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The Crisis Cover Girl: Lena Horne, the NAACP, and Representations of African American Femininity, 1941–1945

Megan E. Williams

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) first featured two-year-old Lena Horne in its October 1919 issue of the Branch Bulletin. Touting her as one of the organization’s youngest members, the Branch Bulletin photograph of light-skinned Lena Horne commenced a lifetime of visibility in the black press. During the war era, the Crisis, official organ of the NAACP, would attempt to construct an image of Horne that both empowered African American women to reject dominant images of black womanhood and reflected the association’s goals of racial advancement and integration.

Though it went unsaid, Horne felt that Walter White, Executive Secretary of the NAACP and a key member of the editorial advisory board for the Crisis, viewed her as “an interesting weapon” in his attempt to coerce Hollywood “to shake off its fears and taboos and to depict the Negro in films as a normal human being and an integral part of the life of America and the world.” Throughout the war years, the Crisis sought to infuse its image of Horne with White’s notion of normality—a notion influenced by class status, skin color, and a desire for racial integration. Horne’s light complexion, enduring relationship with the NAACP, familial ties to the black bourgeoisie in Brooklyn, mainstream success among white audiences, refusal to play stereotypical film roles, performance of popular music, and willingness to contest Jim Crowism in the entertainment industry all made her an ideal Crisis cover girl during World War II. Still, Horne did not passively accept this prescribed role as a bourgeois race woman. Throughout her career as a songstress and film star, Horne maintained, negotiated, and resisted the NAACP’s construction of her as a model of acceptable African American femininity in order to achieve her “main motive” of “protecting [her] opportunity to sing,” an opportunity
which afforded her the means, as a divorced mother, to provide for her children.³

Lena Horne first appeared on the Crisis’s cover in 1941 and again in 1943. Historically, editors of periodicals have employed images of women on their covers as a means of attracting the attention of potential buyers and announcing their magazine’s persona and potential. According to historian Carolyn Kitch, cover girls “conveyed ideas about women’s natures and roles, but they also stood for societal values.”⁴ Beginning in the early twentieth century, the Crisis, a monthly published in New York City by the NAACP, pictured well-dressed, educated, and primarily light-skinned African American women on its covers in an attempt to subvert dominant representations of black women. The Crisis, which achieved a circulation of forty-five thousand during the war years, published sixty issues between 1941 and 1945; thirty-eight featured cover photographs of women.⁵ Of the thirty-eight cover girls chosen to represent respectable African American femininity, Horne was the only woman to appear twice on the cover of the Crisis within this five-year span.

The Crisis is the official publication of the NAACP, an interracial group of northern elites founded in 1909. Since its inception, the NAACP has sought to attain the privileges guaranteed African Americans by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments of the Constitution but denied them under Jim Crow. Historically, the NAACP has worked to gain civil rights and achieve integration by exposing and rectifying injustices through the existing legal system and by adopting the dominant culture’s values of middle-class respectability and morality. Many African Americans believed that by demonstrating middle-class mores and values they would, in the words of August Meier, “impress whites so favorably that they would be freely accorded their rights.”⁶

Originally viewed as radicals, especially when compared to the conciliatory followers of Booker T. Washington’s philosophy, leaders of the national branch of the NAACP later gained a reputation as conservatives interested in preserving the gains of the nearly-assimilated black elite. They were charged with being insensitive to the problems facing the African American working class. While the war-mobilized economy and passage of Executive Order 8802, which barred racial and ethnic discrimination in hiring for government and defense-industry jobs, solidified the NAACP’s interest in the black working class, the organization continued to privilege a bourgeois image of African American femininity on the covers of the Crisis throughout World War II.⁷

African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier referred to the Crisis as “the most important magazine of public opinion among Negroes.” According to Gail Lumet Buckley, Lena Horne’s daughter and biographer, the Crisis “lay next to the Bible in most middle-class black homes.”⁸ First published in 1910, the Crisis remained under the editorship of W.E.B. Du Bois, co-founder of the civil rights organiza-
tion, until his controversial resignation in 1934. Du Bois originally conceived of the *Crisis* as a journal of thought, opinion, and analysis, which would interrogate the problem of the color line within an international context and play a central role in the movement for African American advancement. Walter White believed that the *Crisis* would best serve the NAACP by publicizing its affairs, promoting its legal campaigns to uphold and extend the rights of African Americans, and adopting a “popular” approach.9

