



**MONTCLAIR STATE**  
UNIVERSITY

Montclair State University  
**Montclair State University Digital  
Commons**

---

Department of Teaching and Learning  
Scholarship and Creative Works

Department of Teaching and Learning

---

4-7-2020

## Their American Dream

Danne Davis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/teaching-learning-facpubs>



Part of the Africana Studies Commons, African Languages and Societies Commons, Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons, Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Elementary Education and Teaching Commons, Humane Education Commons, Liberal Studies Commons, Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons, and the Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons

---

Essay

# Their American Dream

Danné E. Davis <sup>†</sup>

Department of Teaching and Learning, College of Education and Human Services, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ 07043, USA; davisd@montclair.edu

<sup>†</sup> Pseudonyms are used to respect the privacy of the author's family and neighbors.

Received: 4 February 2020; Accepted: 1 April 2020; Published: 7 April 2020



**Abstract:** Centuries before W.E.B. DuBois named the colorline—i.e., racism—as the problem of the 20th century, skin color stratification was a persistent phenomenon. In 1983 Black feminist, scholar, and Pulitzer Prize winning author Alice Walker termed “colorism” as “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their [skin] color”. Using the tools of genealogy, I conducted a critical family history of my parents, Lem and Mae’s, pursuit of *their* American Dream. Such exploration digs deep to decipher the nexuses of a family’s evolution. Dr. Maya Angelou routinely shared stories about her past to impart the importance of embracing one’s history. For my parents, the American Dream meant opportunity, which included home ownership. Their American Dream began as African Americans in the United States’ Jim Crow south. Lem was a light-skinned man; Mae a dark-complexion woman. They met, married, and bought a small home in segregated Columbia, South Carolina. Bearing the cloak of oppression, my parents joined millions of southern Blacks in the Great Migration relocating to northern cities—my parents landed in Boston, Massachusetts. Throughout their journey, Lem and Mae reached back to their ancestors, and drew from within themselves to improve their circumstances.

**Keywords:** colorism; Jim Crow; critical family history

---

## 1. Critical Family History

My small family has a rich history. Yet, it took adulthood for me to appreciate that history, cultivated during my tween-year summer vacations “down south”. The visits to South Carolina brought to life heirlooms, traditions and differently hued people in family photographs. Each trip created an opportunity for me to dissect and reexamine my parents’ many conversations around our kitchen table “up north”. With my father now deceased and my mother’s memories fading, this moment is a fitting time to investigate my origin story.

Critical family history is an innovative approach to genealogical storytelling. Through historical research on ancestral bloodlines, genealogists work to feature family origin stories (Bevir 2008). Critical family history digs deep to decipher the nexuses of family evolution. Conceived by the editor of this volume, Sleeter (2016) defines critical family history as the “interrogat[ion of] the interaction between family and context, with a particular focus on power relationships among sociocultural groups” (19). Not ignoring but rather paying attention to the confluence of context and sociocultural happenings upon a family is essential when performing critical family history research. This essay documents my initial venture into critical family history. The United States (U.S.) 20th century segregated south amid the sociocultural phenomenon of colorism shapes my discussion.

## 2. Colorism

Centuries before W.E.B. DuBois named the colorline—i.e., racism—as the problem of the 20th century, skin color stratification was a persistent phenomenon. During the U.S. antebellum, White

European oppressors routinely used skin color to stratify enslaved Black people of African descent. Because anyone born on the African continent is technically African, Black functions as a modifier to differentiate from White people with Anglo/European ancestry. Involuntary servitude—i.e., slavery—was nearly synonymous with being African, especially for someone with dark skin complexion (Norwood 2015). Modern day examples of high-profile people with dark skin include Viola Davis, Idris Elba, Kevin Hart and Lupita Nyong'o, although non-celebrities such as me also have an abundance of melanin<sup>1</sup>. Dark-skinned Africans typically display certain phenotypic characteristics of dark hair color, Type 4 dense, tight curly hair pattern with coarse texture, broad nose, and thick lips (Norwood). Dark skin meant African and consequently, African equated undesirable, demeaned, and deprived. Much of White society—and lighter skin Blacks over the generations—held contempt for the difference. Yet, today's billion-dollar face and body manipulation industry signals a 21st-century hunger for the cultural exoticism of the Black African phenotype. Peculiarly, the contemporary demand is for an aesthetic linked to a people whose appearance centuries ago, generated indescribable abuse, unspeakable cruelty, and the harshest tasks. It is well documented that during the antebellum, people with the greatest melanin performed grueling fieldwork, farming, constructing, and blacksmithing (Dickerson 2005).

Conversely, so-called light-skinned enslaved Blacks were customarily favored in their work assignments and personal treatment. Their light skin, usual fine hair texture and wavy tresses garnered White acceptance because of the visual and actual resemblance to European identity. Light-skinned Blacks' brighter skin complexion resulted from miscegenation. The routinely forced sexual relations between people of African descent and their oppressors created new racial classifications that included mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon (Prewitt 2005). Present day examples of well-known people with light skin are Blake Griffin, Raven Symone, Vanessa Williams and Terrence Howard. Given the racial classifications' connections to slavery, it is offensive to describe people with these terms, especially in the U.S. Consider the recent sentiment of Mat Johnson:

