly to the preceding two men, born into a free Black family (“I now confess to you, that I am not under that state of tyrannical thralldom, and inhuman captivity, to which too many of my brethren are doomed.”<sup>83</sup>), Banneker was provided with an opportunity to speak his mind, as a Black man, on the issue of the Declaration of Independence and its failed promise of equality to everyone. In his letter, Banneker writes,

Sir, how pitiable is it to reflect, that although you were so fully convinced of the benevolence of the Father of Mankind, and of his equal and impartial distribution of these rights and privileges, which he hath conferred upon them, that you should at the same time counteract his mercies, in detaining by fraud and violence so numerous a part of my brethren, under groaning captivity and cruel oppression, that you should at the same time be found guilty of that most criminal act, which you professedly detested in others, with respect to yourselves.<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> “Vox Africanorum,” “Letter to the Maryland Gazette,” 1.

<sup>80</sup> “Vox Africanorum,” “Letter to the Maryland Gazette,” 1-2.

<sup>81</sup> “The Declaration of African American History”

<sup>82</sup> Angela G. Ray, “‘In My Own Hand Writing’: Benjamin Banneker Addresses the Slaveholder of Monticello,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 1, No. 3 (Fall 1998), 387. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41939460>.

<sup>83</sup> Benjamin Banneker, “Letter to Thomas Jefferson” (August 19, 1791), 1, accessed ONLINE July 11th, 2023. <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/curriculum/2-declaration-and-african-american-history>.

<sup>84</sup> Banneker, “Letter to Thomas Jefferson,” 2.

Using his privileged position to defend his people and their at that time non-existent rights, he writes directly to Jefferson, specifically talking about the Fathers' dual approach to the American people. In Ray's words, "Emphasizing the discrepancy between the rhetoric of equality found in the Declaration of Independence and the physical fact of slavery, Banneker denounced the institution that he called the 'state of tyrannical thralldom, and inhuman captivity.'"<sup>85</sup>

Here, considering the fact that, being an important part of the research for the topic of this thesis, Jefferson was discussed in detail earlier in chapter 2.1, it is fitting to include his response to Banneker's letter. Jefferson writes,

Nobody wishes more than I do to see such proofs as you exhibit, that nature has given to our black brethren, talents equal to those of the other colours of men, & that the appearance of a want of them is owing merely to the degraded condition of their existence both in Africa & America. I can add with truth that no body wishes more ardently to see a good system commenced for raising the condition both of their body & mind to what it ought to be, as fast as the imbecility [degraded state] of their present existence, and other circumstance which cannot be neglected, will admit.<sup>86</sup>

Among other things, this passage excerpted from Jefferson's letter to Banneker shows the Founding Fathers' hypocrisy well. Remembering what was said in relation to Jefferson and the Fathers in chapter 2.1, it is evident that in spite of the fact that he seems to be showing a certain level of care and interest in the inquiry, one assumes that the hint of active approach is predominantly a mere diplomatic gesture on Jefferson's part.

Finally, these three African American thinkers, namely Lemuel Haynes, "Vox Africanorum," and Benjamin Banneker, serve as a good example of those representing the primarily voiceless Black people in North America at the time. Their reactions to the Declaration of Independence demonstrate the fact that already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, prior to such thinkers and activists as, for instance, Frederick Douglass and others emerging in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, showed a courage to fight the schizophrenic system as well as the innate hypocrisy of the USA. From the perspective of this thesis, it also shows the main concern of African Americans in the early stage of the United States' existence is their denied right

---

<sup>85</sup> Ray, "In My Own Hand Writing": Benjamin Banneker Addresses the Slaveholder of Monticello," 388.

<sup>86</sup> "Correspondence between Benjamin Banneker and Thomas Jefferson, 1791," *Bill of Rights Institute*, accessed September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023. <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/activities/correspondence-between-benjamin-banneker-and-thomas-jefferson-1791>.

to freedom. Recognizing the desire to abolish slavery as the original Black American dream, the discussion of the Declaration of Independence is crucial since it is the founding document defining American nation's approach to Black people and their right to pursue the American dream.

In order to conclude this chapter, and preface the one that follows, it is important to, once again, emphasize the impact of the early Black Americans and their contribution to the very founding of the USA, with the foundation built on the concept of the American dream and what it ideally represents. The above-mentioned David Hackett Fisher recognizes the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century African American voices as the “African founders” of the USA, stating that “the central idea is the importance of what Africans did to help found this free Republic and how they made it more free than it otherwise would have been.”<sup>87</sup> He adds, “We are all in their debt. And they have also given us the obligation of making [America] yet more free.”<sup>88</sup>

The perceptions of Melvin Rogers, Brown University professor and political scientist, on the early Black American intellectual history seem revelatory. To put it into perspective for the contemporary readers, according to Rogers, the early Black writers, abolitionists, and activists “are essentially the 19<sup>th</sup>-century version of Black Lives Matter movement.”<sup>89</sup> He clarifies, “I think that they both are on the same page. That’s not to say that the context is the same. The context has changed in dramatic ways. [...] But there is this persistent legacy that we find ourselves grappling with again and again.”<sup>90</sup> In Nikki Rojas’ words, “both ask vital questions of the culture and share the belief that the success of the U.S. is fundamentally connected to the status of African Americans and that success depends on the extent to which politics can show equal regard for Black and white Americans.”<sup>91</sup> These statements support the main argument of this thesis, namely the suggested fact that the Black American dream is a concept seemingly evolving, yet fundamentally stagnant, foreshadowing the “evolution” of the Dream and its meaning as the thesis progresses.

---

<sup>87</sup> Fischer, interview.

<sup>88</sup> Fischer, interview.

<sup>89</sup> Nikki Rojas, “How Black Thinkers Wrestled with Founding U.S. Values amid Slavery,” *The Harvard Gazette*, accessed October 12, 2023. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/10/how-black-thinkers-wrestled-with-founding-u-s-values-amid-slavery/>.

<sup>90</sup> Rojas, “How Black Thinkers Wrestled with Founding U.S. Values amid Slavery.”

<sup>91</sup> Rojas, “How Black Thinkers Wrestled with Founding U.S. Values amid Slavery.”

## 2.2.2 19<sup>th</sup> Century and Frederick Douglass

As far as the 19<sup>th</sup> century is concerned, there is a number of representatives worth mentioning, however, for the purpose of this study, Frederick Douglass has been selected as the key figure to be discussed in this context. On the one hand, he is one of the most anthologized Black writers and activists of the 19th century expressing their thoughts on the Declaration of Independence. In Thomas G. Poole's words, "Of all the nineteenth-century African Americans who criticized the nation's self-understanding, the most prolific and best known to white Americans was Frederick Douglass."<sup>92</sup> He adds, "Douglass emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century in a young nation that was struggling to decipher the meaning of its origin and destiny."<sup>93</sup> In other words, "Douglass challenged not only the institution of slavery but the assumptions and values that served as the foundation of the nation's unfolding identity as well. [His] critique centered on the mendacity of white Christianity and the duplicity of the Constitution."<sup>94</sup>

On the other hand, and more importantly, Douglass is often perceived as one of the first self-made African Americans. In his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* [further referred to as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, or simply *Narrative*], Douglass famously states, "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man."<sup>95</sup> Douglass's personal transformation was, for the most part, based on him being self-reliant. Eventually, when studying his work, the reader may come to the realization that, to him, self-sufficiency encompasses being literate, earning money without having the obligation to give it to his master as well as being capable of opposing and physically fighting the white man. As for the latter, he writes,

the battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. (78)

---

<sup>92</sup> Thomas G. Poole, "What Country Have I? Nineteenth-Century African-American Theological Critiques of the Nation's Birth and Destiny," *The Journal of Religion*, 72, No. 4 (October 1992), 541. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1204618>.

<sup>93</sup> Poole, "What Country Have I? Nineteenth-Century African-American Theological Critiques of the Nation's Birth and Destiny," 533.

<sup>94</sup> Poole, "What Country Have I? Nineteenth-Century African-American Theological Critiques of the Nation's Birth and Destiny," 535.

<sup>95</sup> Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, and American Slave; Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Modern Library Classics, 2004), 73.

In David Leverenz's words, for Douglass, "manhood [and ultimately being free] meant the dignity of labor; [...] being a Self-Made Man."<sup>96</sup> In relation to this, as Timothy Sandefur points out fittingly, the story of Frederick Douglass is:

The most quintessentially *American* story in all our literature. That's because it is not just the story of a self-made man, but a story of idealism versus cynicism — of pride against despair — of commitment to principle against nihilism and surrender. It's the story of the assertion of American Dream: the dream of the opportunity for men and women of all races and backgrounds to realize their individual destinies in freedom.<sup>97</sup>

That way, claiming the American dream and its promise on more than one levels, Douglass's intellectual and moral presence expands the original Black American dream discussed in the preceding chapter, namely the seeking of literal physical freedom for all Black people in the USA. From that point of view, his story and intellectual as well as political contribution represent a significant shift in meaning of the Dream for African Americans both at the time and in the time to come.

Despite his uneducated background, Frederick Douglass was considered a skilled orator and writer. As Wolfgang Mieder put it, "Lacking any formal education whatsoever, he nevertheless quickly became a driving force in the antislavery movement, impressing abolitionist audiences with his oratorical eloquence and imposing presence."<sup>98</sup> Specifically, his "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852) has arguably been recognized as the most famous and influential antislavery speech Douglass ever gave.<sup>99</sup> In William L. Andrews' view, among other things, "it exhibits so many of Douglass's strengths as a speaker – in particular, his ability to combine incisive social analysis with compelling argumentative skills and an adroit use of rhetoric."<sup>100</sup> The following part of this study provides a discussion of the three key texts by Frederick Douglass in chronological order: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July" (1852), and "Self-made Men" (1872). That way, the thinker's

---

<sup>96</sup> David Leverenz, "Frederick Douglass's Self-Refashioning," *Criticism* 29, No. 3 (Summer 1987), 361. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23110412>.

<sup>97</sup> Sandefur, "Frederick Douglass and the American Dream."

<sup>98</sup> Wolfgang Mieder, *Proverbs Are The Best Policy: Folk Wisdom And American Politics* (Louisville: University Press of Colorado, 2005), 118.

<sup>99</sup> William L. Andrews, ed. *Frederick Douglass Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 108.

<sup>100</sup> Andrews, ed. *Frederick Douglass Reader*, 108.

views on the founding principles of the USA as well as his thoughts on the Black American dream and its accessibility for Black people at the time will be shown.

According to James Matlack, Douglass's first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, "thrust Douglass into the forefront of the anti-slavery movement."<sup>101</sup> In the book, the author tells his personal story as a fugitive slave who managed to not only escape, but also build a successful life, contributing to the movement fighting the institution. As Douglass writes in the book, "Sincerely and earnestly hoping that this little book may do something toward throwing light on the American slave system, and hastening the glad day of deliverance to the millions of my brethren in bonds."<sup>102</sup> According to Lucinda H. MacKethan, Douglass's "[s]trategy involved forging a bond between the familiar image of the slave narrator as preacher of an abolitionist version of Christianity and an entirely new image of the slave narrator as American poet in the Jeffersonian sense – that is, as one who controls and orders national realities by his ability to name."<sup>103</sup>

In addition to this, Matlack also comments on the *Narrative's* specific form, or more precisely its style, saying that "autobiography, especially in America, usually describes the making of a man. Douglass's *Narrative* tells such a story in an unusually profound and literal way."<sup>104</sup> Interestingly enough, coming back to the Founding Fathers and their values instilled into the American people from the beginning of the history of the USA commented on earlier in this thesis, it must be noted that Douglass's text resembles *The Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin in many ways; hence the possibility that Douglass could have been inspired by Franklin, who was "a key figure [...] as someone who helped create the cult of the self-made man."<sup>105</sup>

According to Andrew Levy, "Franklin and Douglass share an obsession with the dynamics of authority and power."<sup>106</sup> Additionally, Levy points out fittingly that in both cases, "the emphasis both figures placed on the power of the word [...] and their own life stories in the cause of these emerging communities manifested itself in autobiographies

---

<sup>101</sup> James Matlack, "The Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass," *Phylon* 40, No. 1 (1979), 15. <https://doi.org/10.2307/274419>.

<sup>102</sup> Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, and American Slave; Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* 119.

<sup>103</sup> Lucinda H. MacKethan, "From Fugitive Slave to Man of Letters: The Conversion of Frederick Douglass," *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 16, No. 1 (Winter 1986), 57. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30225133>.

<sup>104</sup> Matlack, "The Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass," 21.

<sup>105</sup> Peter Baida, "The Business of America," *American Heritage* 39, No. 4 (May/June 1988), accessed ONLINE, <https://www.americanheritage.com/consider-self-made-man>.

<sup>106</sup> Andrew Levy, "Frederick Douglass, Benjamin Franklin, and the Trickster Reader," *College English* 52, No. 7 (November 1990), 747. <https://doi.org/10.2307/377630>.



which were presented not as self-celebration or self-reflection, but as weapons in revolutionary cause.”<sup>107</sup> Developing this point, MacKethan writes,

To be an “American slave” was to be a man denied manhood in a country which defined men as beings endowed by their creator with the inalienable right to freedom. To be a “fugitive American slave” was to be a man seeking to claim title to the specifically American definition of man by finding a “territory” where that definition would legally apply.<sup>108</sup>

She clarifies,

To be a “fugitive American slave narrator” was to be a man seeking in a written document to prove that the free territory had successfully been appropriated through language, so that the American definition of man and the American concept of freedom could no longer be denied to himself or by logical extension to any other.<sup>109</sup>

More generally speaking, in MacKethan’s view, Douglass’s *Narrative* “made the slave narrative form into a weapon of words to establish the right to letters as a basic human and civil right.”<sup>110</sup>

Being a former slave, Douglass’s significance, power, and influence put the African American intellectual into a rather conflicted position. In relation to this, Andrews writes,

Douglass began to see two diverging roles for himself as a speaker in the antislavery movement. On the one hand, he could continue to play the part he was best known for, that of the former slave who spoke autobiographically about the outrages slavery. On the other hand, he could adopt a new persona who talked less about himself and his former bondage and more about the current condition of African Americans in the North within the context of the larger antislavery struggle.<sup>111</sup>

According to Andrews, in “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July,” Douglass manages to bridge these two dual and increasingly conflicted roles.<sup>112</sup> As stated by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century

---

<sup>107</sup> Levy, “Frederick Douglass, Benjamin Franklin, and the Trickster Reader,” 749.

<sup>108</sup> MacKethan, “From Fugitive Slave to Man of Letters,” 55.

<sup>109</sup> MacKethan, “From Fugitive Slave to Man of Letters,” 55.

<sup>110</sup> MacKethan, “From Fugitive Slave to Man of Letters,” 57.

<sup>111</sup> Andrews, ed. *Frederick Douglass Reader*, 108.

<sup>112</sup> Andrews, ed. *Frederick Douglass Reader*, 108.