In 1931, the NAACP created a board of four, including Walter White and Roy Wilkins, to oversee the *Crisis*’s finances, thus beginning the process of wresting power over the magazine from Du Bois.10 After much infighting and politicking between Du Bois and White, Du Bois resigned from his position in July, 1934. White’s biographer writes, “With Du Bois gone, White took control of the *Crisis,*” selecting assistant secretary Roy Wilkins as Du Bois’s successor and exercising his newly unchallenged influence at the magazine board’s nominating committee meetings.11 Wilkins, like White, felt that the NAACP should “move away from the magazine’s lofty, ebony-tower approach and broaden its appeal, audience, and circulation.”12

Despite its attempts at reaching a “popular” audience, the *Crisis,* in many ways, continued to conform to E. Franklin Frazier’s biting characterization of black news media in general. Frazier wrote, “Although the Negro press declares itself to be the spokesman for the Negro group as a whole, it represents essentially the interests and outlook of the black bourgeoisie.”13 Since its inception, The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People purported to improve the station of all blacks. However, its original choice and continued use of “Colored People” to describe African Americans reflects the organization’s bourgeois roots. The term “colored,” which alluded to white or Indian lineage and implied middle-class status, was preferred to “Negro” or “Afro-American” by many light-skinned and affluent blacks because it evoked their connections to white America.14

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the mulatto editors of black newspapers and magazines, such as *Ringwood’s Afro American Journal of Fashion* (1891–1894), sought to rewrite the cultural meanings of black women’s bodies by claiming light skin as a condition for privilege. These editors fashioned themselves as the elite, responsible for racial uplift. Through style and appearance, the writers of *Ringwood’s Journal* constructed themselves as respectable, moral, and worthy of the title “lady.”15 Yet, in their attempt to displace entrenched notions of black women as trollops or sexual victims, the light-skinned writers of *Ringwood’s Journal* produced a concept of African American femininity that excluded those who were working class, uneducated, and dark skinned. This equating of light skin with class status and race leadership predated the Civil War and continued into the 1940s. For example, Walter White was, in the words of his biographer, “a vol-
untary Negro,’ that is, an African American who appears to be white but chooses to live in the black world and identify with its experience(s).” Likewise, Lena Horne was often confused for a “Latin-American” by her film audiences or enjoined to “pass” as Spanish by nightclub managers. Although the correlation between light skin and respectability, constructed by the black bourgeoisie, began to lose credibility by World War II, the women photographed as Crisis cover girls between 1941 and 1945 elucidate the persistence of skin color as an indicator of middle-class status among African Americans. Much like the writers of Ringwood’s Journal decades prior, the editors of the Crisis used photographs of predominantly light-skinned, college-educated “cover girls” to supplant dominant stereotypes of African American women and to refashion black women as respectable ladies.

As cultural theorist bell hooks has observed, “Access and mass appeal have historically made photography a powerful location for the construction of an oppositional black aesthetic.” A photograph taken by an African American of a black subject acted/acts as “a critical intervention, a disruption of white control of black images.” By photographing elegant, well-groomed, black women for its covers, the editors of the Crisis sought to displace what Patricia Hill Collins has named the “controlling images of Black womanhood,” indelible stereotypes of African American women as asexual mammies or lascivious jezebels. Likewise, the precision with which black women are coded in these Crisis photographs reveals the assimilationist politics of the NAACP as well as the standards of behavior, dress, and attractiveness its leaders thought all African Americans should emulate.

