Decoding Blackness:

C. Jama Adams

Associate Professor & Chair Africana Studies Department

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

City University of New York

cadams@jjay.cuny.edu

The condemnation of Blackness: Race, crime, and the making of modern America

by Khalil Gibran Muhammad. Harvard University Press, 392 pp. $35

Disintegration: The splintering of Black America

by Eugene Robinson. Random House, 254 pp. $24.95

DECODED

By Jay-Z. Spiegel & Grau, 317 pp. $19.11

***'I'd rather die enormous than live dormant,'* Jay-Z**

Blackness comes to the individual unbidden. It is a constellation of identities forged by the descendants of enslaved Africans in the struggle to flourish in a frequently inhospitable and ethically compromised American space. Eager to be a master of his fate, the individual can embrace Blackness as a platform for resistance to injustice and as a means of defining and realizing his chosen life projects. It can also give rise to a commitment to help the less fortunate of his brethren.

These forms of Blackness are unethically constrained when white elites refuse to acknowledge Black individuality and agency. The humanity of Blacks as expressed by their curiosity, restlessness, reflexivity and individuality is often denied by the dominant elites as it is a threat to the ideology and the political structures they have established to support their own quest for individuality and freedom. So while such elites enact an individuality that chafes at group constraints, they at the same time are ambivalent about such strivings in subordinate groups such as Blacks, Native Americans and women among others.

Three books are reviewed here that take different perspectives on attempts by African-Americans to flourish in a flawed ethical space dominated by White Americans. In Khalil Gibran Muhammad's '*The condemnation of Blackness: Race, crime, and the making of modern America,* the focus is on the historical struggle by progressive Black and White Americans to achieve two goals: Firstly to make the case that Blacks were not sub-humans driven by primal states and incapable of reflection and self-restraint. African Americans were in fact human beings who were quite capable of meeting high ethical standards of behavior. Secondly that they were deserving of protection by the institutions of the state, such as the criminal justice system, tasked to enforce the constraints necessary to ensure the protection of all citizens against the unethical actions of others.

Eugene Robinson, in *Disintegration: The splintering of Black America*, celebrates the positive outcomes of the struggles described by Muhammad, such as the establishment of a Black middle class and the resultant contribution to American creativity. He expresses concern however that these victories might have come at the cost of a coherent sense of Blackness and the interdependence that comes from that. This possible disintegration of Blackness, as he sees it, might result in large numbers of Blacks being re-relegated to the bleak and nihilistic places that they fought so hard to escape from.

Jay-Z, in ***DECODED,*** portrays the dark, primitively ethical and violent places occupied by a subset of African Americans. He confronts us with the frightening outcomes that can occur when an unbridled capitalism unfolds among fragile and unsupported youth operating with few ethical constraints. Muhammad is an up and coming historian at the Bloomington campus of Indiana University, and on July 1st became Director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of the New York Public Library. In this thoroughly researched work, he lays out the argument for what one might call a negative exceptionalism when it comes to the ethical treatment of Blacks in America. By this I mean that the ideals that guide American society, the constraints on unfettered and unethical behaviors toward others, did not apply to the treatment of Blacks, as they were not considered fully human. Muhammad goes on to document the struggle to convince dominant whites that Blacks were ethical beings deserving of both inclusion in the mainstream, morally informed American community and of protection against attempts to prevent them from flourishing. He highlights the struggles, setbacks and flaws of both the valiant Blacks and Whites who fought in this noble struggle.

A quote in an anti-abolitionist pamphlet written by William Drayton, in 1836, captures the flavor of this dehumanizing negative exceptionalism in the portrayal of Black Americans: "'*that personal observation must convince every candid man, that the negro is constitutionally indolent, voluptuous, and prone to vice, that his mind is heavy, dull and unambitious; that the*

doom has made the African in all ages and countries, a slave-is the natural consequence of the inferiority of his character.' "

Muhammad contextualizes this statement, which was normative for its time, by saying the following: "*Beginning in the 1830s in response to the abolitionist movement, proslavery writers, many of them slaveholders, sought to justify chattel slavery as the natural state of existence for blacks. In addition to what they claimed to see with their own eyes, they drew on the received wisdom of the day; a combination of Old World travel literature on African savagery; New World race making through colonial and state slave laws; the pseudoscientific race ranking of Enlightenment naturalists, such as Carolus Linnaeus's Systemae Naturae and Frederich Blumenbach's On the Natural Variety of Mankind; and plain old common sense given the daily reality of the master-slave as a self-evident and God-sanctioned legitimation of White over black. It all seemed natural order of things."*

Given the argument that Blacks were incapable of being morally upstanding citizens, the next logical step was to make them a container for all immoral and criminal behaviors; what Muhammad refers to as "*writing race into crime*.''