I grew up a [B]lack boy who looked like a [W]hite one. The contrast between “blackness” and how I looked was so stark that I often found myself sifting through archaic, pre-20th-century African-American racial definitions to find a word that fit me. *Mulatto*, 50 percent African. *Quadroon*, 25 percent African. *Octoroon*, 12.5 percent African. The next stop down, at 6.25 percent African, was *mustefino*. I'd never heard anyone call himself mustefino, and I didn't want to personally relaunch that brand. (Johnson 2015)

Despite the abolishment of slavery throughout the U.S. in 1865, skin color hierarchy prevailed. Akin to what Alexander (2020) dubs “a racial caste system,” (p. 12) a person's skin hue routinely determined their level of privilege or subjugation. The identity politics associated with skin color remains an intense reality for many people, especially within the African American community. The contention reduces people to question the disappearance of civility—“Are we that messed up over skin-color?” (Brewington 2013, p. 101). Whether a person is irrefutably of African descent or prefers to pass as another ethnicity, identity related to skin color complexion remains a sensitive topic. One way to lessen skin color politics is to refer to people by their name rather than their skin tone.

Colorism has become the moniker for today's skin shade hierarchy. Black feminist, scholar, and Pulitzer Prize winning author Alice Walker is acknowledged as coining and first using the term colorism. In *Search of our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker (1984) defines colorism as “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their [skin] color” (p. 291). It is also considered skin tone preference (Greenidge 2019; Hunter 2002) with Knight (2015) narrowing the focus to an inclination for lighter skin color. Russell, Willson, and Hall (Russell et al. 1993) refer to a “color-complex ... [as]

<sup>1</sup> Melanin is a biochrome (pigment) that protects the skin from harmful ultraviolet rays. People who biologically produce more of it have darker skin, hair, and eye color. Oxford English Dictionary <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.montclair.edu/view/Entry/116022>.

a psychological fixation about the color and features that lead Blacks to discriminate against each other" (p. 2). Russell et al. further contend that color partialities influence romantic interests, including "dark-skinned women who aggressively pursue Black men who are lighter" (p. 115) as I discovered about my mother. Sometimes loving hearts bleed red, other times longing eyes are drawn to shades of brown and black.

Likely undergirding the skin color caste system during the antebellum is White supremacy. More than simply elevating whiteness, Saad (2020) defines white supremacy as an ideology whereby White people and their culture dominate societal laws, values, and customs. White supremacy means, "White equals better, superior, more worthy, more credible, more deserving, and more valuable" (What is White Supremacy? Paragraph 3). Moreover, persons born from miscegenation frequently garnered deferential treatment as their White parent's offspring. To varying degrees, their phenotype of nose, lips and hair texture more resembled White European head characteristics than Black Africans. After "1667 . . . the legal status of Africans became tied to skin color" (Norwood 2015, p. 592). Freed light complexion people were advantaged entering the Reconstruction era. Greatly based on appearance mulattos, quadroons and octoroons garnered "more property, wealth, education, employment skills, and knowledge of the etiquette and culture of Whites . . . than their darker-skin peers" (p. 255). "From 1790 to 1990, the nation's demographic base changed from one decennial census to the next, and so too did the racial categories . . ." (p. 5). The 1850 enumeration recorded mulatto for the first time but ceased using the classification in the 1930 Census. By my 1963 birth year, the city of Boston listed my race as "colored" on my birth certificate. In the 21st century, much of the world may see me as a dark-skinned African American. Instead, I identify by my name and as a woman irrefutably African and unapologetically Black. Researching for this critical family history instills a better sense of self. Moreover, the examination helps me to better appreciate my parents' efforts towards self-determination—naming, defining, and shaping their lives on their terms.

### 3. Family Talks and The Docs

As a genealogical exercise, critical family history research "uses tools of genealogy" (Christine Sleeter, "Calls for Papers about Critical Family History", email, 2019. Personal Communication 4 2019). On her webpage <https://www.christinesleeter.org/critical-family-history>, Sleeter provides links to resources along with helpful advice. Of these suggestions, my methods involved several semi-structured face-to-face and telephonic oral history interviews. Interviewees included my living immediate family members—mother Mae born in 1929 and brother Chris born 4 July 1954. I showed them family photographs to activate their memories. When my father Lem died in 1999, the funeral director requested a Presidential Memorial Certificate (PMC). The PMC is a gold-embossed paper certificate commemorating military service. Always signed by the sitting president at the time of the request, Lem's PMC has the signature of 42nd U.S. president William J. Clinton. This primary artifact notes Lem's Army enlistment. A distant relative, Lorna, who knew my mother around the time she met my dad, helped to fill in several gaps.

Through the National Archives on line, I retrieved the 1940, 1930, and 1920 U.S. decennial censuses. Using FamilySearch.org, I accessed obituaries and death certificates which are common genealogical documents. FamilySearch.org is the genealogical entity of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (CJCLDS)—e.g., The Mormons. During a November 2017 trip to Utah, I visited Temple Square, the place that houses Salt Lake Temple—home of the renowned (Mormon) Tabernacle Choir. Unbeknownst to me at the time, the Church's equally well-regarded Family History Library is also in Temple Square. Founded in 1894, the library contains data for more than 4 billion people globally (FamilySearch.org n.d.). Knowledge of family history is an integral aspect of CJCLDS faith. CJCLDS members believe that individual families are eternally bound and therefore aim for afterlife unification. But baptism is required for afterlife admittance so genealogical research enables CJCLDS members to identify family, determine church membership status, and where lacking, petition for membership on their behalf.