Throughout the early 1940s, the Crisis touted those African American women participating in war-related jobs—as war-production laborers, victory farmers, and members of the armed forces. The Crisis occasionally presented them actively engaged in welding or tilling on its covers, but the majority of issues disseminated during this period replicated hegemonic notions of women as passive by featuring portraits of inactive glamour girls. The few women, like Beryl Cobham (April 1942) and Ida Mae Smith (May 1943), shown actively engaged in war production work were darker-skinned (Figures 1–2). In contrast to Cobham and Smith, the Crisis photographed light-skinned Aurelia Carter (September 1944), labeled “Miss Negro Victory Worker, 1944,” in full welding garb while sitting for a studio portrait (Figure 3). While her uniform is featured prominently in the photograph, Carter was removed from her work environment and, smiling cheerily at her viewer, visually rendered passive and traditionally feminine. This representation of Carter was verbally fixed in the cover description; she was characterized as “a typical American girl with a fragile, glamorous appearance,” who prior to the war “was interested in more feminine pursuits.” The copy and cover pose imply that Carter will return to these “more feminine pursuits” at the war’s end.
Interestingly, Carter, like the majority of those women portrayed in inactive poses as glamour girls, was light-skinned, exposing the history of social stratification among African Americans based on the intensity of labor performed and its correlation to skin color. The magazine preferred headshots of well-dressed, light-skinned African American women who were college-educated ladies, beauty-contest winners, soldiers’ wives, or celebrated entertainers, over photographs of dark-skinned women engaged in war-production work. Jane Cooke Wright (August 1942), Barbara Gonzales (March 1944), and Katheryn M. Davenport (August 1944) represent the Crisis’s typical war era cover girl. All three women avert their eyes from the photographer; the photograph showcases their upper torsos, shoulders, and faces, highlighting their light skin and carefully coiffed hair. The concise description of these covers, found in the table of contents, refers to each woman as “Miss” and lauds her status as a college student or graduate (Figures 4-6). The tendency of the Crisis to avoid cover images of overtly blue-collar women and to privilege those of women who conformed to bourgeois standards of femininity reflects the NAACP’s belief that portrayals of black women as conduits of middle-class respectability and models of shared values with white society were a means to achieving integration.

The few products advertised regularly within the Crisis reiterated this message that cleanliness, grooming, and manners defined proper middle-class femininity. For example, advertisements for Madam C.J. Walker’s “Wonderful Hair and Scalp Preparation” featuring a light-skinned woman with long, wavy hair abutted announcements of Howard University and Tougaloo College degree offerings. They informed readers: “The hair and the skin require extra attention,” and “Discriminating women use Madam C.J. Walker’s Egyptian Brown Face Powder.” A well-dressed, light-skinned woman, identified as “Mrs. Grace Clifford, New York social leader,” represented “Palmer’s Skin
Success Ointment,“ which claimed to rid users of the “unattractive complexions” that make “it extremely difficult to gain entree to society.”

First published in 1941, *The Correct Thing to Do, to Say, and to Wear*, by Charlotte Hawkins Brown, was often advertised in the *Crisis* as yet another way to secure upward social mobility. Brown, known as the “First Lady of Social Graces,” was dedicated to teaching proper manners; advertisements for her book stated, “With good manners again in vogue, everybody needs this ready reference.” These particular product notices, repeatedly found within the *Crisis* throughout the early 1940s, stressed the importance of proper decorum, as well as skin and hair care, for African American women seeking class advancement.

During the 1940s, advertisements produced by African American businesses and aimed at black female consumers, such as those found in the *Crisis*, differed from those produced by white businesses for the same audience. Unlike white-produced advertisements for bleaching creams and hair straighteners, endorsements for Madam C.J. Walker’s products, Palmer’s skin cream, and Brown’s etiquette manual avoided denigrating African American physiology. These endorsements promoted consumption and use of these products as a means of upward mobility rather than a means of achieving whiteness. Madam C.J. Walker refused to sell skin bleaches and eschewed the words “hair straightener” in her promotions. The black beauty industry, produced in part by segregation, also created a space for black women to fashion careers and gain economic independence for themselves outside of white people’s homes and white-owned factories. Leaders of the beauty industry also acted as leaders of their race, contributing time and money to secure civil rights for African Americans and bolstering race pride. Historian Julia Kirk Blackwelder contends that the African-American beauty industry “overall embraced the richness of skin and hair variation among African Americans,
praising dark as well as fair” and “helped to build racial solidarity among African American women.”30

Still, the use of light-skinned women in these advertisements points to these companies’ ambivalence concerning skin color. Like advertisements aimed at white women capitalizing on their “inarticulate longings,” these advertisements might be viewed as encouraging black women to assimilate white, “middle-class mores rather than seek out new and possibly more revolutionary alternatives.”31 However, by performing respectability through the use of beauty products and etiquette guides, a space was opened up whereby African American women could potentially empower themselves to reject stereotypical images of black womanhood and expose race as a construction.