African American leader himself, “the fact is, ladies and gentlemen, the distance between this platform and the slave plantation, from which I escaped, is considerable. [...] That I am here to-day, is, to me, a matter of astonishment as well as of gratitude.”<sup>113</sup>

The oration was delivered on July 5, 1852 in New York as an address to the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society. In the text, the author expresses his opinion about the founding of the USA, the Declaration of Independence, and what it means to African Americans both in bondage and free. The speech aims specifically at the hypocrisy and duality of the American nation, emphasizing the hypocritical nature of the Independence Day, voicing the reality of this day. The relation of Black people to the Fourth of July and the Declaration of Independence is crucial for our understanding of the cultural, political, and social base of the USA. The exclusion of African Americans from the founding document is an essential element which Douglass passionately acknowledges in his text. In the speech, Douglass asks directly, “Fellow-citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here to-day? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us?”<sup>114</sup>

He addresses the white Americans, saying, “Citizens, your fathers made good that resolution. They succeeded; and to-day you reap the fruits of their success. The freedom gained is yours.”<sup>115</sup> Before proceeding any further, it must be noted that in the speech, the author firstly acknowledges the Founding Fathers, praising them for their wisdom and courage. It reads,

Oppression makes a wise man mad. Your fathers were wise men, and if they did not go mad, they became restive under this treatment. They felt themselves the victims of grievous wrongs, wholly incurable in their colonial capacity. [...] The signers of the Declaration of Independence were brave men. They were great men too. [...] They were statesmen, patriots and heroes, and for the good they did, and the principles they contended for, I will unite with you to honor their memory.<sup>116</sup>

---

<sup>113</sup> Frederick Douglass, “What to Slave is the Fourth of July?” (1852), 1, accessed ONLINE <https://loveman.sdsu.edu/docs/1852FrederickDouglass.pdf>.

<sup>114</sup> Frederick Douglass, “What to Slave is the Fourth of July?” (1852), 4, accessed ONLINE [https://masshumanities.org/files/programs/douglass/speech\\_abridged\\_med.pdf](https://masshumanities.org/files/programs/douglass/speech_abridged_med.pdf).

<sup>115</sup> Douglass, “What to Slave is the Fourth of July?” 2-3.

<sup>116</sup> Douglass, “What to Slave is the Fourth of July?” 3.

Douglass recognizes the fact that they were, too, under a kind of oppression, namely that of the British rule. Despite the Fathers' treatment as well as ignorance of the Black people's struggle with slavery and racial discrimination, ironically enough, it is undeniable that they nevertheless managed to set themselves free from their oppressor. On the one hand, Douglass acknowledges their strength in this matter. On the other hand, he continues by addressing the paradox of the celebration of the Independence Day.

Douglass exclaims, "Fellow-citizens, above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions! whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are, to-day, rendered more intolerable by the jubilee shouts that reach them."<sup>117</sup> In 1776, the year when the Declaration of Independence was written, there were more than five hundred thousand African Americans enslaved. Black people in bondage represented forty percent of the American population at the time.<sup>118</sup> He elaborates,

I am not included within the pale of glorious anniversary!  
Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable  
distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day,  
rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of  
justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by  
your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. [...] This Fourth  
July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.<sup>119</sup>

Again, as argued in the thesis thus far and pointed out by Frederick Douglass himself, this time in the words of Thomas G. Poole's, "The experience of African descendants in the United States pointed to hypocrisy in the mythocultural understanding of the nation and led black Americans to call into question the country's limited perception of liberty."<sup>120</sup>

Douglass's "What to Slave is the Fourth of July?" is both an address and an exhortation. As Abigail Censky points out, "Douglass' speech is as much a brutal accounting of national hypocrisy on what he referred to as a day of 'tumultuous joy' as it is a call to action."<sup>121</sup> In his address, Douglass points out,

Oh, had I, the ability, and could I reach the nation's ear, I  
would today pour out a fiery steam of biting ridicule,  
blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For

---

<sup>117</sup> Douglass, "What to Slave is the Fourth of July?" 4.

<sup>118</sup> "The Constitution and Slavery," *Teach Democracy*, accessed October 11, 2023. <https://www.crf-usa.org/black-history-month/the-constitution-and-slavery>.

<sup>119</sup> Douglass, "What to Slave is the Fourth of July?" 4.

<sup>120</sup> Poole, "What Country Have I? Nineteenth-Century African-American Theological Critiques of the Nation's Birth and Destiny," 535.

<sup>121</sup> Abigail Censky, "'What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?' Frederick Douglass, Revisited," National Public Radio, accessed October 13, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2017/07/05/535624532/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july-frederick-douglass-revisited>.

it is not light that is needed, but fire. It is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm.<sup>122</sup>

An interesting reference, with biblical roots, to this passage can be found in James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* which will be talked about later in this thesis. As Baldwin writes at the end of his essay, "If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*"<sup>123</sup>

This is, yet again, clear evidence of the deep stagnation pervading African American history in terms of the evolution of the Black people's place and rights in American society. In his speech, Douglass continues,

The feeling of the nation must be quickened. And the conscience of the nation must be roused. The propriety of the nation must be startled. The hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed and its crimes against God and man must be denounced. What to the American slave is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him more than all other days of the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.<sup>124</sup>

In this passage, the speaker summarizes the core thought, feeling, and atmosphere of not only the piece of writing, but also and more importantly of African Americans at the time. It expresses their desire for action and change. Addressing Black people's struggles and calling out the duality on which the USA has been built, it exposes the reality of the Declaration of Independence, and therefore, consequently, of the Black American Dream.

In 1872, Frederick Douglass gave a lecture called "Self-Made Men." The concept of a self-made man, as stated by Ray Williams, is a "myth also described as 'the American dream.'"<sup>125</sup> Ray explains, "The themes of self-reliance and personal responsibility as a means to amassing unlimited success has been an appealing story for more than a century."<sup>126</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century in particular, as pointed out by Noelle N. Trent, "the idea of the self-made man was very popular. The self-made man rose to success without the benefit of external advantage, or from obscurity on strength or personal merit."<sup>127</sup> Douglass

---

<sup>122</sup> Douglass, "What to Slave is the Fourth of July?" 6.

<sup>123</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 105-106.

<sup>124</sup> Douglass, "What to Slave is the Fourth of July?" 6.

<sup>125</sup> Ray Williams, "The American Myth of the 'Self-made Man,' the American Dream and Meritocracy," *Ray Williams*, accessed October 19, 2023. <https://raywilliams.ca/the-american-myths-of-the-self-made-man-the-american-dream-and-meritocracy/>.

<sup>126</sup> Williams, "The American Myth of the 'Self-made Man,' the American Dream and Meritocracy."

<sup>127</sup> Noelle N. Trent, "Frederick Douglass: An Example for the Twenty-First Century," in *Frederick Douglass: A Life in Documents*, ed. James G. Basker (New York: The Gilder Lehrman Institute, 2018), 70.

elaborates on this topic, relating it to the Black American dream in particular, as Trent explains:

The self-made man was considered uniquely American because, according to the country's founding principles, all men were created equal and there were equal opportunities for all. However, this idealized self-made man was a white man. African Americans and other minorities were excluded, and were subject to systemic oppression and racism. In his popular speech [mentioned above], Douglass challenged the prevailing social notions of the self-made man, demanding that his audience reconsider the intelligence and capabilities of African Americans and advocating the creation of a more equitable society.<sup>128</sup>

The following part of this chapter presents Douglass's understanding of the concept of the self-made man, using his perspective not only to elaborate on the issue in general terms but also, and more importantly, to provide an example of a prominent 19<sup>th</sup>-century African American voice representing Black people in America at the time, demonstrating the concept's relevance as far as Black American dream and its accessibility are concerned.

In his speech, the African American thinker and abolitionist talks about the concept of a self-made man which he, too, recognizes as one of the key elements of the American identity. Expanding on the matter, he first clarifies:

Properly speaking, there are in the world no such men as self-made men. That term implies an individual independence of the past and present which can never exist. [...] Our best and most valued acquisitions have been obtained either from our contemporaries or from those who have preceded us in the field of thought and discovery. We have all either begged, borrowed or stolen. We have reaped where others have sown, and that which others have strewn, we have gathered.<sup>129</sup>

Acknowledging this fact, Douglass says that according to him, to be self-made men means to be "men of work. Whether or not such men have acquired material, moral or intellectual excellence, honest labor faithfully, steadily and persistently pursued, is the best, if not the only, explanation of their success."<sup>130</sup> He concludes, stating, "Such men as these, [...] are

---

<sup>128</sup> Trent, "Frederick Douglass: An Example for the Twenty-First Century," 70.

<sup>129</sup> Frederick Douglass, "Self-made Men," (1872), 3. Accessed ONLINE [https://www.leeannhunter.com/english/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Douglass\\_SelfMadeMan1872.pdf](https://www.leeannhunter.com/english/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Douglass_SelfMadeMan1872.pdf).

<sup>130</sup> Douglass, "Self-made Men," 13.

entitled to a certain measure of respect for their success and for proving to the world the grandest possibilities of human nature, of whatever variety of race or color.”<sup>131</sup>

Applying this to African Americans and the Dream’s accessibility to them, Douglass emphasizes the need to provide Black people with an equal chance to try. The thinker writes, “I have been asked ‘How will this theory affect the negro?’ and ‘What shall be done in his case?’ My general answer is ‘Give the negro fair play and let him alone. If he lives, well. If he dies, equally well. If he cannot stand up, let him call down.’”<sup>132</sup> However, he also addresses the disadvantage African Americans have had in comparison to white people, noting that it must be taken into account when considering this matter. Douglass writes,

I have said ‘Give the negro fair play and let him alone.’ I meant all that I said and a good deal more than some understand by fair play. It is not fair play to start the negro out in life, from nothing and with nothing, while others start with the advantage of a thousand years behind them. He should be measured, not by the heights others have obtained, but from the depths from which he has come.<sup>133</sup>

As pointed out by Hochschild, extending the issue to class and gender, “For African Americans to believe with the hustler that everyone, even they, can participate in the search for success, they must believe that the barriers of race, class, and (for half the population) gender have all been knocked out low enough for people like themselves to climb over them.”<sup>134</sup> In relation to this, Douglass concludes, “The nearest approach to justice to the negro for the past is to do him justice in the present. Throw open to him the doors of the schools, the factories, the workshops, and of all mechanical industries. For his own welfare, give him a chance to do whatever he can do well. If he fails then, let him fail!”<sup>135</sup>

In order to provide a full picture, it must be said that already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a number of successful African Americans, who achieved and lived their American dream. Frederick Douglass himself was one of the examples. According to Suet Yuk Au Yeung, Douglass was a “man who demonstrated his life as a journey in which he created his own character out of nothingness.”<sup>136</sup> According to Noelle N. Trent, one of

---

<sup>131</sup> Douglass, “Self-made Men,” 4.

<sup>132</sup> Douglass, “Self-made Men,” 10.

<sup>133</sup> Douglass, “Self-made Men,” 10.

<sup>134</sup> Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*, 73.

<sup>135</sup> Douglass, “Self-made Men,” 10.

<sup>136</sup> Suet Yuk (Rainie) Au Yeung, “Douglass as a Self-made Man,” *American Icons*, accessed October 15, 2023. <https://sites.temple.edu/americanicons/tag/self-made-man/>.

Douglass's "major achievements of his life [was] his transition from a person viewed as property to a public figure whose opinions were sought on national and international issues. [...] Frederick Douglass was by 1893 a firmly established self-made man and civil rights activist who would continue to fight for equality until his dying day."<sup>137</sup> Apart from Douglass, there are other examples of successful self-made African American men and women throughout the country's history, such as Madame C. J. Walker (1867–1919), who was one of the first African American female millionaires. As acknowledged by *Women's History* website, Walker "rose from poverty in the South to become one of the wealthiest African American women of her time. She used her position to advocate for the advancement of [B]lack Americans and for an end to lynching."<sup>138</sup>

Despite these several exceptions who managed to overcome the hardships and be successful, in the context of this thesis, it must be added that the majority of Black people was still struggling with the lack of freedom and simultaneously equal chance to work on their Dream. Regardless of the level of progress and change showcased above, the fight against slavery, racism and inequality was prevalent at that time still. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mostly mirroring the 18<sup>th</sup>-century approach to Black people as far as their place in America was concerned, the Black American dream was still limited for many. As pointed out by Douglass, "Pride and patriotism, not less than gratitude, prompt you to celebrate and to hold it in perpetual remembrance. I have said that the Declaration of Independence is the ring-bolt to the chain of your nation's destiny; so, indeed, I regard it."<sup>139</sup> At this point in history, the Black American dream seems to be evolving, which it to a certain degree is. Nevertheless, further analysis proves that the progress is still limited, and the pattern and the prejudiced approach of the 18<sup>th</sup> century North America to Black people and their desire for freedom, as well as for the equal opportunity to access the American dream continues.

---

<sup>137</sup> Trent, "Frederick Douglass: An Example for the Twenty-First Century," 70.

<sup>138</sup> Debra Michals, "Madam C. J. Walker," *National Women's History Museum*, accessed October 16, 2023. <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/madam-cj-walker>.

<sup>139</sup> Frederick Douglass, "What to Slave is the Fourth of July?" 3.

### 2.2.3 W. E. B. Du Bois and the Transition from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

In light of the discussion of Frederick Douglass as a representative of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century African American intellectual tradition and the struggles faced by African Americans at the time with regards to racial oppression and their limited access to the Black American dream, it is also necessary to comment on W. E. B. Du Bois and his views on this matter. Being a major African American thinker at the turn of the century, his intellectual work includes some of the most influential texts in African American history and literary canon. Randall Kenan calls Du Bois “one of the largest, most complex, most compelling and intricate minds ever to flourish on the American soil; [...] a precursor to many existential texts and heroes in the African American canon.”<sup>140</sup>

Similarly to Douglass, Du Bois found himself in a privileged position, which affected the way he perceived and approached the issue of inequality. In Kenan’s words, “We must bear in mind how warmly — and sometimes naively, sometimes erroneously — Du Bois romanticized working [B]lack folk at the turn of the century.”<sup>141</sup> However, this hardly diminishes his experience and the value of his words. As clarified by Kenan,

This fact in no way invalidates his message or his struggle, his search or his vision, his “twoness” or [...] the sincerity of his own personal misery and anguish in being a black man in America. Rather the very existence of those limitations make this document all the more poignant and perspicacious: for in his attempt to bridge the gap between his unique and privileged position and that of the most deprived and persecuted, W. E. B. Du Bois in many ways approached the ineffable.<sup>142</sup>

As emphasized by Du Bois himself in the forethought to his well-known piece of writing, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), “Need I add that I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil?”<sup>143</sup>

In his *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois proposes the concept of “double-consciousness” which essentially, according to Christina Civantos, “explains the burden

---

<sup>140</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk*, by Randall Kenan (New York: Signet Classic, 1995), xxxii- xxxiii.

<sup>141</sup> Kenan, introduction, xxxix.

<sup>142</sup> Kenan, introduction, xxxix-xl.

<sup>143</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of the Black Folk* (New York: Signet Classic, 1995), 42.



of viewing oneself both with one's own eyes and with the eyes of the dominant white world."<sup>144</sup> Du Bois writes,

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.<sup>145</sup>

Du Bois recognizes the white gaze as the formative element when it comes to African Americans' perception of themselves. He addresses the sense of "twoness" which results from such a powerful external influence. The intellectual explains, "One ever feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."<sup>146</sup>

Apart from this "double awareness," (Civantos's term), which, on the one hand, leads "to the internalization of racist beliefs or to the tactical use of racist rhetoric, which, at least in the short term, upholds the racist belief system,"<sup>147</sup> Du Bois' concept of the double consciousness may, on the other hand, be also viewed as yet another acknowledgement of the dual experience and hypocrisy of the American nation and its rather negative influence on the African American community. To a certain extent, it is a foreshadowing of what Martin Luther King, Jr. later calls "American schizophrenia", which will be discussed later in this thesis. However, in Du Bois' case, there is an additional quality to his vision which must be noted.

Arguably, according to Du Bois, the ideal scenario would be if African Americans were accepted for their innate duality. John D. Wilsey asks,

What was at the heart of Du Bois's vision of an American identity for the nine million black men, women, and children of the United States? It was the reality of a dual identity, what Du Bois referred to as a "two-ness—an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings;" [...] In this two-ness, Du Bois sought to retain both Africa and America at the heart of African-American identity.<sup>148</sup>

---

<sup>144</sup> Christina Civantos, *Jamón and Halal: Lessons in Tolerance from Rural Andalucía* (Massachusetts: Amherst College Press, 2022), 38. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.12404742.6>.

