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Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century

Robert E. Weems

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Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century

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Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century Robert E. Weems Capitalism and slavery stand as the two economic phenomena that have most clearly defined the United States. Yet, despite African Americans' nearly $500 billion annual spending power, surprisingly little attention has been devoted to the ways U.S. businesses have courted black dollars in post-slavery America. Robert E. Weems, Jr, presents the first fully integrated history of black consumerism over the course of the last century. The World War I era Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to northern and southern cities stimulated initial corporate interest in blacks as consumers. A generation later, as black urbanization intensified during World War II and its aftermath, the notion of a distinct, profitable African American consumer market gained greater currency. Moreover, black socioeconomic gains resulting from the Civil Rights movement which itself featured such consumer justice protests as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, further enhanced the status and influence of African American shoppers. Unwilling to settle for facile answers, Weems explores the role of black entrepreneurs who promoted the importance of the African American consumer market to U.S. corporations. Their actions, ironically, set the stage for the ongoing destruction of black-owned business. While the extent of educational, employment, and residential desegregation remains debatable, African American consumer dollars have, by any standard, been fully incorporated into the U.S. economy. Desegregating the Dollar takes us through the "blaxploitation" film industry, the vast market for black personal care products, and the insidious exploitation of black urban misery by liquor and cigarette advertisers. Robert E. Weems, Jr, has given us the definitive account of the complicated relationship between African Americans, capitalism, and consumerism.

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