In her groundbreaking history of African American women’s role in the black Baptist church, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham conceptualizes black churchwomen’s resistance to Jim Crowism in terms of a “politics of respectability.”32 Higginbotham writes, black Baptist women “perceived respectability to be the first step in their communication with white America.”33 Likewise, in her study of the ideological bases for national African American women’s clubs such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), Deborah Gray White discusses black clubwomen’s perception and usage of the politics of respectability as a means of uplifting the race in the eyes of white Americans. These Association women, who were collaborating with black men in the NAACP by the 1920s, sought to reclaim their image, to be viewed as decent, pure, honorable, and feminine ladies, rather than depraved temptresses or masculine mammys.34 Augmenting the work of Higginbotham and White, Victoria W. Wolcott, in her analysis of African American women in interwar Detroit, contends that the discourse of respectability articulated by middle-class, black clubwomen waned during the 1930s.35 Respectability was “remade” by working-class African American women who favored notions of “self-worth, family survival, and racial pride” over “dress, demeanor, and neighborhood cleanliness.”36 While the performance of female respectability as articulated by the black elite may have declined in the years leading up to World War II, it remained implicit in the photographs of African American women selected to represent the NAACP as Crisis “cover girls.” Education, talent, fashion, and grooming fixed the image of femininity favored by the NAACP and signified the Crisis cover girl’s respectability.

During this period, the editors of the Crisis proudly characterized thirty-four percent of its cover girls as students or graduates of higher or vocational education, celebrating African Americans’ promotion of education as a method for racial advancement and uplift since the late nineteenth century.37 In Souls of Black Folk, W.E.B Du Bois had criticized the educational philosophy of Booker T. Washington, who promoted a program of industrial education for African Americans, as
Du Bois wrote of the need for college-educated African Americans, whom he famously termed the “Talented Tenth,” to act as race leaders. He espoused “the rule of inequality,” arguing that certain African American men possessed the talent to be leaders while the rest possessed the talent to be laborers. Despite his resignation in 1934, the type of woman regularly chosen to represent the *Crisis* “cover girl” throughout the early 1940s reflected Du Bois’s elitist emphasis on the importance of higher learning: the number of college or university women selected for the cover between 1941 and 1945 outnumbered those represented as trade school students or graduates by over five to one.

In addition to stressing education for African American women, the *Crisis* emphasized black women’s glamour, esteem, and spousal relationships by depicting popularity- and beauty-contest winners and soldiers’ wives on eight of its covers during this period. Maxine Leeds Craig has traced the history of black beauty contests to the 1890s, arguing that varied discursive strategies for racial rearticulation tied black beauty contests to the ideological positions of their producers and their reviewers in the black press. The *Crisis* used images of beauty-contest winners on its covers to demonstrate its pride in African American pulchritude, yet endorsed middle-class images of women that sustained what Craig calls “the African American pigmentocracy.” Cover girls Jolita Watson (January 1942) and Hazel Geraldine Griffin (March 1942) were named “Miss Jacksonville” and “Miss Miami” respectively, after “several thousand ballots” were distributed in each city. Both covers depicted headshots of the smiling contest winners, who were described as an employee of the Afro-American Life Insurance Company (“Miss Jacksonville”) and a junior at Florida State College (“Miss Miami”). Not only were these women framed as beautiful but they are described as women who aspire to the middle-class lifestyle that accompanies a job in the black business world and a college education.

In contrast, Dorothy Dandridge (June 1942), “selected as the sweetheart of the Seventh Regiment, California State Guard,” posed for her *Crisis* cover in the crux of two large tree limbs. This full-length view of Dandridge in a pair of little white shorts and high-heels emphasized her legs—the part of the female anatomy soon to be made famous by white actress and pin-up girl Betty Grable and favored, during this era, in “glamour shots” of white and black women alike (Figure 7). A similar, full-length view of Pricilla Williams (July 1944) posing on a ladder while wearing a white bathing-suit and a white flower in her long, straightened hair appeared as a *Crisis* cover labeled, “Tan Tidbit—Summer Style.” Williams, touted as “one of the lovely contestants in the nationwide Sepia Miss America contests,” was unsurprisingly light-skinned (Figure 8). Inside the issue were eight more “Sepia Miss America contestants,” all with light complexions and
coiffed hair, wearing bathing suits or short skirts, walking hand-in-hand in a single-file line or posing individually, and clutching a ladder or saluting. The *Crisis* presented these contest-winners in ways that promoted a version of racial pride linked to a specific social class and skin color.