<sup>145</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 45.

<sup>146</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 45.

<sup>147</sup> Civantos, *Jamón and Halal*, 38.

<sup>148</sup> John D. Wilsey, "Which American Dream?" *Intercollegiate Studies Institute*, accessed October 18, 2023. <https://isi.org/modern-age/which-american-dream/>.

In Du Bois' view, allowing African Americans to accept their dual identity, meaning both their African and American roots, this would lead to a unity on a personal as well as potentially national level. He claims that "the history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,— this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self."<sup>149</sup>

In relation to this, Du Bois also comments on the Black American dream. In the book, he asks, "Is it possible, and probable, that nine millions of men can make effective progress in economic lines if they are deprived of political rights, made a servile caste, and allowed only the most meager chance for developing their exceptional men? If history and reason give any distinct answer to these questions, it is an emphatic *No*."<sup>150</sup> According to John D. Wilsey, "Du Bois recognized that an identity based on material prosperity—the American Dream—contributed to the ongoing denial of African-American humanity, which had indeed been denied for centuries."<sup>151</sup> Du Bois calls the racial inequality which is also evident in the case of the Black American dream:

Merely a concrete test of the underlying principles of the great republic is the Negro Problem, and the spiritual striving of the freedmen's sons is the travail of souls whose burden is almost beyond the measure of their strength, but who bear it in the name of an historic race, in the name of this the land of their fathers' fathers, and in the name of human opportunity.<sup>152</sup>

Du Bois then concludes, "The power of the ballot we need in sheer self-defense, — else what shall save us from a second slavery? Freedom, too, the long-sought, we still seek, — the freedom of life and limb, the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire."<sup>153</sup> Simply put, the African American 20<sup>th</sup>-century thinker sees the importance of economic prosperity as a key part of the American dream, nevertheless, as far as Black people and their version of the Dream are concerned, he advocates for the integration and acceptance of the Black community's African side, the social justice and political power as the primary concern.

Before proceeding any further, at this point in the thesis, it is relevant to briefly reflect on the historical frame at the time in order to keep track of the progression in African

---

<sup>149</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 45.

<sup>150</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 88.

<sup>151</sup> Wilsey, "Which American Dream?"

<sup>152</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 52-53.

<sup>153</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 52.

American history, yet stagnation in the African American dream. A representative of the turn of the century, W. E. B Du Bois was born in 1868 and died in 1963. Born a few years after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, Du Bois lived through both the Reconstruction (1865–1877) and Progressive Era (late 19<sup>th</sup> century/early 20<sup>th</sup> century). As far as African American history is concerned in particular, the majority of Du Bois' life was spent under the Jim Crow Laws.

In 1905, he was one of the co-founders of the Niagara Movement which was an “organization of [B]lack intellectuals that was led by W. E. B. Du Bois and called for full political, civil, and social rights for African Americans.”<sup>154</sup> This movement was the predecessor of not only the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) established four years later in 1909, but also of the series of cultural, social, and political movements that had emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In spite of the fact that Du Bois did not witness the Black Arts Movement active in 1960s and 1970s, he did experience the Harlem Renaissance (1920s/1930s) and was still alive when the Civil Rights Movement began. When talking about W. E. B. Du Bois in terms of his intellectual presence and influence at the turn of the century, it is relevant to say that his notions and views are a gradually evolving product of witnessing a great variety of events and moments in American history.

Yet, in spite of the fact that his historical, social, and political experience was as vast as suggested above, it is undeniable that the main issue discussed in his writing remains the same. As demonstrated in several examples in this and the preceding chapters, at this point in history there had been a certain level of progress happening in African American political and social matters, allowing some of the people from the Black community to access important and influential positions in the society. However, Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, used as an example, shows that the themes connected to African Americans, their place in America, and their right to claim the American dream are still repeating. Finally, as stated by Du Bois, “The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line.”<sup>155</sup> In the context of this thesis, the brief introduction to W. E. B. Du Bois and his intellectual views provided above serve as a transition to a more detailed and elaborate discussion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from both conceptual and poetic perspective.

---

<sup>154</sup> Jeff Wallenfeldt, and Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Niagara Movement," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed ONLINE October 18, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Niagara-Movement>.

<sup>155</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* 41.

## 2.2.4 20<sup>th</sup> century and Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Baldwin

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a period in American history extremely rich in political activism, particularly as far as African American community and their rights were concerned. Foreshadowed by W. E. B. Du Bois and his emphasis on the need for Black people in the USA to have the political voice and influence, this call was further developed by African American leaders, civil rights activists, and social reformers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. or James Baldwin. In Baldwin's words, "It is entirely unacceptable that I should have no voice in the political affairs of my own country, for I am not a ward of America; I am one of the first Americans to arrive on these shores."<sup>156</sup>

This chapter focuses on the new wave of intellectual, social, and consequently political influence, represented by two major African American voices and their views on racial inequality and its effect on the Black American dream. As the spokesmen of the Black American community, they both address what King calls the "American schizophrenia" – an innate national quality pervading, as demonstrated in this thesis, the history of the USA from the very beginning. By including the notions of these two 20<sup>th</sup>-century African American thinkers, the study expands on Du Bois' recognition of the social and political power as the key elements in improving the access to the American dream for Black people.

On the one hand, there is, again, a shift happening in the meaning of the Black American dream in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, extending it from the early dream of freedom to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century desire for having the possibility to become self-made and financially free, having the access to material possessions, followed by the next stage of the Black American dream, meaning social justice, and finally political power allowing to achieve a lasting change. On the other hand, examining the texts and thoughts of King and Baldwin, keeping in mind the racial segregation under the so-called Jim Crow Laws in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is evident that the progress in the evolution of the Black American dream was yet again limited.

While Hiram Rhodes Revels was the first African American man to officially enter the political sphere, serving as the first African American senator in the U.S. Congress already in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>157</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. is arguably the most well-known

---

<sup>156</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 98.

<sup>157</sup> "Hiram Revels: A Featured Biography," *United States Senate*, accessed October 20, 2023. [https://www.senate.gov/senators/FeaturedBios/Featured\\_Bio\\_Revels.htm](https://www.senate.gov/senators/FeaturedBios/Featured_Bio_Revels.htm).

African American social and political reformer. As pointed out by Baldwin, King “has succeeded, in a way no Negro before him has managed to do, to carry the battle into the individual heart and make its resolution the province of the individual will. He has made it a matter, on both sides of the racial fence, of self-examination.”<sup>158</sup> According to James Melvin Washington,

It is difficult to appreciate King’s achievement if we do not understand that his dilemma was that he saw both the need and the danger of nationalism. He certainly was an Americanist, but not a nationalist ideologue. He was faithful to his country so long as his country was faithful to the vision of what King often called “the beloved community.”<sup>159</sup>

Known and praised across the world, Martin Luther King, Jr. gave voice to the voiceless. In addition, aware of the fine line between patriotic nationalism on the one hand, and nationalist ideology on the other hand, he addressed the social and political hypocrisy of the American nation, expressing and representing the ultimate dream of African American community, as Michiko Kakutani says:

Dr. King was able to nestle his arguments within a historical continuum, lending them the authority of tradition and the weight of association. For some, in his audience, the articulation of his dream for America would have evoked conscious or unconscious memories of Langston Hughes’s call in a 1935 poem to “let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed” and W. E. B. Du Bois’s description of the “wonderful America, which the founding fathers dreamed.”<sup>160</sup>

According to Martin Luther King, Jr., “In a real sense, America is essentially a dream, a dream yet unfulfilled.”<sup>161</sup>

Also recognizing the American dream as the cornerstone of the American identity, this statement emphasizes the notion that America can hardly live up to its full potential

---

<sup>158</sup> James Baldwin, “The Highroad of Destiny,” in C. Eric Lincoln, ed., *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Profile* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970), 111.

<sup>159</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., introduction to *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986), xi-xii.

<sup>160</sup> Michiko Kakutani, “The Lasting Power of Dr. King’s Dream Speech,” *The New York Times*, accessed October 15, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/28/us/the-lasting-power-of-dr-kings-dream-speech.html>.

<sup>161</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. *A Testament of Hope*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986), 208.

unless it quits the discrimination that the country imposes on Black people. Throughout his career, King expresses his hopes that the Dream will eventually be fulfilled, and African Americans finally be accepted as a legitimate part of the USA. In his famous speech, “I Have a Dream,” delivered in 1963 as a keynote address of the March on Washington for the Civil Rights Movement, King, Jr. exclaims,

I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed — we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.<sup>162</sup>

In his speech from 1961, he elaborates,

The substance of the dream is expressed in these sublime words, words lifted to cosmic proportions: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” This is the dream.

Voicing the Dream’s essence, yet again reflecting on the Founding Fathers’ promise, he encourages African Americans to remain hopeful, too. According to Michiko Kakutani, commenting on the speech’s lasting power, “Dr. King took a leap into history, jumping from prose to poetry, from the podium to the pulpit. His voice arced into an emotional crescendo as he turned from a sobering assessment of current social injustices to a radiant vision of hope — of what America could be.”<sup>163</sup>

Among other things, the dual nature of both American identity and of the Dream is acknowledged throughout King’s writings and speeches a number of times. King labels this duality “American schizophrenia.” He perceives the nation’s as well as the Dream’s hypocritical character as their innate state of being which can and must be dealt with. He also refers directly to America’s inability to put its founding creed into practice:

Ever since the founding fathers of our nation dreamed this dream, America has manifested a schizophrenic personality. She has been torn between [two] selves--a self in which she has proudly professed democracy and a self in which she has sadly practiced the antithesis of democracy. Slavery and

---

<sup>162</sup> King, Jr. *A Testament of Hope*, 219.

<sup>163</sup> Kakutani, “The Lasting Power of Dr. King’s Dream Speech.”

segregation have been strange paradoxes in a nation founded on the principle that all men are created equal.<sup>164</sup>

Again, King acknowledges the American nation's division in terms of its founding principles and values. In his book called *Strength to Love*, King writes, "One of the great tragedies of life is that men seldom bridge the gulf between practice and profession, between doing and saying. A persistent schizophrenia leaves so many of us tragically divided. Against ourselves. On the one hand, we proudly profess certain sublime and noble principles, but on the other hand, we sadly practice the very antithesis of those principles."<sup>165</sup>

In his speech "The Other America" (1967), the African American leader, reformer, and thinker opens the lecture by saying, "I'd like to use as a subject from which to speak this afternoon, the other America. And I use this subject because there are literally two Americas."<sup>166</sup> Viewing the USA as suffering from a great social fraction, he clarifies,

One America is beautiful for our situation. And in a sense, this America is overflowing with the miracle of prosperity and the honey of opportunity. [...] But tragically and unfortunately, there is another America. This other America has a daily ugliness about it that constantly transforms the buoyancy of hope into the fatigue of despair. In this America, millions of work-starved men walk the streets daily in search for jobs that do not exist.<sup>167</sup>

From this perspective, King views America, specifically "the other America" as "an arena of blasted hopes and shattered dreams,"<sup>168</sup> which he also touches upon in one of his early articles, namely in "Our Struggle" (1956).

In that particular piece of writing, commenting specifically on the literal racial segregation that the Black community had been enduring at the time, King points out that "through forced separation from our African culture, through slavery, poverty, and deprivation, many black men lost self-respect. [...] They argue that his inferior social,

---

<sup>164</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. "The Negro and the American Dream," (1960) Accessed ONLINE October 21, 2023. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/negro-and-american-dream-excerpt-address-annual-freedom-mass-meeting-north>.

<sup>165</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 1981), 40.

<sup>166</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. "The Other America," (1967) accessed ONLINE <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/the-other-america-speech-transcript-martin-luther-king-jr>.

<sup>167</sup> King, Jr. "The Other America."

<sup>168</sup> King, Jr. "The Other America."

economic, and political position was good for him. He was incapable of advancing beyond a fixed position and would therefore be happier if encouraged not to attempt the impossible.”<sup>169</sup> In a research report from 2018 called “From Slavery to Segregation,” examining the issue of racial segregation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it has been stated that:

The narrative of racial difference created to justify slavery — the myth that white people are superior to Black people — was not abolished by the Emancipation Proclamation or the Thirteenth Amendment, and it outlived slavery and Reconstruction. White Americans committed to the myth of Black inferiority used the law and violent terrorism to establish an apartheid society that relegated Black Americans to second-class citizenship and economic exploitation.<sup>170</sup>

In Baldwin’s words, “The limits of your ambition were expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being.”<sup>171</sup> It is evident that, as pointed out by King, the USA “has constantly taken a positive step forward on the question of racial justice and racial equality. But over and over again, at the same time, it made certain backwards steps.”<sup>172</sup> Ultimately, caught in this vicious circle, the American dream becomes “something much more closely resembling a nightmare, on the private, domestic, and international levels.”<sup>173</sup>

Commenting on the character of freedom that the former enslaved African Americans and their descendants acquired, King addresses the hypocrisy pervading it:

In 1863, the Negro was freed from the bondage of physical slavery. But at the same time, the nation refused to give him land to make that freedom meaningful. [...] And this is why Frederick Douglass could say that emancipation for the Negro was freedom to hunger. [...] He went on to say that it was freedom without bread to eat, freedom without land to cultivate. It was freedom and famine at the same time.<sup>174</sup>

---

<sup>169</sup> King, Jr. *A Testament of Hope*, 75.

<sup>170</sup> “From Slavery to Segregation,” from *Segregation in America* (Equal Justice Initiative, 2018), 10. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep30692.4>.

<sup>171</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* 7.

<sup>172</sup> King, Jr. “The Other America.”

<sup>173</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 89.

<sup>174</sup> King, Jr. “The Other America.”



Referring to the goals of the Civil Rights Movement, the first massive African American social and political protest movement calling for social and political justice, he says,

We have come to the day when a piece of freedom is not enough for us as human beings nor for the nation of which we are part. We have been given pieces, but unlike bread, a slice of which does diminish hunger, a piece of liberty no longer suffices. Freedom is like life. You cannot be given life in installments. You cannot be given breath but no body, nor a heart but no blood vessels. Freedom is one thing — you have it all, or you are not free. Our goal is freedom.<sup>175</sup>

He concludes, “We are simply seeking to bring into full realization the American dream. [...] When it is realized, the jangling discords of our nation will be transformed into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood, and men everywhere will know that America is truly the land of the free and the home of the brave.”<sup>176</sup> However, it is important to return to one of the fundamental questions: What is the key to such an achievement?

When studying the views of the two prominent 20<sup>th</sup>-century African American intellectuals, preceded by the examination of W. E. B. Du Bois and his opinion on this matter, one comes to the conclusion that the equal opportunity to participate in the political scene, meaning to for example have the right to vote, is the only legitimate way to gain ultimate freedom. As pointed out by Baldwin, “The only thing that white people have that black people need, or should want, is power.”<sup>177</sup> On this topic, King writes, “The continuing struggle for civil rights now shifts into a new phase — a struggle for power. [...] In America, freedom and power are inextricably bound. One cannot be free without power, and there can be no power without freedom to decide for oneself.”<sup>178</sup>

In spite of the fact that African Americans had the voting right officially since 1870 as a result of the Fifteenth Amendment, it was not until 1964, and the ratification of the Twenty-fourth Amendment, that the African American community was not denied their legal right for the ballot.<sup>179</sup> When it comes to African Americans gaining

---

<sup>175</sup> King, Jr. *A Testament of Hope*, 104.

<sup>176</sup> King, Jr. *A Testament of Hope*, 105.