[CJCLDS members] believe that families can be together forever when “sealed” through a special temple ordinance or ceremony. These ceremonies can be performed not only for the living but also on behalf of [deceased] ancestors. For this reason, [CJCLDS members] are encouraged to research their family history to identify their ancestors and learn more about their lives. (Powell 2020)

While the FamilySearch database remains an intriguing personal discovery—and indispensable for the immediate critical family research project—genealogy has key religious significance for CJCLDS members. Other online tools that I found helpful were real estate websites to gather details about the property owned by my parents and the neighborhoods where they lived. I secured one deed through a free public property records search. Nana Alice was my father’s mother. In her living and funerary photographs<sup>2</sup>, she is shown having caramel-colored skin tone. In 1962, the South Carolina, Richland County coroner listed Nana Alice’s date of birth as 1891. If that date is accurate, then Nana Alice was born 28 years after Black people in the confederate south received liberation from physical enslavement and inhumane bondage. Yet, rather than immediately enjoy widespread social and economic gains, Black people battled systemic racism and colorism to make minimal strides (Wormser 2004). One of Nana Alice’s steps toward full societal membership was completing the U.S. decennial census. In three instances, she is listed as head of house. In 1920, Nana Alice’s race is listed as mulatto; her occupation as wife, with four of her children in the household. Still racially identified as mulatto in 1930, she is listed as a widow with five children—her last child was my dad Lem, born in 1924. By the 1940 count, Nana Alice’s race is recorded as Negro, marking the initial use of this referent in a national census.

Maternal family documents were less accessible. In repeated interviews, my mother said she was born in her grandmother Lula Mae’s house in Columbia, South Carolina. Years ago, Emma, mom’s best friend from college, confirmed my mother’s birth year as 1929 (not 1931 as mom long had us believe). Emma also confirmed that my mother had no siblings. Mom said a Negro midwife assisted with her birth. It was not uncommon for women to give birth at home supported by “relatives, friends, or midwives. Unfortunately, in those early days, hospitals were relatively dangerous places where sanitation was questionable and women in childbirth were attended by doctors who knew far less about birthing than did midwives” (Shaw and Lee 2020, p. 357). In addition, mom said “there were no Black hospitals nearby and the White hospitals would not serve Black people” (Interview with “Mae”, 12 July 2019). Along with assisting with childbirth, the midwife served as the official recorder who verbally confirmed mom’s live birth to “the White doctor down the road” (Interview with “Mae”, 12 July 2019).

Hardcopy records for my maternal grandmother Ann, who we fondly called Ma Dear, are minimal. The scant genealogy documents leave me noting the better record access for my lighter skin grandmother Nana Alice than for my dark complexion grandmother Ma Dear. Might colorism have played a role in generating and maintaining vital documents? Recall that from the plantation, to the classroom, and then to the board room, lighter skin tones garnered partiality. Seemingly, among genealogy documents, the hierarchy of skin color continues to plague people of African descent. Nonetheless, I am grateful for Ma Dear’s stockpile of photographs featuring her husband—my mother’s step-father—and images depicting their socializing with their light and caramel complexion friends in Boston circa 1960. A 1972 city of Boston, Massachusetts death certificate lists Ma Dear’s birth date as 1917. There is a strong melanin presence across the three generations—my maternal grandmother Ma Dear, my mother Mae, and me.

---

<sup>2</sup> Harlem Renaissance photographer James VanDerZee (29 June 1886–15 May 1983) popularized post-mortem photographs for the people of Harlem. Called funerary portraits, the full body photographs featured the deceased adorned in their casket. As part of his technique, Van der Zee would insert a poem or spiritual imagery around the subject. For Blacks who had migrated to Harlem as part of the Great Migration, funerary portraits were sometimes kept or sent to remaining southern relatives. Funerary portraits of babies and young children became special keepsakes (Tramz 2014).

What follows are two significant aspects of my family genealogy. The first is the meeting of my parents. The other aspect is their acquisition of a single-family house in Columbia, South Carolina. I was in my 30s the first time I lived in an apartment and approaching 50 the one time I signed a purchase and sale agreement. Conversely, my parents only knew shared cohabitation and house renting into their 30s. Long familiar with this history, only now am I taking time to consider the role of colorism and race on my parents' selection of a life partner and home ownership in the Jim Crow south.

#### 4. Lem and Mae

It is highly probable that the parents of my grandmothers Nana Alice and Ma Dear—had direct connections to U.S. slavery. On 1 January 1863, the final draft of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation took effect. Today, many people misinterpret that executive order as the document that solely "freed the slaves". More accurately, the Emancipation Proclamation liberated enslaved people in the rebellious confederate states and urged their reunification with the union states to avert England's meddling in U.S. domestic affairs (Wormser 2004). Two years later, in 1865, the U.S. Congress passed the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution abolishing slavery throughout the country. Refusing to acquiesce, southern states and towns instituted severely restrictive ordinances called Black Codes.

From 1865 through 1867–68, officials in formerly confederate states enacted a succession of restrictive local ordinances (Wormser 2004). Comprehensively, the edicts functioned to reinstitute social controls akin to the antebellum period, delineating permissible and prohibited activities for people of African descent, especially individuals with dark skin. Because White landowners heavily relied upon forced and uncompensated African American labor prior to 1865, the Black Codes also established a cheap and controlling labor system (Dickerson 2005). With the Black Codes antithetical to the letter and spirit of Emancipation Proclamation along with the 13th Amendment abolishing involuntary servitude, in 1867, U.S. Congress again acted. In the aftermath of the country's Civil War, elected officials passed the three-part Reconstruction Act, designed to: (1) restore the U.S.; (2) rebuild the country's southern region; and (3) catapult African American enfranchisement (Wormser 2004). Encompassing African American liberation and empowerment were election to local, state, and national office, and the rights to marry and to property ownership—from the latter two of which my parents would eventually benefit. With the fall of Reconstruction by 1877, proponents of the antebellum, Old South sensibilities and way of life instituted "pig laws"—ordinances harshly penalizing Blacks for literally stealing pigs, other farm animals and perceived vagrancy (Wormser 2004). Overtime, the restrictions increased and segued into Jim Crow laws.