Like pageant contestants, African American servicemen’s pin-up girls were portrayed in the black press as middle-class, light-skinned beauties. Beginning in 1942, the *Crisis* printed an inset next to its table of contents in each issue enjoining its subscribers, “When you have finished with this copy send it to a boy in camp,” illustrating the association’s support of African American servicemen and pride in their accomplishments. In the years leading up to the war, the NAACP fought to secure African Americans the right to serve. In 1940, the *Crisis* claimed, “this is no fight merely to wear a uniform. This is a struggle for status, a struggle to take democracy off of the parchment and give it life.” At the time of this *Crisis* statement, the armed forces
relegated African Americans to nominal, rigidly segregated, positions. The Army impeded black men’s attempts to enlist. The Navy denied African Americans entry except as mess-men, and the Marines barred them entirely until both branches accepted African Americans for general service on a segregated basis in 1942. Likewise, the Air Corps initially excluded all African Americans; in 1941, it established a segregated training field at Tuskegee for African Americans.

The February 1942 issue of the Crisis provided a photographic review of African American soldiers in the armed forces. One of the images featured in the pictorial of black servicemen depicted Air Cadet Lemuel R. Custis lying on his cot, grinning as he gazed at seven photographs of African American women framed or pinned to his wall. As Robert Westbrook suggests, similar images of white women pinned to barracks walls by white soldiers symbolized men’s private interests and the women they felt obligated to protect; likewise, pin-ups encouraged white women to view themselves as the pin-up girls for whom soldiers were fighting. Like the white press, the Crisis realized soldiers’ desire for reminders of home by providing countless photographs of women on its covers suitable for pinning-up. The January 1945 cover featured a headshot of Mrs. Byron C. Minor; one of three Crisis cover girls identified as a soldier’s wife, Mrs. Minor smiles for Crisis readers, her face framed by her wavy hair (Figure 9). Of this cover, the Crisis editors wrote, “Nothing can stop the men in uniform from using this cover as a pin-up, but we suspect that the proudest ‘pinner-upper’ will be Captain Byron C. Minor, on duty with his artillery in Italy.”

Figure 9. Crisis cover girl Mrs. Byron C. Minor (January 1945).
According to Sherrie Tucker, the white woman as pin-up girl “hailed the dominant culture’s celebration of an imagined prosperous and private status quo” whereas the black woman as pin-up girl exemplified a different set of ideological aims, “in which victory over racism was conceived as a necessary component of victory over fascism.” African American pin-up girls, like Mrs. Byron C. Minor, acted as the female counterparts to the black soldier in the “struggle for status.” They represented models of racial beauty and pride meant to counteract denigrating images of African American women; pin-ups of black women strengthened African American morale. Pin-ups of African American women intensified race consciousness and heightened resolve to fight inequality on the home front.

During WWII, the visibility and popularity of the African American female entertainer also strengthened race consciousness, making her second only to the educated woman as the type privileged by the editors of the *Crisis* for its covers. Black singers, actresses, or dancers appeared on twelve of the thirty-eight covers depicting women between 1941 and 1945. Film historian Donald Bogle has pronounced the 1940s an era infected by “the Negro Entertainment Syndrome,” a condition whereby the dominant culture repackaged old and damaging racist stereotypes of African Americans as naturally rhythmic and farcical in a guise of progressiveness. Although these images of African Americans as entertainers were far from subversive of deep-rooted stereotypes, the black press valued the African American as performer, suggesting that many black spectators viewed African American players like dancer Katherine Dunham (March 1941) as signifying a dazzling, respectable, and imitable black femininity never before represented on the stage and screen. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall maintains that this strategy, by which positive images are meant to displace the negative, is not “necessarily” effective. Still, the *Crisis* chose entertainers like Anne Wiggins Brown (July 1942) and Hilda Simms (October 1944), critically acclaimed Broadway stars, as its “cover girls” because they transcended—even if only marginally—the one-dimensional caricatures of African American womanhood previously portrayed in dominant film and theater.