In explaining heightened mortality rates among Black prison inmates, Muhammad cites a report from R.M. Cunningham, a prison physician who argues that *'… blacks' physical deficiency and asymmetrical development-their small thoracic regions versus their large stomachs and penises-predisposed them to diseases such as tuberculosis'*. A more enlightened position is taken by M.V. Ball, another prison physician, who questions Cunningham's interpretation, arguing that while Black inmates' mortality rates were indeed higher than whites, '…*the causes were related to childhood poverty, unsanitary living conditions and poor hygiene.'*

Ball presents an ecological argument that he also extends to criminal behavior, and he questions the tendency to argue for Blackness as a generator of pathology. Ball and other liberal thinkers '*linked Black criminality not to hereditarian theories of race but to the absence of environmental interventions like those proliferating among whites in the urban north'*

Muhammad questions the accuracy of census data and crime statistics well into the twentieth century. He points out that a seminal report by the Chicago Commission on Race Relations abandoned attempts to get a statistical sense of race and crimes due to the obvious '…. *Inaccuracy and misrepresentation*…' He states, "*At no point before 1922 had any published study argued that racial statistics were too unreliable to be usable. Since the end of the nineteenth century, such statistics, even if incomplete or subject to extreme anti-Black interpretations had been fundamental to assessing the progress and potential of African*

Americans" . One troubling pattern he cites is an over reporting of crimes 'debited' to blacks, while at the same time there was an under-reporting of crimes against blacks.

There was fierce resistance to these arguments by both Blacks and progressive whites. Muhammad scrupulously lays out the arguments, still not definitely resolved in the twenty-first century, as to whether Blacks were intellectually and morally inferior to whites. The normative argument that they sought to displace was a dispiriting narrative with its reliance on anecdote, questionable census data, and crime statistics, often melded into a morally flawed, racialized science.

While Muhammad mentions but does not privilege the economic forces driving the harsh limits placed on most Blacks, many women, and some whites, it is worth emphasizing that a critical factor driving these dehumanizing practices is a capitalism moving at warp speed; displacing here, commodifying there, and leaving anxiety and thwarted dreams in its wake.

There was a two pronged liberal response to these racist ways of thinking and the concomitant criminalization of Blackness. An intellectually robust set of arguments were generated by Black and White intellectuals from the late nineteenth century well into the twentieth century. The first and ongoing approach was to shift the discussion from criminal acts that were a function of the inherent character flaws of Blacks, to one that stressed deviant behavior as being in part a function of structural dislocations. So Ida B. Wells and W.E.B. DuBois, Franz Boas, Melville Herskovits and Zora Neale Hurston among others argued for a more sophisticated and non-racist approach to understanding dysfunctional behaviors among Blacks. Muhammad tracks the arguments regarding the dislocations caused by emancipation, the absence of gainful employment for Blacks, and their abominable housing conditions as factors contributing to their criminal behavior. The second approach was to highlight state predations such as the concentration of bars and houses of prostitution in Black neighborhoods, and rampant police corruption alongside unrestrained violence against Blacks. Added to this was the bias of the courts where there were routine convictions of innocent Blacks or unduly harsh sentences of those found guilty.

Muhammad does a masterful case study of such state-facilitated immorality in Philadelphia. He not only details the corruption but also documents the halting progress by a variety of federal, state, municipal, and community officials and activists to assert and enforce ethical standards of conduct for institutions and individuals. This was a victory of sorts for the liberal narrative of how structural problems lead to crime while still holding individuals appropriately responsible for their behavior. Muhammad notes, '*Writing crime into culture, therefore, represented a transition for social scientists and reformers who were beginning to explain black criminality in terms of environment rather than biology. In other words, it was the initial product of twentieth-*

century racial liberals' first successful attempts to defend the humanity of blacks and their right to fair play in American society, and at the same time concede that blacks were still sufficiently inferior behaviorally or socially to warrant special attention to, but not necessarily special help."