<sup>177</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 96.

<sup>178</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. “Power for Powerless,” (1966) Accessed ONLINE <https://www.crmvet.org/info/mlkpower.htm>.

<sup>179</sup> “Black Americans and the Vote,” *National Archives*, accessed October 22, 2023. <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/vote>.

legitimate political power and influence, unlike King who again remains hopeful and determined to fight, James Baldwin publicly expresses his doubts in one of his pieces of writing from 1962. He states, “Color is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality.”<sup>180</sup> Baldwin continues, “The Negroes of this country may never be able to rise to power, but they are very well placed indeed to precipitate chaos and ring down the curtain on the American dream.”<sup>181</sup> He ponders the possibility of Black people in America having the power to change the course of events affecting their lives and even though he questions the chance of African Americans being in charge, he at the same time expresses his hopes in terms of the Black Americans’ tragedy exposing the dishonest ideology on which the country has been built.

Moreover, Martin Luther King, Jr. was known for his advocacy of a non-violent approach to protesting and fighting against the racial injustice. His belief was deeply rooted in the idea that, as he himself put it, “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”<sup>182</sup> Similarly to King, Baldwin is also gradually coming to the realization that instead of spreading hate, punishing white Americans for their actions and behavior, one must perceive them as the “lost, younger brothers”<sup>183</sup> who lack love, and especially self-love. According to Baldwin, love secures growth, and growth is the key to a permanent change. He writes,

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word “love” here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace — not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough universal sense of quest and daring and growth.<sup>184</sup>

More specifically, he explains that considering their ancestors’ treatment of their Black brothers, “white people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this [...] the Negro will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.”<sup>185</sup>

---

<sup>180</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 104.

<sup>181</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 88.

<sup>182</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. “Loving Your Enemies,” accessed ONLINE <https://greenwichpres.org/mt-content/uploads/2022/03/mlk-loving-your-enemies.pdf>.

<sup>183</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 9.

<sup>184</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 95.

<sup>185</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 22.

In Baldwin's view, this internal transformation on white Americans' part must be supported by the Black community. This change in Baldwin himself and his perspective which happened over time ("A few years ago, I would have hated these people with all my heart. Now I pitied them."<sup>186</sup>) resulted in the encouragement mentioned above. As he preached in a letter addressed to his nephew, "These men are your [...] lost, younger brothers. And if *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it."<sup>187</sup>

To conclude both this chapter and the conceptual part of this thesis, it is important to summarize the role of African Americans within the concept of the American dream. Keeping in mind the fact that the Dream is a fundamental element of the nation's identity, one must recognize the role of Black people in it as crucial. In the course of this study, a certain shift in the meaning of the Black American dream has been demonstrated, however, reaching this point in history, namely the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, it is evident that a full circle moment has been reached. Despite the seeming progress and evolution in Black man's opportunity to pursue his or her happiness in the USA, one comes to realization that it is a mere illusion.

Two centuries later, the Black community's dream is still freedom; freedom which, interestingly enough, does not concern African Americans only, but more importantly white Americans as well. White Americans do not have to seek freedom in the literal sense as African Americans did and to a certain extent still do. Yet, from a more philosophical and psychological perspective, they also cannot be fully free until they acknowledge and fix the issue of which they are the cause. As presented by Baldwin, you get what you give, and you have what you are. In his own words, "Black freedom will make white freedom possible. Indeed, *our* freedom, which we have been forced to buy at so high a price, is the only hope of freedom that they have."<sup>188</sup>

Only by integrating one's self, one can allow the integration of others. And the integration of others on the full scale, meaning among other things to give everyone the same space and tools to live fulfilled lives, treating them as equals, is what will not only empower the nation, but also and in the context of this thesis more importantly, permit it

---

<sup>186</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 56.

<sup>187</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 9-10.

<sup>188</sup> James Baldwin, "Letter to the Bishop," *New Statesman* (23 August 1985), 9.

to fulfill its Promise and reach its potential as the land of the free. In other words, white American dream cannot exist at the expense of the Black American dream.

### 2.3 Reflection on the Black American Dream in the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Black American Poetry

African American poetry is an essential, yet still underrated part of the American literary tradition and culture as a whole. As argued by Lauri Ramey,

African American poetry pre-dates the nation that became the United States of America and is a central part of its identity and expression. It is a major touchstone of the American literary tradition and deserves recognition for its aesthetic quality and influence on world culture. Yet this extraordinary body of writing remains under-explored as a topic of research, study, understanding, and appreciation.<sup>189</sup>

Black American poetry records African American history, commenting on, among other things, the African Americans' everlasting struggle with white American supremacy and the overall system built on deliberate racial discrimination and oppression. In Ramey's words, "This body of literature unquestionably has played a unique role in identifiable moments in American history in chronicling specific types of American experience."<sup>190</sup> She explains, "A constant in African American poetry has been a belief that art can produce social change and challenge the status quo. African American poetry holds an inextricable role in reflecting and defining the truth and totality of American experience, expression, and identity."<sup>191</sup> Expanding on the conceptual foundation established in the preceding chapters (2.1 and 2.2), this chapter provides an analysis of the Black American dream as reflected in 20<sup>th</sup>-century African American poetry. It studies a selection of poems composed during key cultural and social movements, namely the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Chicago Renaissance, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Black Arts Movement.

Before proceeding any further, the origin of African American poetry dating back to slave songs, also known as "spirituals," and their fundamental role in the evolution of Black American poetry must be acknowledged briefly. In her book *A History of African American Poetry*, Ramey calls slave songs, "the bedrock of this genre."<sup>192</sup> Moreover, in addition to this, Ramey also calls the slave songs the original protest songs. She states,

It is a common belief that African American protest poetry is a product of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1960s, but if we look at the full range of foundational literature in the African American tradition, we see protest, self-

---

<sup>189</sup> Lauri Ramey, *A History of African American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1.

<sup>190</sup> Ramey, *A History of African American Poetry*, 22.

<sup>191</sup> Ramey, *A History of African American Poetry*, 47.

<sup>192</sup> Ramey, *A History of African American Poetry*, 18.

articulation, self-empowerment, and originality from the start.<sup>193</sup>

As demonstrated in chapter 2.2.4, the 20<sup>th</sup> century represents a significant breakthrough in both American and African American history on various levels. It is commonly perceived as the time of a major turmoil and change. Additionally, this thesis has provided a discussion of the origin of the corruption, duality, and hypocrisy of both the American and Black American dream commenting on the conceptual input from the Declaration of Independence to Martin Luther King, Jr. In this context, the Harlem Renaissance or the Civil Rights Movement are often presented as the cornerstones of African American history and literary tradition, while those that came before and set the ground for these two events and their representatives remain less conspicuous.

As pointed out by Ramey, specifically the Harlem Renaissance “was a vibrant era with a lasting poetic legacy which has such a towering reputation and legend that it is often the only period in African American literature known to general readers.”<sup>194</sup> Nevertheless, as also suggested by Ramey, this is an inaccurate perception. In her study, Lauri Ramey addresses the issue of a limited perspective as far as African American culture, specifically poetry, is concerned. She sheds some light on the fact that to view the development of the Black American literary canon as a set of “renewals” rather than a continuous progress consisting of work directly, or indirectly based on its predecessors is limiting and incorrect. She states,

As we have seen, the idea that African Americans had not produced great poetry before the twentieth century is a profound misunderstanding. This perspective reflects the problems of viewing African American history and culture as a series of stop-starts and renewals, when, in contrast, the Anglo-American canon is viewed as a continuous timeline of developments and progressions.<sup>195</sup>

Keeping this notion in mind, despite acknowledging the fact that African American culture, and literary canon in particular are much richer and expanding beyond this significant, yet not the only cultural movement, as far as the Black American poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is concerned in particular, it seems fitting to begin with the analysis of the work of African American poets emerging during the Harlem Renaissance.

---

<sup>193</sup> Ramey, *A History of African American Poetry*, 42.

<sup>194</sup> Ramey, *A History of African American Poetry*, 129.

<sup>195</sup> Ramey, *A History of African American Poetry*, 128.

However, it is still crucial to also take into account the fact that specifically African American poetry does not merely react to the first half and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century nor does it rely on the conceptual and intellectual foundation of the Dream's concept exclusively. Its roots date back to the slave songs, which are not necessarily the primary subject matter this study deals with, but it is important to be aware of the fact that already in the spirituals the enslaved African Americans addressed and responded to the Dream's duality and hypocrisy. For example, this can be observed in a folk song called "That Hypocrite," anthologized in *The Black Poets* edited by Dudley Randall. This slave song only supports the undeniable fact that, both implicitly and explicitly, the theme of the American dream as a hypocritical concept pervades the African American history since the very beginning, which then supports the notion suggested in this thesis, meaning that the Black American dream is rigid, only seemingly evolving. Ultimately, studying the African American poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one must recognize the voices which allowed the more recent poets to be vocal in the first place. The rest of this chapter will now focus on poetic work by a selected number of 20<sup>th</sup>-century African American poets depicting the hypocritical and dual nature of the Black American dream.

### 2.3.1 Harlem and Black Chicago Renaissance: Langston Hughes and Margaret Walker

The struggle of African Americans for claiming the Dream pervades the American literary tradition. In Langston Hughes' poetry, the call for having a place to sit "at the table/When company comes," (275) both metaphorically and literally speaking, is almost always present, especially as far as the 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry is concerned. As Hughes keeps asking in his "Tell Me":

Why should it be *my* loneliness,  
Why should it be *my* song,  
Why should it be *my* dream  
deferred  
overlong? (231)

Langston Hughes is generally classified as the most prominent and anthologized representative of Harlem Renaissance, also known as the New Negro Movement. Similarly to a great number of poets across the century, Hughes voices the issue of dual and hypocritical treatment of the American dream in terms of its accessibility to the Black community in the USA. He expresses the Black Americans' frustration as well as determination to continue dreaming and fighting. Langston Hughes' poetry provides a clear definition of the Black American dream at the time. The issue of the Black American dream is one of the most frequent themes pervading his poems. His awareness of the concept's importance within the nation's existence as well as his understanding of the importance of African Americans' integration into the Dream is evident in his work. In James Presley's words, "For Hughes the American dream has even greater meaning: it is the *raison d'être* of this nation."<sup>196</sup>

In this sense, Langston Hughes and his work becomes a powerful means of identifying clearly the struggle and limitations forced upon African Americans, especially as far as their chances to fulfill their dreams and potential are concerned. According to Kalamu Ya Salaam, "Hughes becomes medium, a sensitive and subtle medium, but a medium nonetheless. In a seemingly simple form, Hughes serves as a sounding board for the articulation of people who are usually voiceless."<sup>197</sup> As Shelia Cunningham Sims put it, Hughes "uses African American language—a language that speaks to the resiliency,

---

<sup>196</sup> James Presley, "The American Dream of Langston Hughes," *Southwest Review* 48, no. 4 (Autumn 1963), 380. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43467552>.

<sup>197</sup> Kalamu Ya Salaam, "Langston Hughes: A Poet Supreme," in *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 18.



dedication, and determination of a community to overcome barriers,”<sup>198</sup> as mentioned above, one of those barriers being the struggle to gain the equal chance of accessing and fulfilling their own American dream from the time of slavery till the poet’s present day.

Culturally speaking, the New Negro Movement is often regarded as the first Black American cultural movement giving African Americans, and African American artists specifically, the creative space to address the issues such as the American dream’s inaccessibility to the Black American community. According to Abraham Chapman, the Harlem Renaissance was the “first major cultural culmination of the inner resources and strength of the American Negro. It was the refusal of the Negro intellectuals and writers to be kept down and locked out of their rightful place as creators of American culture.”<sup>199</sup> Fighting for their place within the American dream, at that time African Americans were continuously reshaping the American culture of which the Dream is undeniably part of.

From a historical perspective, in spite of the fact that African Americans were supposed to live freely in the USA after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the end of the Civil War in 1865, the reality was different. Shortly after the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment was ratified, the Southern states started to implement the Jim Crow laws, which were later sanctioned on the federal level by the “separate but equal” legal doctrine and were in effect since 1870s till 1965.<sup>200</sup> However, in 1920s and 1930s, during the Harlem Renaissance, African Americans took a stand. For that reason, alongside the Civil War, the Harlem Renaissance may be perceived as the second point in the American history which contributed to the overall shift in the USA as far as the Black people and their position and rights in the USA were concerned, their right to have an equal access to the American dream included. Yet, as demonstrated in the selected poems that follow, a shift does not necessarily mean progress, improvement, or accomplishment.

Firstly, the plea expressed in Hughes’ “The Negro Mother” may be recognized as the original Dream of Black Americans, in other words, the original desire for literal freedom, as discussed in chapter 2.2.1. of this study. In “The Negro Mother,” Hughes amplifies the original wish and goal, signified by the metaphor of “the seed of the free,”<sup>201</sup> to never let the white supremacy treat African Americans as inferior again, and to be

---

<sup>198</sup> Shelia Cunningham Sims, “Classroom Uses of Langston Hughes' Poetry,” *The Langston Hughes Review* 14, No. 1/2 (Spring/Fall 1996): 95. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26434506>.

<sup>199</sup> Abraham Chapman, “The Harlem Renaissance in Literary History,” *CLA Journal* 11, No. 1 (September 1967), 44. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/-44328230>.

<sup>200</sup> Nikki L. M. Brown and Barry M. Stentiford, ed. *The Jim Crow Encyclopedia* 1, 2 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 388.

<sup>201</sup> Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2020), 288.

determined to strive for prosperity known to white Americans. Arguably, in this poem, Hughes uses the figure of a former female slave, the stereotype of a Black “Mammy,” as the spokeswoman of that dream, having the function of being a reminder of what had been as well as an encouragement to what could and should be:

I nourished the dream that nothing could  
smother  
Deep in my breast—the Negro Mother.  
Dark ones of today, my dreams must come  
true:  
Remember my sweat, my pain, my despair.  
Remember my years, heavy with sorrow—  
And make of those years a torch for  
tomorrow.  
But march ever forward, breaking down bars.  
Look ever upward at the sun and the stars.<sup>202</sup>

In this excerpt, Hughes addresses the fact that the dream of freedom, equality, and consequently of the equal opportunity to build a life based on prosperity and free social and political will was present in the Black people’s consciousness from the outset; the belief that African Americans, too, deserve what the white man enjoys. The desire for the abolishment of slavery and becoming free voiced by Hughes in “The Negro Mother” marks the beginning of a continuous struggle to make this Dream happen.

In “Lunch in a Jim Crow Car,” the African Americans’ denied right for equal opportunity to work on their dreams on the American land is discussed by using the image of an African American eating a sandwich while riding a segregated vehicle:

Get out the lunch-box of your dreams.  
Bite into the sandwich of your heart,  
And ride the Jim Crow car until it screams  
Then—like an atom bomb—it bursts apart.<sup>203</sup>

According to Paul Williams, “placing this within the Jim Crow car stresses that it is the racism present within America that forces African Americans to cannibalize their hopes and goals.”<sup>204</sup> It shows how Black Americans are forced to approach their dreams in the very oppressive and limiting conditions: they must make the best use of what they have, which is already quite limited. Getting very little help from sources outside the community,

---

<sup>202</sup> Hughes, *Selected Poems*, 288-289.

<sup>203</sup> Hughes, *Selected Poems*, 280.

<sup>204</sup> Paul Williams, “White Rain and the Black Atlantic” in *Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War: Representations of Nuclear Weapons and Post-Apocalyptic Worlds* (Liverpool University Press, 2011), 155. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5vjdcf>.

Black people are forced to operate and perform under discriminating circumstances, giving them no other choice but to exploit themselves until there is nothing left.