Like the Black Codes implemented before Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws were a series of strict laws limiting daily life and opportunity for millions of Black people emancipated since 1865. Systematically restricting the daily life of African Americans would suppress their progress against the elevation of White supremacy (Kendall 2009). Jim Crow had a stronghold in southern *and* northern states (Wormser 2004). Drawing its name from a submissive, clumsy minstrel character who wore blackface<sup>3</sup>, the name Jim Crow served to disguise the racism of Jim Crow laws. The impetus for suppressing Black progress occurred via: (1) refusing to acknowledge the personhood of people of African descent; (2) fearing their reprisal for centuries of inhumane forced enslavement and unimaginable oppression; and (3) aiming to thwart any semblance of social and economic advancement of "8.8 million" Black freedmen/freemen (U.S. Department of Commerce 1993, p. 2). The myriad barriers significantly hindered the promise of liberty and the equitable opportunity for Blacks to pursue happiness regardless of their skin color. On paper, Jim Crow laws ended with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Yet, the foundation of White supremacy impacted the progress of countless African Americans.

---

<sup>3</sup> Blackface dates back to the early 1800s when mainly White men would perform theatrical acts stereotypically depicting the mannerism and speech of Black men. To appear "Black," they would use burnt cork, grease paint, or black shoe polish darken their faces. Then and now the performance is considered racially offensive.

My mother is certain that in 1952, Emma, who had become mom's teacher co-worker, introduced mom to Lem. He became Mae's husband in 1953. Born in 1924, Lem overcame the weight of being the youngest of five siblings. According to the 1940 U.S. Census, Lem only completed the sixth grade, which by today's standards leaves few favorable options. However, Lem's light skin complexion and pencil-thin moustache, topped with a head of thick, dark wavy head hair, easily met 20th century favorability standards. With each year, Lem learned to better pair his rudimentary knowledge and exceptional street smarts to advance. Consider that from 1929 to 1939, during the U.S. Great Depression, people of color dominated the menial labor force. In South Carolinian cities such as Lem's hometown of Columbia, men with his looks easily secured employment. Although segregated White hotels and restaurants refused to serve patrons of African descent of any hue, these same establishments easily hired light-complexion men as kitchen cooks and dishwashers, table bussers and hotel porters (Mielnik 2011). A 1928 S.C. statute even prohibited Blacks and Whites from using the same public toilet facilities (Wormser 2004)! Black and Brown people endured the socioemotional humiliation of the Jim Crow laws. Yet, Lem, wrapped in the will to rise above diminutive social stratification, availed himself of the limited economic opportunities that existed.

America's foul history of institutionalized slavery was a century behind Lem. The country's ten-year attempt at economic and political recalibration through the Reconstruction Era resulted in minimal advancement for Lem and his Black community. Lem's 1950s America routinely relegated Black and Brown women, children and men to the margins and subservience. In his teens, Lem secured a job at the Columbia Hotel not far from his home. He served as a uniformed bellhop responsible for transporting luggage to and from guest rooms. When necessary, he likely functioned as a porter, assisting guests with unloading their luggage from vehicles then carrying suitcases into the hotel. Located in the segregated White section of downtown on the corner of Gervais and Sumter Streets, the eventual landmark hotel was a popular lodging site for out-of-town White travelers (The Columbia Hotel n.d.). With colorism dictating social expectancies during the 20th century, it is probable that Lem's superficial characteristics increased his job prospects. Interviews with my mother revealed that she considered his appearance greatly appealing.

Mae saw in Lem confidence, integrity, and progress. She was initially attracted to Lem's outward appearance exemplifying colorism's influence on romantic interests. When I interviewed my mother about her attraction to my father, in several instances she shared a cautionary from her mother, Ma Dear. "Don't marry a dark man because you will have dark babies" (Interview with "Mae", 26 May 2019). To illustrate this enduring sentiment, author Kathy Russell reports being told, "Don't bring home any old, dark-skinned Black boys, 'cause I don't want any Black, nappy-headed grandbabies (Russell et al. 1993, p. 4). While Mae and Kathy are on opposite ends of the skin color spectrum—Kathy describes herself as having "fairly light skin"—representing different generations, both women received maternal advice to seek a light-skinned romantic partner. My mother obliged but did not pass down that cautionary to me. Instead, she watched me during my formative years, play hand games and jump rope to songs repurposed from Broonzy (1981) Black, Brown and White lyrics—"If you's [W] hite, you's alright. If you's brown, Stick around. But if you's [B] lack, oh, brother, Get back, get back, get back" (Broonzy).