Within this narrative Muhammad highlights an interesting race divide in the approach to managing crime. Blacks would engage in intensive and often contested efforts to police Black deviancy within their communities. At the same time there was an expectation-often unfulfilled- that whites, given their monopoly on political power, would address the structural problems, such as homelessness, unemployment, corruption and bias in the criminal justice systems that contributed to Black criminality.

One sub-theme through the book is the grudging willingness of many whites to acknowledge the humanity of Blacks and their right to be included under the ethical umbrella of the society. Alongside this was a fierce resistance to extending special assistance to enable them to flourish.

The actions of Jane Addams the stalwart social reformer, and a founding member of the NAACP, exemplifies a strain of liberal ambivalence toward Blacks that is still very much alive. In her trenchant analysis of the fate of the poor in Chicago during the early part of the twentieth century Addams linked juvenile prostitution, substance abuse and other forms of delinquency to the ravages of industrialization and the absence of institutional interventions that acknowledged the humanity of the poor. Addams was renowned for her capacity to see the potential for goodness and moral uplift in the teeming masses of poor whites that she observed. She was a pioneer in the establishment of the settlement houses that did so much to alleviate their suffering. She was also a tireless advocate for the establishment of age appropriate interventions such as the Juvenile court of Chicago, with its innovative alternative to incarceration programs.

At the same time Addams and her white comrades in arms were creatures of their time when it came to their ways of thinking about the equally desperate traits of Blacks. They hewed to the argument that Blacks were culturally inferior. Speaking to the issue of prostitution in the Black community, Muhammad noted that white liberals saw Black female prostitution as a racial defect and believed that the experience of slavery had challenged their capacity to be virtuous. Muhammad notes, that Addams thought that Black inferiority could be attributed to the fact that they have ,"…the shortest history of social restraint."

Coupling their "belated" moral developments with current social conditions, Addams concluded that the results were not surprising: a "*very large number of colored girls entering a disreputable life."*

Muhammad goes on to note that " *Within the progressive black crime discourse, Addams attacked racism but simultaneously excused it on the grounds that African Americans lacked sufficient " inherited" resources to deal with the challenges of modern city life. Within the progressive white crime discourse, Addams framed immigrant crime and immorality as social problems wholly divorced from any inherited defects of the Old World."* What is especially sobering is that this idea of Black culture--as deficient and divorced from the influence of the larger white culture in which it is embedded--is still very much alive. See Stephen Steinberg's, *Culture still doesn't explain poverty*, in a recent article in the Boston Review (http://www.bostonreview.net/BR36.1/steinberg.php).

Muhammad's work is painstakingly documented, and within the parameters of historical research methodology, a well argued and cogent piece of research. It would have benefitted from a discussion of the other areas of struggle for justice, namely that in the arts. While much of the book focuses on the first three decades of the twentieth century there is no substantive mention of the illuminating work coming out of the Harlem Renaissance. It would have enriched this discussion had the author shown the ways in which those works informed and were informed by the incipient struggles for civil rights.

I would also have found it useful to hear about the safe places, however fragile and transient, that were created by these struggles. We know that human beings have a remarkable capacity to be resilient and creative under the bleakest of conditions and that given spaces for respite, creativity and further resistances will bloom. Alongside the condemnation of Blackness that Muhammad so well documents there existed an affirmation of a different and positive Blackness; perhaps we could have heard more about that in the struggles for the recognition of a Black humanity. To his credit, Muhammad lays out some of the crucial elements of the struggle for civil rights in the early twentieth century.

Eugene Robinson is an Associate Editor and columnist at *The Washington Post*. His book, *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*, is a melancholic, ambivalent, brief, and somewhat autobiographical examination of what he perceives as troubling systemic changes in the Black community. Although he may not have intended to do so, he provides an abundance of data with regards to identity construction in an age of blurred ethnic boundaries, a desire to be unconstrained but at the cost of latent anxieties around being isolated. Alongside this is an incipient awareness of the limits to identities built on being smart and having a lot of material goods. One could read this work as a classic casebook on late modernity. It abounds with themes of uncertainty, ambiguity, hybridity and opportunity, all uneasy juxtapositions and ephemeral alliances.