As far as the Dream and its portrayal in Hughes' poetry is concerned, to a certain extent, "Lunch in a Jim Crow Car" corresponds with another poem of his, namely "Harlem." Firstly, these two poetic works both share the energy of a similar explosive tension; the feeling of oppression being so strong that an explosion is inevitable. They both come to the same conclusion that African Americans' dreams cannot be deferred forever. The change must come because the longer white Americans oppress them, the bigger the explosion, figuratively speaking, and its consequences. In Hughes' words, "What happens to a dream deferred?/ [...] Maybe it just sags/like a heavy load./ *Or does it explode?*"<sup>205</sup> Secondly, they also express the same urgency to make the Dream accessible to Black Americans. Arguably, in "Harlem," Hughes elaborates on the sense of frustration expressed in "Lunch in a Jim Crow Car," asking a set of questions and trying to identify what the dream that African Americans are left with in reality is.

By raising these questions, Hughes continues to emphasize the urgency for African Americans to have equal opportunity in their American life. He speaks on the hypocrisy of the American dream by addressing the ridiculous nature of, for example, the Jim Crow Laws. As suggested in "Merry-Go-Round," racial segregation, it being one of the reasons for the inequality in the Black American dream, is pointless:

Where is the Jim Crow section  
On this merry-go-round,  
Mister, cause I want to ride?  
[...]  
On the bus we're put in the back —  
But there isn't no back  
To a merry-go-round!<sup>206</sup>

In fact, in this poem, Hughes both mocks the segregated system and feels desperate over the vicious circle it represents. By amplifying the ridiculousness of the enforced position of Black Americans, the poet addresses the duality of the Dream rooted in America's inherent hypocrisy. The vicious circle which arguably prevents the Black American dream from evolving and becoming more accessible is then implied in the poet's "I, Too" as well.

In "I, Too," racial segregation, ultimately representing the segregated Dream of Black Americans, is also alluded to, this time by incorporating the voice of a Black man

---

<sup>205</sup> Hughes, *Selected Poems*, 194.

<sup>206</sup> Hughes, *Selected Poems*, 194.

who is forced to eat separately in the kitchen whenever somebody pays a visit to the white family. In this particular poem, the speaker asserts himself by stating the well-known phrase “I, too, sing America; I, too, am America,”<sup>207</sup> meaning ‘I do belong.’ In relation to this, it is important to keep in mind that the personal pronoun “I” which reoccurs in the work of art multiple times implies the poem’s subjective nature, yet Hughes uses it in order to give a voice to the collective “we.” As suggested by Salaam, “Hughes as an individual is deemphasized in the work, [...] as various individual members of the community speak and are spoken about.”<sup>208</sup> The “I” represents all African Americans treated unjustly. That way, the poet contributes to making the Dream more inclusive, suggesting the country’s potential to include everybody, meaning American nation and its people as a whole. As the speaker says, “I am the darker brother. I, too, sing America.”<sup>209</sup> From such a perspective, the poem is a clear statement of pride and determination to make the Dream a reality.

Additionally, it must be noted that the poem’s signature opening line (“I, too, sing America”<sup>210</sup>) as well as its closing line (“I, too, am America.”<sup>211</sup>) are deeply symbolic. Along with being assertive, this formal feature indicates a sense of closure. In other words, it creates a figurative full circle moment used to communicate the poem’s message, namely Hughes’ condemnation of America’s hypocritical treatment of its “darker brother”<sup>212</sup> and his dreams. As Susan Mernit put it, Hughes’ “poems attacking racism and hypocrisy view prejudice as a symptom of a sick society, not the cause,”<sup>213</sup> meaning that the prejudice is a mere indication of a society built on an oppressive mindset as far as its African American minority is concerned, but the ultimate cause is the innate fear that the prejudice results from, and it must be faced. In other words, in the case of this poem, Hughes implies that the American, and specifically Black American dream is built on a vicious circle which is later indirectly discussed by, for instance, Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Baldwin (see chapter 2.2.4). The circle, and therefore the Dream, depends on the white people’s recognition that the problem cannot be solved unless white Americans face their own inner demons. Ultimately, prejudice is a matter not set in stone. It can be changed, if one’s willing and determined.

---

<sup>207</sup> Hughes, *Selected Poems*, 275.

<sup>208</sup> Salaam, “Langston Hughes: A Poet Supreme,” 18.

<sup>209</sup> Hughes, *Selected Poems*, 275.

<sup>210</sup> Hughes, *Selected Poems*, 275.

<sup>211</sup> Langston Hughes, “I, Too,” *Poetry Foundation*, accessed November 15, 2023.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47558/i-too>.

<sup>212</sup> Hughes, *Selected Poems*, 275.

<sup>213</sup> Susan Mernit, “A Question of Vision,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 60, No. 2 (Spring 1984), 2. <https://www.vqronline.org/question-vision>.

Again, keeping in mind that, historically speaking, the American nation itself was founded on great uncertainty and struggle (2.1) which was not the African Americans' fault, it is only by dealing with this fear originating in the past and healing the misconception about the Black Americans' worth, that African Americans can be accepted in the American society and reach their full potential by then finally gaining the equal and full access to the American dream and the potential it offers. In other words, only when white people understand that the issue starts with themselves, and finally embrace Black Americans fully, can the Black American dream be realized and fulfilled in the true sense of the word. As implied in "I, Too," the speaker hopes for this moment of healing to come, recognizing it as the ultimate source of acceptance and permission to finally reach the Dream. ("They'll see how beautiful I am/ and be ashamed—/I, too, am America."<sup>214</sup>)

Additionally, from another point of view related to the issue of the Black American dream, the line "I, too, sing America"<sup>215</sup> may also be interpreted as a reference to Hughes' contemporary, W. E. B. Du Bois, and his theory of the so-called "double consciousness" which has been explained in chapter 2.2.3 of this thesis. Having the same pronunciation as the word "two," the "too" next to the communal "I" seems to acknowledge the inherent duality of African American identity as suggested by Du Bois. The sense of division that African Americans feel as a result of the oppression of their African self has a negative, and more precisely restrictive influence on their ability to live a full life in the USA. Therefore, following this train of thought, the poem arguably also advocates for a complete integration of the two sides of African Americans, seeing this integration as an essential part of realizing the Black American dream. Expanding on Du Bois' theory, it is only when the Black people in America are allowed to accept their inherent duality and embrace it fully, that the Black community can achieve an equal chance to live their American dream.

In "Theme for English B," Hughes continues developing this notion, encouraging the importance of acknowledging and accepting the dual identity of Black Americans because a lack of understanding in this matter results in a great sense of confusion and misunderstanding on both parts. The poet writes,

But I guess I'm what  
I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:  
hear you, hear me—we two—you, me, talk on this page.

---

<sup>214</sup> Hughes, *Selected Poems*, 275.

<sup>215</sup> Hughes, *Selected Poems*, 275.

[...] Me—who?<sup>216</sup>

Again, the “we two” may be perceived as Hughes’ reference to Du Bois and his “double consciousness.” It addresses the issue of seeing oneself through other person’s, more specifically white man’s eyes, gradually being taught to disassociate with the African part of oneself. In “Afro-American Frangment,” Hughes writes,

So long,  
So far away  
Is Africa.  
Not even memories alive  
[...]  
Beat out of blood with words sad-sung  
In strange un-Negro tongue—  
So long,  
So far away  
Is Africa.<sup>217</sup>

Coming back to “Theme for English B,” capturing the speaker’s thoughts, this raw presentation of the speaker’s confused feelings then shift, similarly to “I, Too,” into an assertive statement. Finally, the poet states, “You are white —/ yet a part of me, as I am a part of you./ That’s American.”<sup>218</sup> Since the accessibility of the Black American dream depends, to a certain extent, on America’s acceptance of the Black community for who they are as a whole, this is a crucial point explaining that African Americans, their innate cultural duality included, are an essential part of the country and, therefore, of the Dream.

Interestingly enough, in “Let America Be America Again,” Hughes takes the issue of duality to another level by continuing to amplify it in the formal features of the poems. In this particular poem’s case, the poet incorporates the duality in terms of the two speakers’ function and role. The poem features two voices, one more prominent than the other, yet both equally important. According to Westover, Hughes uses “a dual discourse in order to express the contradictory meanings of America.”<sup>219</sup> The first voice is that of the primary, the more prominent speaker since it dominates the poem. It can be interpreted as a representative of the oppressed African Americans treated unjustly, those not given the equal opportunity to use America’s full potential to achieving their American dream.

---

<sup>216</sup> Langston Hughes, “Theme for English B,” *Poetry Foundation*, accessed November 17, 2023. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47880/theme-for-english-b>.

<sup>217</sup> Hughes, *Selected Poems*, 3.

<sup>218</sup> Hughes, “Theme for English B.”

<sup>219</sup> Jeff Westover, “Langston Hughes's Counterpublic Discourse,” *The Langston Hughes Review* 24 (Winter/Fall 2010/2011), 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26434683>.

The second, and also secondary voice presented through the lines written in italics (“*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark? And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*”<sup>220</sup>) arguably belongs to a faceless and nameless individual. This voice may be perceived in two different ways. On the one hand, it may represent the oppressive American system built on white supremacy which is the cause of the hypocrisy and consequently of the inaccessibility of the Black American dream. On the other hand, both the primary and secondary voice together possibly represent the inner and innate duality of African Americans in the W. E. B. Du Bois sense, as discussed above, one speaking for the African side and the other for the white side of their identity.

From this perspective, the monologue and brief dialogue are showcasing not only the external oppression of the system in terms of the access to the American dream for Black people, but also and perhaps more importantly it showcases the African American sense of being essentially torn, or even oppressive to themselves when it comes to African Americans recognizing their own value in the American society, and therefore leading to them questioning their right to have a full access to their American dream, ideally based on equality and short of hypocrisy.

Finally, it is significant that in “Let America Be America Again,” the poet skillfully captures the ultimate essence of the Dream by addressing rather explicitly, yet effectively both the romanticized and realistic idea of the American dream. For example, the idea of hard work and persistence praised by the ideology defining the American dream can be examined briefly in relation to Hughes’ “Let America Be America Again.” As already implied, one of the values characteristic for the American dream in general is determination and hard work which leads to success (see chapter 2.2.2). In this poem, Hughes also points out the irony and hypocrisy on white Americans’ part by addressing the fact that the USA had been built mainly thanks to those who are excluded and discriminated in the American nation the most. As Barack Obama says, “There is not much question that the wealth of this country, the power of this country, was built in a significant part, not exclusively and maybe not even the majority of it, but a large portion of it was built on the backs of slaves.”<sup>221</sup> As stated in “Let America Be America Again,” “Torn from black Africa’s strand I came to build a ‘homeland of the free.’”<sup>222</sup>

---

<sup>220</sup> Langston Hughes, “Let America Be America Again,” *Poetry Foundation*, accessed November 17, 2023. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147907/let-america-be-america-again>.

<sup>221</sup> President Barack Obama and Bruce Springsteen, “American Skin: Race in the United States,” *Renegade: Born in the USA*, season 1, episode 2, by Higher Ground on *Spotify* app, February 22nd, 2021, 23:14 -23:35.

<sup>222</sup> Hughes, “Let America Be America Again.”

Coming back to the possible self-doubt resulting from African Americans inner duality as addressed in the same poem, and mentioned above, the poet finally comes to the conclusion that the Black American is as worthy of having a full profit from what the country has to offer as the white American does if not more. The same goes for other marginalized groups such as the Native Americans:

The land that's mine— the poor man's, Indian's,  
Negro's, ME—  
Who made America,  
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,  
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,  
Must bring back our mighty dream again.<sup>223</sup>

Here, in the last line, Hughes refers once again to the original dream discussed earlier in this chapter in relation to “The Negro Mother.” According to Jeff Westover, this poem emphasizes “the conflict between America as a Utopian ‘dream’ of democracy and America as a country marred by the legacy of racial injustice.”<sup>224</sup> It addresses the corruption of the Dream and its inaccessibility to those who are marginalized. It showcases the hypocritical nature of the Dream’s values. Specifically the line “Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—,”<sup>225</sup> creating the emphatic alliteration, evokes, yet again, a sense of amplification as well as urgency, and highlights the naivety of this great American Paradox and myth. Finally, the commentary put in the parentheses reveals the ultimate truth: “(There’s never been equality for me, nor freedom in this ‘homeland of the free’).”<sup>226</sup>

It has been established that Langston Hughes was a key voice of the 1920s and 1930s. His poetry provided an extensive commentary on the duality and hypocrisy of the American dream as far as Black Americans and their access to it was concerned. In one of her early poems, namely “I Want to Write” (1934), Margaret Walker said, “I want to write/the songs of my people./[...] I want to frame their dreams/into words;/their souls into notes.”<sup>227</sup> Similarly to Hughes, Walker’s lines express the general feelings and motivations behind the majority of African American poets of the period of racial segregation and inequality. The following part of this chapter analyzes the work of Margaret Walker as a representative of the Black Chicago Renaissance and their view on the Black American dream.

---

<sup>223</sup> Hughes, “Let America Be America Again.”

<sup>224</sup> Westover, “Langston Hughes's Counterpublic Discourse,” 3.

<sup>225</sup> Hughes, “Let America Be America Again.”

<sup>226</sup> Hughes, “Let America Be America Again.”

<sup>227</sup> Margaret Walker, “I Want to Write,” *All Poetry*, accessed November 19, 2023. <https://allpoetry.com/I-Want-To-Write>.



Similarly to the Harlem Renaissance flourishing in 1920s and 1930s in New York City, there was a significant cultural shift happening in Chicago at the time as well. As noted by Darlene Clark Hine, “Beginning in the 1930s and lasting into the 1950s, [B]lack Chicago experienced a cultural renaissance that rivaled and, some argue, exceeded the cultural outpouring in Harlem.”<sup>228</sup> Alongside New York, Chicago became another major destination for African American migration from the South.<sup>229</sup> The Black community in Chicago grew rapidly, cultivating a deep desire for self-expression. Hine explains,

An urgency radiated throughout the Black Chicago Renaissance, an urgency to create music, literature, paintings, radio programs, magazines, photography, [...] and films that expressed black humanity, beauty, self-possession, and black people’s essential contribution to not only the local geographical community but also to the development of global communities.”<sup>230</sup>

Despite being less known, the Black Chicago Renaissance is also a key cultural movement in African American history, representing another significant platform for not only the Black community’s creative expression in its basic sense but also, and more importantly, for communicating some of the issues concerning African Americans and their rights to build a prosperous life in the USA, one of those being the limited access of the Black American dream rooted in white Americans’ hypocrisy and strong racial prejudice.

In her collection of autobiographical and literary essays, *How I Wrote Jubilee: And Other Essays on Life and Literature*, Margaret Walker writes, “When I was five, I was busy discovering my world, and it was a place of happiness and delight. Then, one day, a white child shouted ‘nigger’ [...] and I was startled. [...] I went home and asked what it meant, and my parents looked apprehensively at each other, as if to say, ‘It’s come.’”<sup>231</sup> She continues,

Then I began to daydream: It will not always be this way. Someday, just as chattel slavery ended, this injustice will also end; this internal suffering will cease; this ache inside for understanding will exist no longer. Someday, I said, when I am fully grown, [...] I will write books about colored

---

<sup>228</sup> Darlene Clark Hine and John McCluskey, introduction to *The Black Chicago Renaissance* by Darlene Clark Hine (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2012), xv.

<sup>229</sup> Hine and McCluskey, introduction to *The Black Chicago Renaissance*, xv.

<sup>230</sup> Hine and McCluskey, introduction to *The Black Chicago Renaissance*, xvi.