Above all, Lena Horne famously embodied this new type of African American entertainer—the sophisticated songstress and Hollywood actress with ties to the black bourgeoisie and fame among white Americans. In her own words, Lena Horne was unquestionably Hollywood’s first African American actress to stand “between the two conventional ideas of Negro womanhood: the ‘good,’ quiet, Negro woman who scrubbed and cooked and was a respectable servant—and the whore.” She was also arguably most illustrative of the NAACP’s attempt to construct respectable images of African American femininity. Horne was not college-educated; however, her roots in the black bourgeoisie that gave rise to the NACW and NAACP combined with her vis-
ibility as a popular songstress and Hollywood star made her the perfect symbol for the NAACP’s campaign to depict the African American as a respectable and “normal human being.”

Talented and genteel, Horne was constructed by the NAACP as symbolic of her race, as representative of the African American middle class. The February 1941 Crisis cover depicts a young Horne (Figure 10). She is pictured from the waist up, conservatively dressed, her hair worn long and smooth. Like the majority of women selected as Crisis cover girls during this period, her light skin and straightened hair illuminate the internalization of colorism and conventional notions of beauty as promoted by the dominant society as well as the biracial roots of the black bourgeoisie. Avoiding the viewer’s gaze, Horne’s head is turned to one side as her manicured hand props up her chin. Described in the photograph’s caption as “LENA HORNE: Featured Vocalist with Charlie Barnet’s Orchestra,” a popular all-white band, Horne represented the type of entertainer celebrated by the black bourgeoisie. She wrote, “I sang popular songs, romantic songs . . . most of which were written by whites. I did not do ‘race’ material, blues, for instance.” Since the 1920s, leaders of the black middle

Figure 10. Lena Horne as the February, 1941, Crisis cover girl.
class had denounced the blues as vulgar and viewed blueswomen, who openly sang of sexual—including homosexual—situations, as perpetuating stereotypes of black women as depraved. In Horne’s words, urban, middle-class, African Americans “did not think this kind of music was art. They thought it was dirty, an unpleasant reminder of their low origins.” Unable to appreciate the blues as a site of working-class, black women’s resistance to racism, sexism, and classism, the black elite simply believed that “respectable girls were not supposed to go to work in Harlem night clubs.”

In 1943, a reporter with the white press wrote, “Unlike most Negro chanteuses, Lena Horne eschews the barrel-house manner, claws no walls, conducts herself with the seductive reserve of a Hildegarde,” a famous white songstress. Concerned with the performance of respectability and acceptance into the dominant middle class, the black press bolstered Horne’s image in the white press as “unlike most Negro chanteuses” and sought to present her as representative of black female respectability. Claiming that her repertoire, which appealed to both the black and white middle classes and “eschew[ed] the barrel-house” songs viewed as “low” culture by both, was not “a conscious choice on [her] part,” Horne alleges, “I sang what I could sing best, period.” Consciously or not, by singing mainstream songs written by popular white composers, Horne embodied the type of songstress acceptable among middle-class audiences—both black and white.

With her success as a songstress among both black and white middle-class audiences, Horne garnered a long-term contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and again appeared on the cover of the Crisis in January 1943 (Figure 11). Since last appearing on the magazine’s cover, Horne had left New York for a singing engagement in Hollywood at the urging of Walter White. Horne asserts that White “was anxious to bend the color line in movies” and believed that her “exposure in Hollywood might lead to movie work for a lot of other Negro people.” In fact, White had been working with ex-presidential candidate Wendell Willkie and the Office of War Information (OWI), a government agency responsible for disseminating war aims to the public and fostering mass support for the war effort, to change the portrayal of African Americans in Hollywood films. White conceived of the liaison between the NAACP and the OWI, which commenced in 1942, as a way of altering the one-dimensional portrayals of African Americans in film, and propagandists viewed the collaboration as a means of arousing feelings of loyalty among the largely disillusioned black public. Historians have argued that, by the spring of 1943, the goals of black leaders and those of the OWI propagandists “proved to be incompatible.” At the time Horne appeared on the January 1943 cover of the Crisis, however, White remained full of hope for change in Hollywood.
Horne’s cover image was described in the table of contents as “A new photograph of Lena Horne, now appearing at the exclusive Savoy-Plaza Hotel in New York City.”62 Once again, Horne is positioned in an inactive pose, her eyes directed away from her viewer. “The Cover” informed Crisis readers that “This is the first time a colored singer (not an orchestra) has been booked in the hotel of the class of the Savoy-Plaza” and lauded Horne’s “seven-year contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, largest of the Hollywood studios.”63 Well-aware that this contract made her “the NAACP’s first available guinea pig,” Horne did not passively accept her characterization as a token of black, middle-class gentility. In many instances, she seemingly upheld the definitions of respectability instilled in her as a child of the black bourgeoisie, but at the same time she fashioned her own version of respectability that accorded her the flexibility to uphold, negotiate, and resist the NAACP’s rigid construction of her as a model of venerable African American femininity.