Ma Dear worked as a domestic who, according to my mother, earned cents on the dollar "cleaning White people's houses" (Interview with "Mae", 27 May 2019). Ma Dear was a talented seamstress who designed and sewed my fancy dresses for school and church. Ma Dear introduced me to baking, ultimately serving as my culinary muse in adulthood. During her lifetime, Googling the Internet to download recipes was not an option. Rather, for new food recipes or those not committed to her memory, she searched her library of cookbooks. Today, all but one of those culinary resources has been relinquished to a local thrift store. For reasons of nostalgia, I retained Ma Dear's Betty Crocker's New Picture Cook Book. Likely drawn to its color block cover, I fondly remember seeing the book atop a cabinet in Ma Dear's kitchen. Published in 1961, two years before my birth, today the culinary reference book is listed as a collectible by hawkers on the likes of Ebay and Etsy, and online book

resellers asking upwards of \$325. While the demand for this Betty Crocker how-to book is astonishing to me, Ma Dear's writing on the inside cover of hers makes the cookbook in my possession priceless. As she did with all of her cookbooks, in legible penmanship, she wrote her current address at the time of acquisition. I sought out the building and it is still standing on a quiet tree-lined street in the Boston area. Incidentally, Ma Dear's insistence that her dark-skinned daughter Mae marry a light-skinned man backfired. The contrasting dark skin color of my brother and I compared to Lem's light skin tone often had people questioning whether he was our birth father.

For Lem, Mae signified grit, smarts, and determination—qualities inculcated through Ma Dear's assertions. In addition to not having dark babies, Ma Dear insisted Mae "get a job so [she] could be independent" (Interview with "Mae", 29 May 2019). An only child, my mother embraced those words by graduating in 1949, at the age of 20, from a four-year historically Black college in South Carolina. Before 1964, educating people of African descent was the primary mission of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). As institutions of higher education, HBCUs provided access to learning beyond high school, ultimately contributing to the progress and elevated status of descendants of formerly enslaved people (Hill 1985). At the co-ed institution, Mae earned a bachelor's degree in education, providing the underpinning of her more than fifty years of teaching elementary schoolchildren: first in S.C., then in Massachusetts, where she retired in 2004.

Mae unabashedly describes herself as exceptional, which in many ways she is. For starters, her maternal grandmother Lula Mae assumed primary responsibility for raising my mother, Mae. Lula Mae was presumably born sometime around the turn of the 20th century, when high school, let alone graduating from a four-year college, was a rarity for people of African descent. Instead, Lula Mae earned money by cleaning White people's laundry in her home. Mae told me, "White people would drop off their sheets and other dirty laundry on Monday and return on Wednesday to retrieve it" (Interview with "Mae", 12 July 2019). Lula Mae received \$1 to wash and iron two baskets of laundry. That Mae's mother worked as a domestic is a second factor making Mae an exception. Ma Dear "worked in White people's homes cooking, cleaning and taking care of their children" (Interview with "Mae", 27 September 2019). According to Mae, Ma Dear had a sixth- or seventh-grade education, but she could read and write, as evinced by her penmanship inside of the 1961 Betty Crocker's New Picture Cook Book. Third, Lula Mae and Ma Dear were dark-skinned women laboring under early 20th century diminutive expectations. That my maternal great-grandmother and grandmother could muster \$60 each month to pay for my mother's college tuition is a feat in itself. Mae said her mother scrubbed floors to keep Mae from scrubbing floors then or in her future—and I can attest to never seeing my mother clean floors. Ma Dear told Mae that her job was to go to school, do well and graduate. Mom described herself as studious but sometimes had to miss school because Ma Dear did not have 10 cents for the round-trip bus ride. Upon returning to school and explaining her absence on one occasion, a professor gave Mae bus money for the rest of the week and offered to help as needed. While I used to criticize Mae for her self-aggrandizement, the more I hear about her modest beginnings, the more I celebrate her temperament of self-importance especially given her formative years. Many of the stories Mae heard from her grandmother and mother were undoubtedly informed by their primary and secondary knowledge of life impacted by Black Codes and Jim Crow—two eras when light-skinned women especially received education and were groomed to achieve (Norwood 2015). When Mae graduated college in 1949, women represented 24% of all conferred bachelor's degrees with Black people comprising approximately 2% of all college graduates in the U.S. (Snyder 1993). That Mae is included in those percentages is noteworthy.

Four years after earning a college degree, and less than two years after meeting each other, in July 1953, Lem and Mae married, beginning their journey as a "new negro" couple. During the mid-20th century, Negro was a commonplace referent for people of African descent in the United States. Thirty years earlier, Locke (1992) used the phrase "new Negro" to title his book and ascribed the referent to a subset of Black people who uplift, advance, and enlighten themselves to improve their community. My parents were able to draw on their legacy as descendants of formerly enslaved people and traverse the



Jim Crow south to avail themselves of opportunities beneficial for our family and the Black community. Homeownership was one of those opportunities.

### 5. Homeownership: The American Dream

Anyone who has lived long enough, especially in the United States, has heard the phrase “the American Dream”. Scholars credit the American Dream turn of phrase to James Truslow Adams. In his 1931 best-seller, *Epic of America*, he describes this vision as, “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (Adams 2012, p. xvi). Since then, the American Dream has evolved into a dynamic phrasing taking on reinterpretation and new meaning (Churchwell 2018). With every changing generation of people in the U.S., there is a redefining of the American Dream often temporally predicated. Amid periods of want and economic decline, the American Dream reflects superficiality. During the Great Depression and Great Recession, material wealth, upward mobility, and education represented the American Dream (Barone 2020; Goodman and Christopher 2018). While owning a house is one example of tangible prosperity, its precise link to the American Dream is uncertain (Barone 2020; Churchwell 2018). In addition to apparent wealth, the American Dream is an ideology. At times of sociopolitical unrest, the dream has signified social democracy, equity, and social justice (Churchwell 2018). Twenty-first century activists and progressive thinkers are likely to consider home ownership as an empowering feat given its accompanying social status and economic opportunities. For me, this critical family history exercise has introduced me to the impact of colorism as a power play on my parents social and economic undertakings.