<sup>231</sup> Margaret Walker, *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), 3.

people who have colored faces, books that will not make me  
ashamed when I read them.<sup>232</sup>

In the preface to the 1989 edition of her poems, *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*, Walker states, “If I could write my epitaph it would read: Here lies Margaret Walker, Poet and Dreamer. She tried to make her life a Poem.”<sup>233</sup> Recognizing herself as a dreamer, Walker used her poetry to show the importance of Black people not only having dreams but also to have the opportunity to follow them and make them a reality. That way, following the example of her predecessors and contemporaries, she contributed to the Black American dream and its accessibility. When reading, for instance, her famous poem “For My People,” written between the 1930s and 1940s, the presence of Langston Hughes and his “Let America Be America Again,” seems evident.

Firstly, Walker’s “For My People” comments on the African American experience in general, opening the poem with a reflection on the time of slavery in particular. (“For my people everywhere singing their slave songs/repeatedly: [...] praying their prayers nightly to an/unknown god, bending their knees humbly to an/unseen power”<sup>234</sup>) As Stephen Vincent Benét put it, Walker’s poetry is “full of the rain and the sun that fall upon the shoulders and faces of her people, full of the bitter questioning and the answers not yet found, the pride and the disillusion and the reality.”<sup>235</sup> However, in relation to this, the poet adds,

For my people lending their strength to the years, to the  
gone years and the now years and the maybe years,  
washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending  
hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching  
dragging along never gaining never reaping never  
knowing and never understanding.<sup>236</sup>

Among other things, Walker addresses the empty promise of the Dream as far as Black Americans are concerned, that way also addressing the schizophrenic approach of American nation towards African Americans and their effort to be a part of the American dream’s potential. Despite their hard work, otherwise praised by the American society, which has also been discussed in connection to Hughes’ “Let America Be America Again,”

---

<sup>232</sup> Walker, *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature*, 4.

<sup>233</sup> Margaret Walker, preface to *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989), xi.

<sup>234</sup> Margaret Walker, *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 6.

<sup>235</sup> Walker, *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*, 4.

<sup>236</sup> Walker, *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*, 6.

the Black people's effort is not recognized, nor valued. ("Washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending/ hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching/ dragging along never gaining never reaping."<sup>237</sup>) Therefore, one comes to the conclusion that Walker amplifies the point made by Hughes in his poetic work, meaning his emphasis on the fact that the country, and the American dream belong "to all the hands who build."<sup>238</sup>

In one of her interviews, Walker admits, "As a small child in the 1920s, I was very much affected by the Harlem Renaissance. As early as age eleven, I had read poetry by Langston Hughes."<sup>239</sup> Keeping this fact in mind, the final stanza of "For My People" reads,

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a  
bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second  
generation full of courage issue forth; let a people  
loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of  
healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing  
in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs  
be written, let the dirges disappear.<sup>240</sup>

Here, the influence of Langston Hughes on Margaret Walker cannot be denied, however, her personal take on the matter signifies a shift which must be acknowledged.

Initially, when reading the poem, the first impression based on the strong presence of the word "let" evokes the similarity between this stanza and Hughes' poem already mentioned in this chapter. ("Let America be America again./ Let it be the dream it used to be./ Let it be the pioneer on the plain/ Seeking a home where he himself is free."<sup>241</sup>) However, interestingly enough, she brings the issue to another level. In other words, on the one hand, similarly to Hughes, Margaret Walker does recognize the potential of the USA. Nevertheless, on the other hand, her ideal vision of fulfilling this potential does not lie in returning back to something that allegedly used to be, but in using the nation's essence to build something fresh and new. ("Let a second/ generation full of courage issue forth; let a people/ loving freedom come to growth."<sup>242</sup>)

Apart from slavery, and the dream of those enslaved, as well as the impact of Langston Hughes and his understanding of the Black American dream, in her poetry, Walker also shares her thoughts on the turbulent 1960s and the effect this period in history

---

<sup>237</sup> Walker, *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*, 6.

<sup>238</sup> Hughes, *Selected Poems*, 291.

<sup>239</sup> William R. Ferris, "My Idol Was Langston Hughes: The Poet, the Renaissance, and their Enduring Influence," Southern Cultures, accessed November 20, 2023. <https://www.southerncultures.org/article/my-idol-was-langston-hughes-the-poet-the-renaissance-and-their-enduring-influence/>.

<sup>240</sup> Walker, *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*, 7.

<sup>241</sup> Hughes, "Let America Be America Again."

<sup>242</sup> Walker, *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*, 7.

had on the Black American dream. For instance, in her poems “At the Lincoln Monument in Washington, August 28, 1963,” “Amos, 1963,” and “Amos (Postscript, 1968)” the poet addresses the dream represented by Martin Luther King, Jr. Specifically in “Amos, 1963” Walker writes,

Preaching love and justice to the solid southern land  
Amos is a Prophet with a vision of brotherly love  
With a vision of a dream of the red hills of Georgia  
“When Justice shall roll down like water  
And Righteousness like a mighty stream.”  
Amos is our Shepherd standing in the Shadow of our God  
Tending his flocks all over the hills of Albany<sup>243</sup>

As acknowledged by Trudier Harris, Margaret Walker “recognizes King as leader and places him in the company of prophets and Biblical revelation.”<sup>244</sup> The biblical references connected with King, Jr. can also be observed in her “At the Lincoln Monument in Washington, August 28, 1963.” The poet remembers the Civil Rights protests taking place in Washington D.C. at the time, and reflects on Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speech. In this case, Walker uses the image of Moses and Aaron. The poem reads,

There they stand together, like Moses standing with  
brother Aaron;  
Whose rod is in his hand,  
The old man Moses standing with his youngest brother,  
Aaron,  
Old man with a dream he has lived to see come true.<sup>245</sup>

In addition to this, Walker uses the biblical imagery, revisiting the image of Amos, in her “Amos (Postscript, 1968).” In this particular poetic work, the poet states,

From Montgomery to Memphis he marches  
He stands on the threshold of tomorrow  
He breaks the bars of iron and they remove the signs  
He opens the gates of our prisons.  
He speaks to the captive hearts of America  
He bares raw their conscience  
He is a man of peace for the people  
Amos is a prophet of the Lord  
Amos speaks through Eternity

---

<sup>243</sup> Walker, *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*, 78.

<sup>244</sup> Trudier Harris, *Martin Luther King, Jr., Heroism, and African America Literature* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama, 2014), 53.

<sup>245</sup> Walker, *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*, 68.

The glorious word of the Lord!<sup>246</sup>

On the one hand, one interprets this piece of poetry as Walker's reaction to King's death which automatically evokes a sense of anger and frustration on the African American community's part. Nevertheless, on the other hand, it must be noted that in "Amos (Postscript, 1968)" instead of agony, the poet focuses on the social leader's legacy which then implies a hope for a new wave of opposition contributing to the overall change which would potentially mean a change in the accessibility of the American dream to Black Americans. According to Harris, "After all the declarations of what the Prophet has offered [...], the consolation comes in the form of embracing a distant immortality and a vague speaking of something that will continue."<sup>247</sup> As stated by Walker in "Five Black Men," "If they ask you why he came/ tell them he came/ to wake the conscienceless... / tell them he came/ to teach us how to dream."<sup>248</sup>

Finally, coming back to Langston Hughes and his connection to Margaret Walker, both Hughes and Walker remain hopeful and motivated to continue believing in the Dream's redemption. In "Freedom's Plow," Hughes predicts the dream of unity and community coming true, saying,

The dream becomes not one man's dream  
alone,  
But a community dream.  
Not my dream alone, but our dream.  
Not my world alone,  
But your world and my world,  
Belonging to all the hands who build.<sup>249</sup>

Walker is slightly skeptical at first, focusing on the negative association, viewing the Dream in fact as a hurtful matter rather than enriching ("For those who fell beneath the lash/ Who dies choked in the chain,/ [...] Burned thousands caught beneath the floods,/ Who died within the dream—"<sup>250</sup>), but she eventually chooses to remain a believer. In "Solace," she chooses perseverance. ("Oh no, [...] A Fighter still, I will not cease to strive/ and see beyond this thorny path a light./ I will not darken all my days/ with bitterness and fear,/ but lift my heart with faith and hope/ and dream, as always, of a brighter place."<sup>251</sup>)

---

<sup>246</sup> Walker, *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*, 79.

<sup>247</sup> Harris, *Martin Luther King, Jr., Heroism, and African America Literature*, 59-60.

<sup>248</sup> Walker, *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*, 142.

<sup>249</sup> Hughes, *Selected Poems*, 291.

<sup>250</sup> Walker, *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*, 149.

<sup>251</sup> Walker, *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*, 193.

She asks, “Where shall we march/ If not to Freedom/ And to our Promised land?”<sup>252</sup>  
Expanding on the ideas expressed in Langston Hughes’ and Margaret Walker’s poetry presented above, the following part of the thesis shifts to the next generation, examining the views on the Black American dream of Amiri Baraka and Lucille Clifton.

---

<sup>252</sup> Walker, *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*, 69.

### 2.3.2 Black Arts Movement: Amiri Baraka and Lucille Clifton

Harlem Renaissance was succeeded in the next generation(s) by the Black Arts Movement and the Black Power Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. It shared with Harlem Renaissance the focus on the community and the social and political engagement of art. As Larry Neal says, “The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. [...] As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America.”<sup>253</sup> He continues,

Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics.<sup>254</sup>

In addition to this, for the purpose of this study, it must be emphasized that these two movements also partly deny what W. E. B Du Bois suggested in terms of the need for integrating and accepting the duality of African Americans (2.2.3). In fact, despite amplifying the fact that the Black Americans’ cultural heritage is dual, the goal was to not integrate but separate the two cultures, embracing the African side fully. In Neal’s words, “The two movements postulate that there are in fact and in spirit two Americas - one black, one white. The Black artist takes this to mean that his primary duty is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people.”<sup>255</sup> This can be applied to the understanding of the Black American dream at the time as well. To support the statement, a selection of Amiri Baraka’s poems will be used as an example.

It is undeniable that Amiri Baraka, also known as LeRoi Jones, was a revolutionary character in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century American cultural history, whose legacy resonates to this day. According to Charlie Reilly, “In many ways, he made the world of letters rethink the distinction between art and politics. In many ways, he produced types of writing and modes of expression that had been barely gestured at in the history of literature.”<sup>256</sup> Among other things, his rebellious as well as radical approach to what it means to be an African

---

<sup>253</sup> Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *The Drama Review* 12, No. 4 (Summer 1968), 29. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1144377>.

<sup>254</sup> Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” 29.

<sup>255</sup> Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” 29.

<sup>256</sup> Charlie Reilly, ed. Introduction to *Conversation with Amiri Baraka* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), xiii.

American shaped the Black American community in terms of its national and cultural identity, which can be observed in his perception of the Black American dream, too.

To clarify, one of his rebellious as well as deeply symbolic acts was his move to Harlem. In relation to this, John Wideman writes,

[Baraka's] move uptown from Greenwich Village to Harlem anticipated the journey thousands of blacks were making, the great migration, pilgrimage, flight from marginal participation in the pieties of the American Dream to a greater awareness of themselves as an oppressed minority, strangers in a strange land.<sup>257</sup>

[...]

His poetry and prose created startlingly clear pockets of meaning. Against the chaos of those times, his rage, his candor, his unflinching commitment to do and say what he believed forced some of us to seek that better part of ourselves we'd sacrificed for material success.<sup>258</sup>

From this point of view, one may argue that the two movements, here represented by Amiri Baraka, in fact, opposed and refused the traditional understanding of the Black American dream as the hope for freedom and equal opportunity that is for integration as a legitimate member of the American society. Simply put, the ultimate desire to be respected and to feel a sense of belonging in those terms was to be avoided. As stated in Baraka's "Notes for a Speech,"

Strength  
in the dream, an oblique  
suckling of nerve, the wind  
throws up sand, eyes  
are something locked in  
hate, of hate, of hate, to  
walk abroad, they conduct  
their deaths apart  
from my own. Those  
heads I call my "people"  
(And who are they. People. To concern  
myself, ugly man.<sup>259</sup>

---

<sup>257</sup> John Wideman, "Amiri Baraka: The Art of Survival," *Washington Post*, accessed November 21, 2023.

<sup>258</sup> Wideman, "Amiri Baraka: The Art of Survival."

<sup>259</sup> Amiri Baraka, *SOS: Poems 1961-2013*, ed. Paul Vangelisti (New York: Grove Press, 2014), 45.



The Dream as promoted by the Black Arts Movement and Black Power Movement was one of ideally separating oneself from wanting to be American in that sense, and to instead lean in one's African side fully, almost excluding and denying the white American part of one's national and cultural identity.

As Jerry Watts put it, "Dreams of a 'free' African diaspora became more important than strategies for effecting change."<sup>260</sup> As implied above, Baraka's poetry promotes a deep sense of African pride ("African blues/ does not know me."<sup>261</sup>) As expressed in, for instance, his poem "The Pressures,"

We are beautiful people  
with African imaginations  
full of masks and dances and swelling chants  
with African eyes, and noses and arms,  
though we sprawl in grey chains in a place  
full of winters, when what we want is sun.<sup>262</sup>

Instead of focusing on the USA as the only place filled with exclusive potential, Baraka and other poets of the Black Arts Movement, such as Sonia Sanchez, encourage African Americans to embrace the richness of their African roots. In the poem, he continues,

We have been captured,  
brothers. And we labour  
to make our getaway, into  
the ancient image, into a new  
  
correspondence with ourselves  
and our black family. We need magic  
now we need the spells, to raise up.<sup>263</sup>

In fact, to Baraka, the "new" Black American dream was to escape the oppressive country which Black people were forced to call a home. In his view, the Dream is a matter of complete Black liberation, coming back, figuratively speaking, to "the ancient image, into a new/ correspondence with ourselves/ and our black family."<sup>264</sup> As Sonia Sanchez's poem called "black magic" reads, "magic/ my man/ is you/ turning/ my body into/ a thousand/ smiles./ black/ magic is your / touch/ making/ me breathe."<sup>265</sup>

---

<sup>260</sup> Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 381.

<sup>261</sup> Baraka, *SOS: Poems 1961-2013*, 45.

<sup>262</sup> Randall, ed. *The Black Poets*, 213.

<sup>263</sup> Randall, ed. *The Black Poets*, 213

<sup>264</sup> Randall, ed. *The Black Poets* 213

<sup>265</sup> Randall, ed. *The Black Poets* 233.

Taking this into account, it is relevant to say that at this point the Black American dream's meaning shifts completely. Baraka calls the American dream and what it represents an illusion, which is a notion that had been promoted by Hughes before him. But unlike Hughes, or Walker, Baraka openly proclaims it unworthy of pursuing. Ultimately, proclaiming the Dream a myth impossible to achieve for Black Americans, and therefore unworthy of their time, energy, and overall essence, he calls Black people in America the only source of real magic and potential. ("A Bad Dream, continuing into the late afternoon./ Suppose I am not a Dream. Suppose I am Real."<sup>266</sup>) To this, Watts adds, "The idea of rejecting American socioeconomic inclusion in favor of a nebulously defined black separatist future gained a great deal of rhetorical currency in this sector of the black intelligentsia."<sup>267</sup>

Therefore, it seems that the idea of the Dream shifted from the concept of the Black American dream as perceived by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century African Americans (2.2.2), or the poets of the Harlem Renaissance presented earlier in this chapter. In relation to this, making a reference to the New Negro Movement, more specifically to Langston Hughes' poetry, in his poem "Black Art," Baraka states,

We want a black poem. And a  
Black World.  
Let the world be a Black Poem  
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem  
Silently  
or LOUD.<sup>268</sup>

Similarly to Margaret Walker, as demonstrated in the part of this chapter dealing with Walker's poetry (2.3.1), Amiri Baraka also takes Hughes' famous "Let America Be America Again" line and transforms it, adjusting it to his own version of the Dream.