The granddaughter of Cora Calhoun Horne, “a devoted clubwoman” and early member of both the NAACP and the National Urban League, and the niece of Frank Horne, a member of FDR’s Black Cabinet, Lena Horne was regarded as a member of, in her words, “one of the ‘First Families’ of Brooklyn.” She wrote, “The world into which I was born, the one which exerted the strongest pull on my personality,
was... the world of the Negro middle class.”

White viewed Horne, a family friend, as a “winner,” a respectable entertainer with crossover appeal. In his mind, she mirrored the image and assimilationist leanings of the NAACP; she could adequately represent the black middle class of which they were both a part.

In Too Heavy a Load, Deborah Gray White writes that “middle-class status in black society was associated as much with ‘style of life’ as with income,” and she emphasizes the vital role clothes played in maintaining “the clubwoman’s self-image and status.” Similarly, Noliwe Rooks has asserted that, historically, fashion “function[ed as] part of a larger project aimed at refuting charges of African American moral inferiority, as well as distancing African American women from cultural associations of rape and sexual availability.” Both female members of the African American elite and the black Baptist church sought to control and contain the image of black women by dictating what constituted proper attire. Throughout the late nineteenth century, magazine articles aimed at black women listed appropriate colors, patterns, and styles that would indicate a woman’s respectable nature. Likewise, African American church women condemned flashy colors, unique designs, and “conspicuous trimmings.”

Interestingly, in her biography of the Horne family, Buckley recounts an incident where White polices Horne’s choice of clothing. Thrilled with the success of her first MGM film, Panama Hattie, Horne bought herself “a little silk afternoon dress with the words ‘Good Luck’ printed all over it in various languages.” Apparently, when she wore the dress to her first informal MGM photo session, Walter White reprimanded her: “You must never wear a dress with writing on it!” White, concerned with protecting Horne’s image, obviously subscribed to the strict decorum of dress outlined by the black bourgeoisie, its belief that clothing featuring unique designs detracted from a woman’s claim to respectability and left her open to criticism as frivolous, profiliigate, and immoral. For her two appearances as the Crisis “cover girl,” Horne, like the majority of the Crisis “cover girls” during this period, wore conservative outfits that acted as examples of the sort of fashions approved by the black elite. Despite White’s reprimand, Horne continued to resist his attempt to mold her in terms of his definition of acceptable femininity. By purchasing herself a mink coat, Horne, to borrow the words of Wolcott, “transgressed boundaries of bourgeois respectability.” Surely, White would have balked at Horne flaunting her social mobility by buying and wearing expensive garments, an act which linked her to young African American men and women dressed in zoot suits and furs, migrants who were viewed by many of the black elite as undependable, uncultured, and uneducated. Yet, Horne felt that the coat was “fabulous,” her “first ‘movie star’ status symbol.”

Likewise, Horne performed acts in Hollywood films that scandalized White. White was initially hopeful that Cabin in the Sky, the all-
black musical purchased by MGM, for which Horne was offered a leading role when she signed her seven-year contract, would present African Americans as respectable “human beings.” In her autobiography, Horne writes, “Walter’s concern, and mine too, was that in the period while I was waiting for Cabin in the Sky they would force me to play roles as a maid or maybe even as some jungle type.” She continues, “Walter felt, and I agreed with him, that since I had no history in the movies and therefore had not been typecast as anything so far, it would be essential for me to try to establish a different kind of image for Negro women.” Both Horne and White were hopeful that Cabin in the Sky (1943) and Twentieth Century Fox’s competing all-black musical Stormy Weather (1943) would provide this opportunity.

