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Robert E. Weems. *Desegregating the Dollar: African-American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century.* New York: New York University Press, 1998. x + 195 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-81479-290-1, $18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-9327-5.

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"Purchase Power"?: The False Promise of African-American Consumerism

What is "purchase power"? Can people be empowered by their ability to consume material goods in free market economy? Robert Weems explores these questions in his new book, *Desegregating the Dollar: African-American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century*. Historically, racial discrimination and limited economic resources constricted black Americans' ability to participate in America's consumer-driven society. In the early twentieth century, African-Americans were not only discriminated against as consumers but were often the objects of ridicule in advertisements that employed negative, racist stereotypes to sell products to whites. For these reasons, African-Americans have often approached the consumer marketplace with skepticism, trepidation, and anger. It is no coincidence, as Weems and others have pointed out, that the modern Civil Rights movement pivoted on a consumption axis. Both the 1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott and the 1960 Greensboro, North Carolina Sit-In campaign, the first major "grassroots" campaigns to end segregation, revolved around the issue of the rights of black Americans to be treated equally in the consumer marketplace.

Weems explains at the outset that his book is a "panoramic survey" of African-American consumerism in twentieth-century America. This objective is both the strength and the weakness of the book overall. The survey framework succeeds in giving readers a broad overview of central issues that should be considered when exploring the history of African-American consumer practices. For example, Weems illustrates quite clearly how the Great Migration of blacks from the rural South to the urban North dramatically altered their status as consumers. Once in the urban North, many African-Americans found not only better jobs and stronger incomes but more goods to purchase. Urbanization also gave blacks more opportunities to build professional organizations and networks that could promote their needs as consumers. In Chapter Three, "New World A-Coming: Black Consumers, 1941-1960," Weems describes an impressive array of black organizations such as the Interstate United Newspapers, Inc., a consortium of African-American newspapers founded in 1940; the National Negro Network, Inc., a consortium of "Negro-appeal" radio stations founded in 1954; and the National Association of Market Developers, a professional association of "Negro market" specialists who worked within major white-owned corporations. These groups all worked to sensitize corporate America to the needs of black American consumers. Weems' overview of these groups suggests the need for a much larger study on the history of black professionalization in the twentieth century.

The weakness of Weems' "panoramic survey" is that no one topic is explored in much depth. Given the richness of the subject matter, this problem is a significant one–especially for readers who are looking for details and previously "untold tales." For instance, in his discussion of black pioneers in corporate America, Weems mentions James A. "Billboard" Jackson and Harvey Russell. Jackson joined Esso Standard Oil in 1937 and by the mid-1940s became the first black member of the American Marketing Society. Russell worked at the Pepsi-Cola Company in the 1950s and became the first African-American to be named vice-president of a multinational corporation. Weems acknowledges the accomplishments of these individuals, but never gives the reader a vivid sense of who they were and what motivated them. Any

anecdotes about the struggles they must have faced as the first prominent African-Americans at their respective companies would have added another dimension to the story.

The latter half of the book describes a "tale of two markets" as African-Americans have become increasingly divided by class differences throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Middle-class and upper middle-class blacks have been able to move into suburban America to partake in its consumer landscape of strip and mega-malls, while the urban poor have been left behind. Weems explains this outcome by arguing that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ultimately benefited white-owned businesses more than black consumers. Weems offers a case study of blaxploitation film both in the 1970s and 1990s as evidence for this argument. Blaxploitation films, which glamorize inner-city criminal life and drug culture, reap large profits for the white-owned movie studios that produce them. Black Americans, on the other hand, can only consume the films and are often shut out of economically powerful positions in the film industry. The blaxploitation argument is a valid one, but one that also leaves the reader with a larger question: is the history of African-American consumerism complete without a complementary history of African-Americans' role as producers or business-owners? Weems' conclusion leads to this point as he writes that "[a] truly free people possesses the power to produce, as well as consume." Overall, *Desegregating the Dollar* presents a useful overview of African-American consumerism in the twentieth century, but also raises more questions about race and economic empowerment than it can fully answer. The book should inspire others, however, to further study.

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