### 6. The Celery-Green House

As far back as I can remember, I have always heard stories about the 546 sq. ft. celery-green-colored, single-family house in Columbia, S.C. Richland County real estate records indicate a 1952 construction date. Family records suggest Lem and Mae purchased the house in 1953, the year they married, with a home loan under the G.I. Bill. The G.I. Bill was among a suite of subsequent benefits and programs established by the U.S. government to assist WWII veterans’ transition back to civilian life (Rothstein 2017). Dad’s PMC acknowledges his U.S. Army service, with online records indicating 1938–1946 as his service dates. However, based on our family records and understanding of Dad’s date of birth, a 1938 enlistment would have made him several years below the age of eligibility with parent consent. Similar to the time of Mae’s birth, vital records for people of color were poorly maintained if kept at all. Further, with the country at the height of WWII, the government likely welcomed any man wanting to serve. Always wanting more, Lem enlisted in the “[W]hite man’s Army” (Hurst 2005, p. 283), labeled as such by racist Whites who viewed Black soldiers as monstrosities, lacking the knack and commitment for combat. Black reformers used the phrase for dissuasive messaging declaring, “If it is a [W]hite man’s government . . . let him take care of it” (Missionary Department of the Atlanta, Georgia, A.M.E. Church 1899). Whether Lem lacked the skill and desire for combat is unknown, because his superiors denied him the chance for advancement. Instead, he was assigned to the mess and commissary. Despite the bigotry, Lem completed one tour in the U.S. Army and received an honorable discharge in 1946.

Lem and Mae learned about the G.I. Bill loan guaranty and the celery-green-colored house through a friend of a relative. Regardless of the contradictions about his years of service, Dad applied for and received a home loan from the U.S. Department of Veteran’s Affairs. Their choice of locations was limited by race because, at the time, the government and private realtors collaborated to establish racially segregated communities. Some developed into “almost all-[B]lack neighboring suburbs” (p. 68) of White communities or “ghettos . . . where government . . . not only concentrated a minority but established barriers to its exit” (xvi). The celery-green-colored house was located in a section of Columbia, S.C. representing a new, all Black enclave. Nana Alice moved into the house after a few years. Compelled to move because when Lem and Mae bought their house, Nana Alice was left

alone to maintain the rental property where she lived—something uncommon for women at the time. Legally, women were prohibited from solely entering into home rental contracts, establishing utility or store credit accounts (Shaw and Lee 2020). That Nana Alice did not have an income contributed to her dependency.

Lem, Mae, Chris and Nana Alice lived in the 564 sq. ft. house for several years. In 1962, when Nana Alice died, Lem moved north in search of work, leaving Mae the head of house. During the 20th century, men were the primary breadwinners and household managers, but that arrangement did not hold true for Lem and Mae. Since her college graduation in 1949, Mae worked full time as a second-grade teacher in a S.C. Lower Richland County, all-Black elementary school. Teaching and preaching were among the primary professions for people of African descent during the early to mid-1900s. During a January or early February 1963 visit home to Columbia, S.C. Lem and Mae conceived me. In June of that year, Mae resigned from her second-grade teaching position. Lem returned to pack up Mae and Chris then relocate them to Massachusetts. It is peculiar that the family would relinquish Mae's full-time job and Lem's small house—Mae's name was not on the deed. Mom said she never questioned Lem because he was the man and her husband. Still mindful of their American Dream, they decided to rent the celery-green-colored house to a Black family in the neighborhood unable to secure a conventional bank mortgage but wanting to imagine homeownership.

### 7. Lem and Mae's "Great Migration"

Many historians dub the Great Migration as the largest willful relocation of human beings within their homeland. The Great Migration refers to a 60-year period when chiefly people of African descent vacated the southern part of the United States to pursue a range of opportunities in northern and midwestern cities (Rothstein 2017). During this time, the southern population shifted from 90 to 47 percent African American. Demographers segment the migratory phenomenon into two waves—the first comprising nearly 1.5 million people, occurring from 1910 through 1940 (Morrill 2011). In this wave, Black southerners left behind myriad sociopolitical oppressions. Jim Crow laws and social practices complicated respectable working and living opportunities. With World War I in the past and World War II in progress, demands were high for factory workers in major cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and New York (Wilkerson 2011). In addition to factory work, The Pennsylvania Railroad and Illinois Central Railroad companies offered free rail service and relocation support to attract workers (Wilkerson 2011).

The second wave of the Great Migration occurred between 1950 and 1970. Lem and Mae were among the 5 million African Americans who moved from the down south to up north. During the second wave, many Black southerners expanded their migration to the west coast cities of Los Angeles, Oakland, Portland, San Francisco, and Seattle (McDonald and Cross-Barnet 2018). Although Boston was a northern city, it was not among the principal destinations for relocating southern Blacks (Saunders 2018). I am certain that by 1960, Ma Dear and her husband relocated to Boston during the Great Migration's second wave. Certain photographs in her stockpile are stamped 1960 and 1961. Images depict her and her husband socializing in living rooms, kitchens, in front of apartment buildings and on a public beach all in the Boston area. It is unclear whether an employer brought Mae and her husband north to work as domestics or whether they left Columbia in search of northern prospects. However, Mae confirms that Ma Dear urged Lem to bring his family to Boston because of the job opportunities for him. Although my parents relocated during the second wave, they embraced first wave dreams aiming for social and economic options.