Interestingly enough, the progression in the meaning of this line, in all its versions, as used by the three poets, shows well the gradual shift in the meaning of the Black American dream in general. Langston Hughes believed in the country's potential and Promise given since its foundation in the Declaration of Independence. Margaret Walker, being Hughes' contemporary but also arguably to a certain extent his successor, and at the same time the predecessor of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, she is not as radical as Amiri Baraka and his desired complete exclusion of the oppressive white

---

<sup>266</sup> Baraka, *SOS: Poems 1961-2013*, 446.

<sup>267</sup> Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual*, 3.

<sup>268</sup> Randall, ed. *The Black Poets*, 224.

American society. However, she also dreams of a new place which may not be based on the African cultural heritage exclusively, but at the same time is not necessarily built on the same potential of the USA that Hughes praises.

Amiri Baraka's perspective on the Dream seems to digress from the otherwise repetitive pattern in the "evolution" of the Black American dream, but his position is certainly not universal to his generation, as we can see in the examination of the works of Lucille Clifton whose poetry was described by Toni Morrison as "seductive with the simplicity of an atom, which is to say highly complex, explosive underneath an apparent quietude."<sup>269</sup> As Charles Henry Rowell points out in the anthology of African American poetry, *Angels of Ascent*, Lucille Clifton did not necessarily subscribe to the Black Arts Movement's aesthetic.<sup>270</sup> According to Hilary Holladay, "When asked to comment on the Black Arts Movement thirty years after its inception, Clifton voiced ambivalence."<sup>271</sup>

On the one hand, she was a part of the movement, advocating for the importance of recognizing the strength in the Black Americans' oppressed African roots. As stated in "the raising of lazarus,"

the dead shall rise again  
whoever say  
dust must be dust  
don't see the trees  
smell rain  
remember africa  
everything that goes  
can come  
stand up  
even the dead shall rise<sup>272</sup>

Or in her "my dream about being white," too, having the supposedly Black speaker imagine themselves as white, then rejecting the "whiteness" and what it represents, ultimately experiencing a sense of Black liberation. The poem reads,

hey music and  
me  
only white,

---

<sup>269</sup> Lucille Clifton, preface to *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965–2010* by Toni Morrison, Kevin Young and Michael S. Glaser, ed. (New York: BOA Editions, Ltd., 2012), xxxi.

<sup>270</sup> Charles Henry Howell, ed., preface to *Angels of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), xxv.

<sup>271</sup> Hilary Holladay, *Wild Blessings: The Poetry of Lucille Clifton* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 21.

<sup>272</sup> Lucille Clifton, Kevin Young and Michael S. Glaser, ed. *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965–2010* (New York: BOA Editions, Ltd., 2012), 122.

hair a flutter of  
fall leaves  
circling my perfect  
line of a nose,  
no lips,  
no behind, hey  
white me  
and i'm wearing  
white history  
but there's no future  
in those clothes  
so i take them off and  
wake up  
dancing.<sup>273</sup>

However, on the other hand, her poetry and views presented in it, were not defined exclusively by the Movement. In Holladay's words, from Clifton's point of view, "much of the race-related rhetoric of the 1960s was an elitist construction that ignored history at its own peril. Clifton recoiled from the idea of a protest that seemed oblivious to past struggles and gains."<sup>274</sup> For that reason, instead of fully supporting the Black Arts Movement's rather radical ideology, in some of her poetry, she appears as being more inclined to the strategy used by its predecessors, particularly expressing her idea of the Black American dream in a similar manner.

For example, similarly to Langston Hughes, or Margaret Walker, Clifton does not necessarily seek a complete separation of the American dream and the Black American dream. The goal is not to reject the more "traditional" version and then to create a new dream based on the Black people's needs exclusively. Instead, in her poems, she chooses to continue addressing the duality, inaccessibility, and inequality pervading the concept as far as Black Americans are concerned, not surrendering to the oppression, that way claiming the Dream as African Americans' own, also. This is evident, for instance, in her poem "some dreams hang in the air."

In this poem, Clifton comments on the Dream from a more general point of view. Firstly, she acknowledges the complexity of both the American and Black American dream, implying that it is indeed limited and hardly accessible for the Black community. However, and perhaps more importantly, the poet emphasizes the fact that no matter what African Americans do, they cannot avoid the desire to have and achieve the Dream. In her words,

---

<sup>273</sup> Clifton, *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965–2010*, 279.

<sup>274</sup> Holladay, *Wild Blessings: The Poetry of Lucille Clifton*, 21.

you be half the time trying to  
hold them and half the time  
trying to wave them away.  
their smell be all over you and  
they get to your eyes and  
you cry.<sup>275</sup>

With American dream being a major part of the American identity, according to Clifton, it is impossible to avoid the American dream as proposed by Baraka and the Black Arts Movement since the Dream and the desire to dream is embedded in African American's identity, too. This may cause frustration, but as Lucille Clifton put it, "the fire be gone/ and the wood but some dreams/ hang in the air like smoke/ touching everything."<sup>276</sup> To pursue one's dreams through hard work, regardless of how inaccessible, is an essential part of Americans' DNA – including that of Black Americans.

Clifton is more realistic about the issue of the Black community's denial of their American side, recognizing this attempt of distancing as delusional. However, this means that it is even more important to continue being vocal about the inequality, duality and hypocrisy of the Dream. In her poem "anna speaks of the childhood of mary her daughter," the poet writes,

we rise up early and  
we work. work is the medicine  
for dreams.  
that dream  
i am having again;  
she washed in light,  
whole world bowed to its knees,  
she on a hill looking up,  
face all long tears.  
and shall i give her up  
to dreaming then? i fight this thing.

all day we scrubbing scrubbing.<sup>277</sup>

Again, amplifying the Dream's inaccessibility, in this poem, the speaker again voices the ultimate frustration as well as Black people's exploitation, and the exploitation of their dreams, which is expressed in Walker's "aunt jemima" as well. In "aunt jemima," the speaker laments, addressing the American paradox (2.1). The speaker states, "white folks

---

<sup>275</sup> Clifton, *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965–2010*, 179.

<sup>276</sup> Clifton, *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965–2010*, 179.

<sup>277</sup> Clifton, *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965–2010*, 227.

say i remind them/ of home i who have been homeless/ all my life except for their/ kitchen cabinets.”<sup>278</sup>

Incorporating the American food brand that literally exploited African Americans, specifically their enslaved ancestors, as a motif in this poem is deeply symbolic in terms of the Black American dream. Clarifying the historical and cultural connotation of “Aunt Jemina,” the Russell Evans writes,

the face used to sell the product came to embody the racist tropes in American home life of the African American female housekeeper. [...] The image [...] perpetuated the idea of the Black motherly housekeeper figure looing after a white family who was forced to see little of her own children.<sup>279</sup>

Arguably, representing an embodiment of the great American paradox, applying it specifically to the Black American dream, this symbol allows Clifton to effectively show the duality and hypocrisy of the USA as well as of the American dream in connection to the Black Americans and their unequal chances. In Clifton’s words, “the shelf on which i sit/ between the flour and cornmeal/ is thick with dreams/ oh how i long for/ my own syrup [...]/ my kitchen my family/ my home.”<sup>280</sup> Among other things, it also shows how deeply embedded, and unavoidable, the white American side is in the African American’s identity.

---

<sup>278</sup> Clifton, *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965–2010*, 640.

<sup>279</sup> Russell Evans, “Poem: ‘Aunt Jemima’ by Lucille Clifton,” *University of Plymouth*, accessed November 23, 2023. <https://blogs.plymouth.ac.uk/foahbequalitydiversityandinclusion/2022/03/11/poem-aunt-jemima-by-lucille-clifton/>.

<sup>280</sup> Clifton, *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965–2010*, 640.

### 3. Conclusion

the fact is the falling,  
the dream is the tree.<sup>281</sup>

- Lucille Clifton, “my dream about falling”

The concept of the American dream represents a major issue as far as its relation to the African American community is concerned. The Dream’s accessibility to Black people in the USA has been pondered and discussed on various levels across the nation’s history. This MA thesis provided a chronological overview of the ways in which the Black American dream has been perceived by African Americans from both conceptual and poetic perspective. The first part of the thesis demonstrated how values on which the new country was built established by Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence connect specifically to Black people and slavery. It stressed the sense of ambiguity and hypocrisy present already in the Founding Fathers’ discourse, which is crucial in understanding the following progression of both the issue of the American dream’s inaccessibility in particular and the African American experience in the USA in general. The main body of the thesis (divided into two major sections) focused on the views of the Black American dream by, on the one hand, a selected number of African American thinkers from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and, on the other hand, some of the key 20<sup>th</sup>-century African American poets.

Since the American dream is a very broad topic, the goal was to make the thesis as compact and concise but at the same time rich and illuminating as possible. Therefore, in the process of writing, several decisions had to be made. For example, in spite of the fact that the conceptual part of this thesis covers the African American intellectuals’ views from the beginning of the history of the USA, specifically the 18<sup>th</sup> century, till the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has been decided that the poetic part deals with the 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry only. Again, in order to provide a concise analysis of the representation of the American dream in African American poetry, it seemed relevant to use poetry of the more recent period since it arguably provides a reflection encompassing the legacy of all the preceding centuries which implies its potency and cogency.

In addition, speaking of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry chosen for this part, a certain omission must be acknowledged here, too. The poetic interpretation of the issue provided

---

<sup>281</sup> Clifton, *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965–2010*, 282.

in chapter 2.3 follows the cultural and social movements crucial in the evolution of African American poetry and its perception of the Black American dream. The chapter has been divided into two parts, dealing with the poetry of the Harlem and Chicago Renaissance, represented by Langston Hughes and Margaret Walker, followed by the analysis of the poetry composed by the poets of the Black Arts Movement generation, specifically Amiri Baraka and Lucille Clifton.

The study ends with a commentary on the views expressed by the Black Arts Movement for the following reason: The Black Arts Movement poets may be perceived as the last generation of African American poets who are no longer alive and actively writing, which makes the poetry easier to classify and study, providing a space already established and set. This corresponds with the choice to also not include the 21<sup>st</sup> century in neither the conceptual nor the poetic part. The post-Black Arts Movement poetic work, including the contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century is still in the process of evolving, since some of the poets who have started composing in the late 1970s and 1980s are active to this day. While there has been some critical discussion of this most recent period already, the lack of stability and distance in terms of time makes the contemporary poetry arguably not ripe enough to be studied effectively just yet as far as this thesis is concerned.

That does not imply that the period from approximately the 1980s to the present is insignificant. On the contrary, the thesis recognizes its potential and importance as a new wave which should be examined by students, critics and scholars in the future. In this sense, this MA thesis could serve as a point of reference and a foundation for further and more thorough research. Hopefully, this thesis could also serve as an encouragement for future students to build on its conclusions and examine the fascinating issue of the Black American dream analyzing more contemporary material. However, based on the results of this particular thesis and the analysis provided in it, it appears as very likely that the outcome will be similar if not the same because it has been proved that regardless of any possible temporary digression and seeming improvement, the pattern of inaccessibility, and frustration resulting from it, remains.

As far as the theory is concerned, in chapter 2.1 and 2.2, the duality, hypocrisy and its opposition proved to be a constant pervading the nation's history. To summarize the poetic response to the Black American dream and its development, an intriguing progress has been noted. The very meaning of the American dream to Black Americans shifted multiple times. The common thread found in the poetry of all the poets included in this



thesis lies in the recognition that the Dream at its core is an illusion; a myth. However, each poet approaches the myth from a different perspective and at various levels.

Langston Hughes sees the myth as an illusion rooted in a great potential long forgotten and in a desperate need of revival. His poetry shows anger and frustration, but at the same time hope and perhaps even a sense of naivety. He condemns the racial injustice imposed on him and his community, but still hopes for a change which, in his eyes, can come when remembering and fighting for the country's original Promise. On the one hand, Hughes addresses the duality and hypocrisy of his country in his poetry. On the other hand, knowing the seriousness of the situation and the source of the problem, he hopes that it can be changed even though the hypocrisy is the Promise's inherent quality.

Margaret Walker is much more skeptical and perhaps realistic in her approach to the Black American dream. She addresses the empty Promise as well as its schizophrenic nature. She acknowledges the hidden potential of the USA but refuses to stay in the past, following the version which never proved itself effective. According to Walker, the Black American dream can only bloom if its essence is used to create something completely new and fresh. Interestingly enough, being both Hughes' contemporary and the predecessor of the Black Arts Movement, her poetry is to a certain extent a combination of the two. She chooses to be a believer in the potential of the American dream, but also dreams of a new space which is not built the same way that Hughes promotes. She is not as radical as Amiri Baraka, however, she foreshadows the more radical shift happening at the time of the Black Arts Movement, and in Amiri Baraka's poetry.

In the context of this thesis, the poetry of Amiri Baraka represents the major and most radical change in the Black people's understanding of the American dream and their role in it. He proclaims the potential not worth following at all. Baraka expands on the awareness demonstrated by Walker's poems, and transforms it into the desire for deliberate detachment from the American dream and what it represented and promoted thus far. His vision and dream was that of a complete separation, becoming not only independent of the Dream and its empty Promise, but also and perhaps more importantly of the white American part of one's African American identity. The goal was to consciously deny that part and embrace one's African side fully. That way he, for example, also denied what W. E. B. Du Bois preached with his "double consciousness" and the need to be able to fully embrace and integrate both sides of the African American cultural identity. Baraka's Dream is based on the radical exclusion, and segregation, in reverse. Nevertheless, despite its radical character, it proves to be only a momentary digression.

Baraka's contemporary, Lucille Clifton, serves as a proof that, similarly to the conceptual part and its full circle moment of coming back to the original Dream of freedom, those poets writing outside the Black Arts Movement and Black Power Movement aesthetic deal with the same desire and frustration as those of the preceding generations. Clifton partially contributed to the aesthetic mentioned above, but similarly to Walker, her final approach to the Black American dream was much more realistic. In her poetry, she comes to the understanding that it is hardly possible to be in such a denial as called for by Amiri Baraka. In her opinion, the separation from both white American heritage in the African Americans blood and identity is unrealistic, and, therefore, she embraces the frustration that she is left with and continues being vocal about the inequality, duality and hypocrisy of the Dream as done by the previous generation.

Judging by the notions, ideas, and facts presented in both the conceptual and poetic section, it is obvious that the Black American dream and its inaccessibility, based fundamentally on the hypocrisy and duality of the American nation and its values, is a problem with, at this stage, no solution. The main question pervading the American and African American history was still relevant towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is relevant to this day. What does it take for the vicious circle, the pattern, to be finally broken? One assumes that the ultimate answer lies truly in James Baldwin words and his belief that for a real and permanent change to happen, as far as the Black people's place and their right to pursue their happiness in the USA are concerned, the oppressive white supremacy must recognize the unhealed parts of their own national heritage and identity, and embrace those parts with an open heart. Only then can that very heart be open to their African American brothers and sisters.