In Cabin in the Sky, co-starring Ethel Waters and Eddie “Rochester” Anderson, Horne played Georgia Brown, a character accurately dubbed “the seductive menace” by Newsweek. Horne enjoyed performing in Cabin in the Sky and recalled the film’s opening as “a wonderful time” and “a fantastic engagement”; White’s hopes, however, were dashed. Rather than presenting a new image of the African American as White had desired, White felt the film recalled old stereotypes of blacks as superstitious, ignorant, and licentious with weaknesses for gambling and alcohol. In Twentieth-Century Fox’s Stormy Weather, Horne starred as Selina Rogers, an entertainer, alongside Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Fats Waller, Cab Calloway, Katherine Dunham, and the Nicolas Brothers. Walter White opposed some of the “vulgar things” Horne, as Selina, did in this film as well. Wearing a fantastic, jungle costume, her character performed a pseudo-African dance on stage while singing “Diga Diga Do,” evoking stereotypes of African Americans as primitive and uncivilized. Despite the fact that Stormy Weather’s off-stage portrayal of Selina provided a representation of “the Negro . . . as a normal person,” White objected to what Lena Horne was called on to do in certain scenes of the film, acts that producers would “not think of having a white actress do.” Horne acknowledges in her autobiography the critiques of Stormy Weather as patronizing toward African Americans and claims that she “did not think Stormy Weather was anywhere near as good as Cabin in the Sky.” Still, she apparently had no qualms about performing the “Diga Diga Do” number. In her final assessment of the film, she states, “Stormy Weather may not have been an all-time great, but I’m still grateful to it for the reputation the [title] song gave me.”

In the end, Horne did not view her responsibilities as an African American woman in the limelight in the same way that Walter White envisioned them. Of her brief time in Hollywood, she candidly writes, “It was no crusade . . . of course I hoped that if I could set my own terms in the movies and also be successful, then others might be able to follow. But, I must admit, that was not my main motive.” For Horne, her “chief interest” and “main motive” were “protecting [her]
opportunity to sing.” As a breadwinner and divorced mother of two, Horne sought above all else to protect her livelihood. Though born into the black bourgeoisie and chosen twice by the Crisis as a representative of the NAACP, Horne refashioned the uplift ideology and politics of respectability emphasized by the middle-class, African American clubwomen and men who preceded her. Like the working-class women of Wolcott’s study, Horne interpreted and “remade” the discourse of respectability in ways that fit her life and ambitions. As a working woman, Horne defined respectability in terms of “self-worth, family survival, and racial pride” rather than as a rigidly defined performance of identity signified by tasteful dress and bourgeois deportment. While the Crisis and Walter White attempted to construct an image of Horne in keeping with its overall representation of African American femininity, Horne resisted the constraints that accompanied her characterization by the NAACP as a symbol of her race. She endeavored to assert, “All right, I’m a symbol. But I’m a person, too. You can’t push me so hard. I’ve got a right to my own happiness.”

NOTES

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3 Horne and Schickel, Lena, 137.

4 Horne and Schickel, Lena, 6.


8 Edward Franklin Frazier, Black Bourgeoisie (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 177; Buckley, The Hornes, 82.


10 Janken, White, 165.

11 Janken, White, 191.


13 Frazier, Black Bourgeoisie, 174.


16 Janken, White, xiii.
17 See Horne and Schickel, Lena, 106, 22, 40.
19 hooks, “In Our Glory,” 47.
22 August Meier notes, “Social stratification among Negroes appeared before the Civil War. Among the slaves there were distinctions between house servants and . . . field laborers . . . distinctions that were to a large extent correlated with skin color and that were carried over into freedom.” See Meier, Negro Thought in America, 1880–1915, 150.
23 Meier, Negro Thought in America, 35.
27 For more on this difference, see “In Search of Connections” in Noliwe M. Rooks, Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996).
28 Rooks, Hair Raising, 127.
33 Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent, 196.
34 White, Too Heavy a Load, 60, 66.
36 Wolcott, Remaking Respectability, 95, 38.
37 Meier, Negro Thought in America, 1880–1915, 5, 11.
42 “Cover,” The Crisis 49.6 (1942): 182. For a biography of Dandridge, see Donald Bogle, Dorothy Dandridge: A Biography (New York: Amistad, 1997).
43 “Cover,” The Crisis 51.7 (1944): 216.
50 Donald Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films (New York: Continuum, 2001), 118.


54 Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 126.


60 Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 121.


66 White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 70, 76.


73 *Newsweek* article quoted in Buckley, *The Hornes*, 177.


76 Koppes and Black, “Blacks, Loyalty, and Motion-Picture Propaganda,” 392, 398.

77 Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 163.

78 Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 165.

79 Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 137.

80 Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 137.