Once landing in Boston, Lem tapped into his military culinary experience to secure a job as a sous chef—a kitchen professional second in command to the executive/head chef (Culinaryschools.org n.d.). By 1963, the Filene's Department Store in downtown Boston had a reputation as a popular regional retailer. Founded in 1881, the flagship rivaled any of its caliber on New York's famed Fifth Avenue (Celebrate Boston n.d.). In addition to selling a range of fashions, Boston's Filene's department store featured specialty shops offering hairdressing, manicuring, and pedicuring services to women;

a full-service barber shop; a restaurant, tea-room, top floor café, basement soda fountain and lunch room (Celebrate Boston n.d.). For out-of-town patrons, the store offered gender-specific bathrooms (Celebrate Boston n.d.). With the growth of the suburbs, the Filene's company began establishing satellite locations around the state and northern New England. Many of the flagship services including the restaurants were being duplicated in the suburban locations. Lem applied for and was hired as a sous chef. The influence of his light skin and black wavy textured hair on securing the job remains unknown. However, for many years, Lem was the only person of African descent in the kitchen while all of the food servers were White women. In addition, dad's employment qualified us for a Filene's charge account with a 20 percent discount. To facilitate purchases, the company issued two 1.5" × 3.5" baby blue charge cards, one embossed with Mr. Lem and the other with Mrs. Lem. After nearly twenty years of cooking in two of Filene's' restaurant kitchens, Lem suffered an unexpected fall on the job. The injury forced Lem to file for disability benefits which he received for several years. Unable to return to Filene's to work, Lem subsequently retired.

To this day, Mae still enjoys detailing her becoming a trailblazing Boston public school educator in 1964. On her first attempt, Mae passed the city's teacher qualifying examination. The accomplishment yet another achievement given the exam's insidious reputation that "[m]any of the [B]lack teachers were weeded . . . out by . . . the Boston Teacher's Examination (BTE) . . ." (Taylor 1998, p. 53). Mae's membership at a local African Methodist Episcopal church gave her direct access to its well-connected, highly regarded and very light-skinned pastor—privileged likely garnered because of his skin complexion. When the pastor discovered that Mae had passed the BTE, he quickly referred her to a nearby elementary school principal, Mrs. Doris Cavanaugh. The White, Irish Catholic administrator agreed to mentor Mae, putting her in touch with the school district's human resources department and recommending immediate hire. While passing the BTE was one feat, securing a job was quite another. In the early 1960s, when the Black teachers represented one percent of its public-school teaching force (Taylor), Mae's ability to secure another second-grade teaching position up north increased Boston's number of Black educators by one person.

## 8. Final Thoughts

I have always viewed my parents' histories as distinct and distant. Apart and together, they experienced the world through a colored lens. Not a rose tint, but rather shades of black, brown, and white. Sometimes those colors were welcoming, other times challenging. I always knew that Lem and Mae had modest starts. While genealogy tools confirm elements of Lem's lived experience, I relied heavily on oral history to assemble a basic origin story for Mae. Again, I wonder about colorism's impact on creating and maintaining vital statistical records based on skin color. Some may dismiss my surmise as trivial. However, throughout my lifetime as a Black woman of African descent, colorism and race have always been variables in my efforts.

I am fortunate that both of my parents shielded my brother and me from the ugly injustice and turmoil of the U.S. 20th century. To encounter bigotry, sexism, and racism for simply aiming to live your best life in your own skin (color) is emotionally penetrating. Lem and Mae reached back to their ancestors and drew from within themselves to attain varied external opportunities from the federal government to their local communities. In concert with colorism's mores, they met and married. There were gnarls along the way—some sealed for ever—but my parents managed to achieve *their* American Dream. In turn, their journey enables me to fashion my American reality. Dr. Maya Angelou routinely shared stories about her past to impart the importance of embracing one's history. This initial step of exploring my critical family history affirms my rich legacy.

Search, learn, and grasp your family stories. Whether joyous or janky; prosperous or pugnacious each aspect contributes to your being. Remember that your history does not inherently define you; rather, it prepares you for your journey.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