#### 4. Bibliography

- Andrews, William L., ed. *Frederick Douglass Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Baida, Peter. "The Business of America." *American Heritage* 39, No. 4 (May/June 1988). Accessed ONLINE. <https://www.americanheritage.com/consider-self-made-man>.
- Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Vintage International, 1993.
- Baldwin, James. "The Highroad of Destiny." In C. Eric Lincoln, ed., *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Profile* New York: Hill and Wang, 1970.
- Baldwin, James. "Letter to the Bishop" *New Statesman* (23 August 1985).
- Banneker, Benjamin. "Letter to Thomas Jefferson." (August 19, 1791) Accessed ONLINE July 11, 2023. <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/curriculum/2-declaration-and-african-american-history>.
- Baraka, Amiri. *SOS: Poems 1961-2013*. Ed. Paul Vangelisti. New York: Grove Press, 2014.
- Bogin, Ruth. "'Liberty Further Extended': A 1776 Antislavery Manuscript by Lemuel Haynes." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 40, No. 1 (January 1983), 85-105. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1919529>.
- Bouie, Jamelle. "America Had More Than One Founding and More Than One Set of Founders." *New York Times*. Accessed September 5, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/04/opinion/declaration-independence-antislavery-movement.html>.
- Brown, Nikki L. M. and Barry M. Stentiford, ed. *The Jim Crow Encyclopedia*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008.
- Byrd, Brandon R. "The Rise of African American Intellectual History." *Modern Intellectual History* 18, no. 3 (2021), 833–864. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244320000219>.
- Censky, Abigail. "'What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?' Frederick Douglass, Revisited." *National Public Radio*. Accessed October 13, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2017/07/05/535624532/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july-frederick-douglass-revisited>.
- Chapman, Abraham. "The Harlem Renaissance in Literary History." *CLA Journal* 11, No. 1 (September 1967), 38-58. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44328230>.
- Civantos, Christina. *Jamón and Halal: Lessons in Tolerance from Rural Andalucía*. Massachusetts: Amherst College Press, 2022. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.12404742.6>.

- Clifton, Lucille. Preface to *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965–2010* by Toni Morrison, Kevin Young and Michael S. Glaser, ed. x-xiv. New York: BOA Editions, Ltd., 2012.
- Clifton, Lucille. *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965–2010*. Kevin Young and Michael S. Glaser, ed. New York: BOA Editions, Ltd., 2012.
- Collins, Donald Earl. "Plantation Slavery, the First American Dream." *Aljazeera.com*. Accessed June 17, 2023.  
<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/8/29/plantation-slavery-the-first-american-dream>.
- Cullen, Jim. *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Darnton, Robert. "The Pursuit of Happiness." *The Wilson Quarterly* 19, No. 4 (Autumn 1995), 42-52. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40259050>.
- Davis, David Brion. *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*. New York: Ithaca, 1975.
- Douglass, Frederick. "What to Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852) Accessed ONLINE.  
<https://loveman.sdsu.edu/docs/1852FrederickDouglass.pdf>.
- Douglass, Frederick. "What to Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852) Accessed ONLINE.  
[https://masshumanities.org/files/programs/douglass/speech\\_abridged\\_med.pdf](https://masshumanities.org/files/programs/douglass/speech_abridged_med.pdf).
- Douglass, Frederick and Harriet Jacobs. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, and American Slave; Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. New York: Modern Library Classics, 2004.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Signet Classic, 1995.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. Introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk*. By Randall Kenan, xxxi-xl. New York: Signet Classic, 1995.
- Evans, Russell. "Poem: 'Aunt Jemima' by Lucille Clifton," *University of Plymouth*, accessed November 23, 2023.  
<https://blogs.plymouth.ac.uk/foahbequalitydiversityandinclusion/2022/03/11/poem-aunt-jemima-by-lucille-clifton/>.
- Ferris, William R. "My Idol Was Langston Hughes: The Poet, the Renaissance, and their Enduring Influence." *Southern Cultures*. Accessed November 20, 2023.  
<https://www.southerncultures.org/article/my-idol-was-langston-hughes-the-poet-the-renaissance-and-their-enduring-influence/>.
- Finkelman, Paul. Preface to *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson* by Paul Finkelman, ix-xi. New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996.

- Fischer, David Hackett. "African Thinkers: The Black Thinkers Who Shaped the U.S." Interview by Olivia B. Waxman. *Time*, June 1, 2022. <https://time.com/6183265/americas-african-founders-history/>.
- Freehling, William W. "The Founding Fathers and Slavery." *The American Historical Review* 77, No. 1 (February 1972), 81-93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1856595>.
- Harris, Trudier. *Martin Luther King, Jr., Heroism, and African America Literature*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama, 2014.
- Haynes, Lemuel. "Liberty Further Extended: Or Free Thoughts on the Illegality of Slave-Keeping." (1776) Accessed ONLINE July 10th, 2023. [http://storage.gilderlehrman.org/dec250/Lemuel%20Haynes,%20Liberty%20Further%20Extended%20\(1776\).pdf](http://storage.gilderlehrman.org/dec250/Lemuel%20Haynes,%20Liberty%20Further%20Extended%20(1776).pdf).
- Hine, Darlene Clark and John McCluskey. Introduction to *The Black Chicago Renaissance* by Darlene Clark Hine, xv-xxix. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2012.
- Hochschild, Jennifer L. *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*. New Jersey: University of Princeton, 1995.
- Holladay, Hilary. *Wild Blessings: The Poetry of Lucille Clifton*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004.
- Howell, Charles Henry, ed. Preface to *Angels of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*. By Charles Henry Rowell. xxiii-xxvii. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013.
- Hughes, Langston. *Selected Poems*. London: Serpent's Tail, 2020.
- Hughes, Langston. "I, Too." *Poetry Foundation*. Accessed November 15, 2023. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47558/i-too>.
- Hughes, Langston. "Let America Be America Again." *Poetry Foundation*. Accessed November 17, 2023. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147907/let-america-be-america-again>.
- Hughes, Langston. "Theme for English B." *Poetry Foundation*. Accessed November 17, 2023. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47880/theme-for-english-b>.
- Jefferson, Thomas. *Declaration of Independence*. *Archive.org*. Accessed ONLINE on June 2nd, 2023. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.
- Johnson, Samuel. *Taxation No Tyranny: an Answer to the Resolutions and Address of the American Congress*. London: Printed for T. Cadell, 1775.
- Kakutani, Michiko. "The Lasting Power of Dr. King's Dream Speech." *The New York Times*. Accessed October 15, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/28/us/the-lasting-power-of-dr-kings-dream-speech.html>.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. *A Testament of Hope*. Ed. James Melvin Washington. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Loving Your Enemies." Accessed ONLINE

- <https://greenwichpres.org/mt-content/uploads/2022/03/mlk-loving-your-enemies.pdf>.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Power for Powerless." (1966) Accessed ONLINE <https://www.crmvet.org/info/mlkpower.htm>.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Strength to Love*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. "The Negro and the American Dream." (1960) Accessed ONLINE October 21, 2023. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/negro-and-american-dream-excerpt-address-annual-freedom-mass-meeting-north>.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. "The Other America." (1967) Accessed ONLINE <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/the-other-america-speech-transcript-martin-luther-king-jr>.
- Komunyakaa, Yusef. "Langston Hughes + Poetry = The Blue." *Callaloo* 25, No. 4 (Autumn 2002), 1140-1143. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3300276>.
- Langham, Jaida and Alyssa McCants "Let's Talk About Secular Folk Music." *Black Music Scholar*. Accessed November 18, 2023. <https://blackmusic scholar.com/lets-talk-about-secular-folk-music/>.
- Leverenz, David. "Frederick Douglass's Self-Refashioning." *Criticism* 29, No. 3 (Summer 1987), 341-370. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23110412>.
- Levy, Andrew. "Frederick Douglass, Benjamin Franklin, and the Trickster Reader." *College English* 52, No. 7 (November 1990), 743-755. <https://doi.org/10.2307/377630>.
- Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*. January 6, 2004. Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/10615/10615-h/10615-h.htm>.
- Locke, John. *Second Treatise of Government*. January 2005), Early Modern Texts. <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/locke1689a.pdf>.
- MacKethan, Lucinda H. "From Fugitive Slave to Man of Letters: The Conversion of Frederick Douglass." *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 16, No. 1 (Winter 1986), 55-71. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30225133>.
- Maloy, Mark. "The Founding Fathers Views on Slavery." *Battlefields.org*. Accessed May 28, 2023. <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/founding-fathers-views-slavery>.
- Matlack, James. "The Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass." *Phylon* 40, No. 1 (1979), 15-28. <https://doi.org/10.2307/274419>.
- Mernit, Susan. "A Question of Vision." *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 60, No. 2 (Spring 1984), 1-5. <https://www.vqronline.org/question-vision>.
- Michals, Debra. "Madam C. J. Walker." *National Women's History Museum*. Accessed October 16, 2023.

<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/madam-cj-walker>.

Mieder, Wolfgang. *Proverbs Are The Best Policy: Folk Wisdom And American Politics* Louisville: University Press of Colorado, 2005.

Mintz, Steven. "Historical Context: Was Slavery the Engine of American Economic Growth?" *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*. Accessed on June 15, 2023.  
<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/teaching-resource/historical-context-was-slavery-engine-american-economic-growth>.

Morgan, Edmund S. "Slavery and Freedom: The Great American Paradox." *The Journal of American History* 59, No. 1 (June 1972), 5-29. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1888384>.

Neal, Larry. "The Black Arts Movement." *The Drama Review* 12, No. 4 (Summer 1968), 28-39. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1144377>.

Obama, Barack and Bruce Springsteen. "American Skin: Race in the United States." *Renegade: Born in the USA*. Season 1, episode 2. By Higher Ground on *Spotify* app, February 22nd, 2021.

Poole, Thomas G. "What Country Have I? Nineteenth-Century African-American Theological Critiques of the Nation's Birth and Destiny." *The Journal of Religion*, 72, No. 4 (October 1992), 533-548. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1204618>.

Presley, James. "The American Dream of Langston Hughes." *Southwest Review* 48, no. 4 (Autumn 1963), 380-386. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43467552>.

Rakove, Jack. "How the Meaning of the Declaration of Independence Changed Over Time." Interview by Mellisa de Witte. *Stanford News*, July 1, 2020.  
<https://news.stanford.edu/2020/07/01/meaning-declaration-independence-changed-time/>.

Ramey, Lauri. *A History of African American Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Randall, Dudley, ed. *The Black Poets*. New York: Bantam Books, 1985.

Randall, Dudley, ed. Introduction to *The Black Poets* by Dudley Randall. xxiii-xxvi. New York: Bantam Books, 1985.

Ray, Angela G. "'In My Own Hand Writing': Benjamin Banneker Addresses the Slaveholder of Monticello." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 1, No. 3 (Fall 1998), 387-405. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41939460>.

Reilly, Charlie, ed. Introduction to *Conversation with Amiri Baraka*. ix-xviii. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.

Rojas, Nikki. "How Black Thinkers Wrestled with Founding U.S. Values amid Slavery." *The Harvard Gazette*. Accessed October 12, 2023.

<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/10/how-black-thinkers-wrestled-with-founding-u-s-values-amid-slavery/>.

Salaam, Kalamu Ya. "Langston Hughes: A Poet Supreme" in *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*, 17-24. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999.

Sandefur, Timothy. "Frederick Douglass and the American Dream." *Caro Journal*. Accessed October 5, 2023. <https://www.cato.org/cato-journal/winter-2020/frederick-douglass-american-dream>.

Sims, Shelia Cunningham. "Classroom Uses of Langston Hughes' Poetry." *The Langston Hughes Review* 14, No. 1/2 (Spring/Fall 1996): 94-96. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26434506>.

Thomas, Brian W. "Struggling With the Past: Some Views of African-American Identity Struggle of the Past." *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 6, no. 2 (June 2002), 143-151. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20852996>.

Trent, Noelle N. "Frederick Douglass: An Example for the Twenty-First Century." In *Frederick Douglass: A Life in Documents*. Ed. James G. Basker. 70-73. New York: The Gilder Lehrman Institute, 2018.

Vanneman, Reeve and Lynn Weber Cannon. *The American Perception of Class*. The Temple University Press, 1987. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv941wv0>.

Walker, Margaret. *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1990.

Walker, Margaret. "I Want to Write." *All Poetry*. Accessed November 19, 2023. <https://allpoetry.com/I-Want-To-Write>.

Walker, Margaret. Preface to *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*. xi-xvii. Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989.

Walker, Margaret. *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*. Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989.

Wallenfeldt, Jeff. and Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Niagara Movement." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Accessed ONLINE October 18, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Niagara-Movement>.

Washington, James Melvin. Introduction to *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, by James Melvin Washington, xi-xxvii. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986.

Watts, Jerry Gafio. *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

Westover, Jeff. "Langston Hughes's Counterpublic Discourse." *The Langston Hughes Review* 24 (Winter/Fall 2010/2011), 2-19. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26434683>.



- Wideman, John. "Amiri Baraka: The Art of Survival." *Washington Post*. Accessed November 21, 2023.
- Williams, Paul. "White Rain and the Black Atlantic." In *Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War: Representations of Nuclear Weapons and Post-Apocalyptic Worlds*, 147-179. Liverpool University Press, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5vjdcf>.
- Williams, Ray. "The American Myth of the 'Self-made Man,' the American Dream and Meritocracy." *Ray Williams*. Accessed October 19, 2023. <https://raywilliams.ca/the-american-myths-of-the-self-made-man-the-american-dream-and-meritocracy/>.
- Williams, Yohuru. "Why Thomas Jefferson's Anti-Slavery Passage Was Removed from the Declaration of Independence." *History.com*. Accessed May 27, 2023. <https://www.history.com/news/declaration-of-independence-deleted-anti-slavery-clause-jefferson>.
- Wilsey, John D. "Which American Dream?" *Intercollegiate Studies Institute*. Accessed October 18, 2023. <https://isi.org/modern-age/which-american-dream/>.
- Yeung, Suet Yuk (Rainie) Au. "Douglass as a Self-made Man." *American Icons*. Accessed October 15, 2023. <https://sites.temple.edu/americanicons/tag/self-made-man/>.
- "A Plea to End Slavery: The Essay of 'Vox Africanorum.'" *The American Revolution Institute*. Accessed September 14, 2023. <https://www.americanrevolutioninstitute.org/lesson-plans/revolution-on-paper/vox-africanorum/>.
- "Black Americans and the Vote." *National Archives*. Accessed October 22, 2023. <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/vote>.
- "Correspondence between Benjamin Banneker and Thomas Jefferson, 1791," *Bill of Rights Institute*, accessed September 16, 2023. <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/activities/correspondence-between-benjamin-banneker-and-thomas-jefferson-1791>.
- "Declaration of Independence Deleted Passage, 1776." *University of Washington*. Accessed June 10, 2023. <https://ischool.uw.edu/podcasts/dtctw/declaration-independence-deleted-passage>.
- "From Slavery to Segregation." 6-19. From *Segregation in America* (Equal Justice Initiative, 2018) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep30692.4>.
- "Hiram Revels: A Featured Biography." *United States Senate*. Accessed October 20, 2023. [https://www.senate.gov/senators/FeaturedBios/Featured\\_Bio\\_Revels.htm](https://www.senate.gov/senators/FeaturedBios/Featured_Bio_Revels.htm).
- "John Locke." *Pursuit of Happiness*. Accessed September 13, 2023. <https://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/john-locke/>.

- “The Constitution and Slavery.” *Teach Democracy*. Accessed October 11, 2023. <https://www.crf-usa.org/black-history-month/the-constitution-and-slavery>.
- “The Declaration of African American History.” *Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*. Accessed ONLINE on July 16, 2023. <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/curriculum/2-declaration-and-african-american-history>.
- “Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: A Brief Account.” *Monticello.org*. Accessed June 2, 2023. <https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/jefferson-slavery/thomas-jefferson-and-sally-hemings-a-brief-account/>.
- “Vox Africonarum.” “Letter to the Maryland Gazette.” (May 15, 1783) Accessed ONLINE on July 14, 2023. <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/curriculum/2-declaration-and-african-american-history>.
- The deleted passage of the *Declaration of Independence*, 1776. Accessed ONLINE on June 13, 2023. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/declaration-independence-and-debate-over-slavery/>.