- Adams, James Truslow. 2012. *The Epic of America*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Alexander, Michelle. 2020. *New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press.
- Barone, Adam. 2020. "What Is the American Dream?" Investopedia. *Investopedia*. March 27. Available online: <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/a/american-dream.asp> (accessed on 3 April 2020).
- Bevir, Mark. 2008. What is genealogy? *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 2: 263–75. [CrossRef]
- Brewington, Mark T. 2013. *Times of Expression & Poetry: Expressions of Evolution to Manhood . . . from Hope to Manhood*. Bloomington: Xlibris.
- Bronzy, Big Bill. 1981. Black, Brown, and White. B1 on *If You're Black Get Back*. Storyville Records. Vinyl, LP, Compilation. Available online: <https://www.discogs.com/Big-Bill-Bronzy-If-Youre-Black-Get-Back/release/3685714> (accessed on 4 April 2020).
- Celebrate Boston. n.d. Filene's Building, 1912. Available online: <http://www.celebrateboston.com/architecture/filenes-building.htm> (accessed on 18 March 2020).
- Churchwell, Sarah. 2018. *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Culinaryschools.org. n.d. Life as a Sous Chef. Available online: <https://www.culinaryschools.org/chef-types/sous-chef/#context/api/listings/prefilter> (accessed on 16 March 2020).
- Dickerson, Debra J. 2005. *The End of Blackness: Returning the Souls of Black Folk to Their Rightful Owners*. New York: Anchor Books.
- FamilySearch.org. n.d. FamilySearch. Available online: <https://www.familysearch.org/en/home/about> (accessed on 17 March 2020).
- Greenidge, Kaitlyn. 2019. Why black people discriminate among ourselves: The toxic legacy of colorism. *The Guardian*. April 13. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/apr/09/colorism-racism-why-black-people-discriminate-among-ourselves> (accessed on 3 April 2020).
- Goodman, Laurie S., and Mayer Christopher. 2018. Homeownership and the American Dream. *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 32: 31. Available online: <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.montclair.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsj&AN=edsj.26297968&site=eds-live&scope=site> (accessed on 11 March 2020). [CrossRef]
- Hill, Susan. 1985. *The Traditionally Black Institutions of Higher Education, 1860 to 1982*; Washington: U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics.
- Hunter, Margaret L. 2002. If You're Light You're Alright: Light Skin Color as Social Capital for Women of Color. *Gender and Society* 16: 175–93. Available online: [www.jstor.org/stable/3081860](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3081860) (accessed on 3 April 2020). [CrossRef]
- Hurst, Eileen M. 2005. Voices of Connecticut Veterans: Willie James Macon, an African American Soldier in World War II. *Connecticut History* 44: 282–90.
- Johnson, Mat. 2015. Proving my Blackness. *New York Times Magazine*. May 19. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/24/magazine/proving-my-blackness.html> (accessed on 18 March 2020).
- Kendall, John. 2009. Reference Reviews. *Harlow* 23: 15–17.
- Knight, David. 2015. "What's 'Colorism'?" Skin-color bias has real effects. Do you and your students know how to talk about it? *Teaching Tolerance* 15: 45–48.
- Locke, Alain. 1992. *The New Negro*. New York: Atheneum.
- McDonald, Katrina Bell, and Caitlin Cross-Barnet. 2018. *Marriage in Black: The Pursuit of Married Life among American-Born and Immigrant Blacks*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Mielnik, Tara Mitchell. 2011. *New Deal, New Landscape: The Civilian Conservation Corps and South Carolina's State Parks*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Missionary Department of the Atlanta, Georgia, A.M.E. Church. 1899. The Negro Should Not Enter the Army. Voice of Mission. Available online: <https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/negrosoldiers.html> (accessed on 3 March 2020).
- Morrill, Richard. 2011. A Century of Change in the US Black Population, 1910 to 2010. *Newgeography*. October 20. Available online: <https://www.newgeography.com/content/002490-a-century-change-us-black-population-1910-2010> (accessed on 3 March 2020).

- Norwood, Kimberly. J. 2015. sIf You Is White, You's Alright . . . Stories About Colorism in America. *Washington University Global Studies Law Review* 14: 585–607.
- Powell, Kimberly. 2020. Why Mormons Research Their Ancestors. Learn Religions. Available online: <https://www.learnreligions.com/why-do-mormons-research-their-ancestors-1421782> (accessed on 19 March 2020).
- Prewitt, Kenneth. 2005. Racial classification in America. *Dædalus: Journal of the Academy of Arts and Science* 134: 5–17.
- Russell, Kathy, Midge Wilson, and Ronald E. Hall. 1993. *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color among African Americans*. New York: Doubleday.
- Rothstein, Richard. 2017. *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*. New York: Liveright Publishing.
- Saad, Layla. 2020. Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor. Sourcebooks. Available online: [https://www.google.com/books/edition/Me\\_and\\_White\\_Supremacy/SNmWdWAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Me_and_White_Supremacy/SNmWdWAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0) (accessed on 18 March 2020).
- Saunders, Pete. 2018. Thoughts on Boston and Northern Exclusion. Available online: <https://www.newgeography.com/content/005844-thoughts-boston-and-northern-exclusion> (accessed on 10 March 2020).
- Shaw, Susan, and Janet Lee. 2020. *Gendered Voices, Feminist Visions: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. New York: Oxford Press.
- Sleeter, Christine E. 2016. Critical Family History: Situating Family within Contexts of Power Relationships. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 8: 11–24.
- Snyder, Thomas D. 1993. *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait*. Washington: The Columbia Hotel.
- Taylor, Steven J. L. 1998. *Desegregation in Boston and Buffalo: The Influence of Local Leaders*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- The Columbia Hotel. n.d. History of SC Slide Collection. The Columbia Hotel|History of SC Slide Collection|Knowitall.org. Available online: [www.knowitall.org/photo/columbia-hotel-history-sc-slide-collection](http://www.knowitall.org/photo/columbia-hotel-history-sc-slide-collection) (accessed on 10 March 2020).
- Tramz, Mia. 2014. Death in Harlem: James VanDerZee's Funerary Portraits. *Time*. February 24. Available online: <https://time.com/3807384/death-in-harlem-james-vanderzees-funerary-portraits/> (accessed on 3 April 2020).
- U.S. Department of Commerce. 1993. *We Are the Americans: Blacks*; Washington: Department of Commerce.
- Walker, Alice. 1984. *In Search of Our Mothers's Gardens: [Womanist Prose]*. San Diego: Harvest.
- Wilkerson, Isabel. 2011. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Vintage.
- Wormser, Richard. 2004. *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.



© 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).