Robinson argues that the Black community is less cohesive than it was before the successes of the civil rights struggle. He sees it as having splintered into four distinct groupings: The *Transcendent*, the *Mainstream*, the *Emergent* and the *Abandoned*. Robinson's concern also

speaks to disquiet around the apparent splintering of a Black identity that was once unified by the struggle for acknowledgment of Black humanness and for inclusion in an ethical space that protected and nurtured Black attempts to flourish.

Robinson celebrates the increased integration of Blacks into previously excluded places but is understandably concerned as to the cost in terms of a widely shared Black identity. As the Black population diversifies in how its members pursue attempts to flourish, the meaning of Blackness becomes more attenuated. This is a valid concern given the increasing risks of cultural homogeneity within a middle-class America that is overly preoccupied with acquisitiveness and ensuring that their children acquire a particular cognitive world view that will enable them to earn sufficient resources to be also mindless consumers.

The Transcendent are the Black elite, a turbo-charged version of W.E. Dubois', Talented Tenth. Its members are smart, driven and superbly skilled, operate at the highest levels of power and influence in American society. Elite whites defer to them and for many blacks they are the ultimate role models. These are folks who have flourished despite racial oppression; who earned the grudging respect of White America. This group has a long history and includes luminaries such as Frederick Douglas, Booker T. Washington and Joe Louis. Today it would include individuals such as Vernon Jordon, Colin Powell, Valerie Jarrett, Richard Parsons, Kobe Bryant, the Williams sisters, Oprah Winfrey, Stevie Wonder, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and of course the President of the United States, Barack Obama.

But while these people appear to have transcended the daily hassles of being black in America, Robinson makes a convincing case that they remember very well the obstacles they had to overcome merely because they were black and that, like their black mainstream counterparts they recognize the need for eternal vigilance and constant motivation. "*With their strength*," Robinson says, "*comes an indelible wariness and the knowledge that however meaningless race might be, it does matter*." Reasonable access to the benefits and protection of an ethically informed space within which to attempt to flourish is not something most Black Americans take for granted. One steps forward with both confidence and vigilance.

A question facing the younger members of the Transcendent group, who are a generation removed from the searing heat of blatant racial discrimination, is whether they will attempt to bring about structural changes, after playing by biased rules to reap untold wealth, power and status. Will they champion changes that will benefit the mass of Americans, black and otherwise, who struggle in a system that makes it hard to achieve the good life? For the Transcendents, service must be commensurate with the power they have and cannot be limited to the un-thoughtful disbursement of relatively modest amounts of tax deductible money that has little structural transformative effect.

Robinson is cautiously hopeful and makes the case, similar to one made by the Harvard philosopher Tommie Shelby, that the reaffirmation of service to others can be the basis of a revitalized sense of Blackness that does not have to be racially exclusionary or be driven by a diminishing sense of group victimhood.

The Mainstream is the middle class Black Americans who feel that they have achieved the material and professional trappings of the good life. Robinson references Black middle class and upper middle class enclaves such as DeKalb County outside of Atlanta and Prince George County in Maryland where "*six figure incomes are the norm*." But this mainstream group, like the Transcendents, is still marked by the recollections of struggle. "*Despite all the progress that's been made, there's still a nagging sense of being looked down upon, of being judged, of being disrespected".* Robinsons says these perceptions are not always justified, but that "*there is enough reality behind them to keep alive a sense of separate but not-quite equal-enough to make many people seek safety, acceptance and solidarity in numbers*".

Other pressures buffer this group, too. Many struggle to find a balance between their new-found freedom as autonomous, caring and creative individuals, and the tendency to embrace what feels like a defensive Blackness, out of their concerns about their relationship to White America. This issue of Blackness is often exacerbated by the identity choices of their children, who are less preoccupied with race than their parents and are relatively more comfortable around white peers. Robinson contrasts contemporary interracial peer relationships with those of his youth when such liaisons could lead to fatal outcomes for Black young men. He recounts an anecdote of being alone with a white female high school peer at her home and becoming suddenly and painfully aware that should he be seen there it could result in a beating or death at the hands of white racists.

Robinson offers a brief and rather disingenuous spin on gender issues among this Black mainstream group. He tends to speak of successful men and women and does not speak to some troubling constellations among them. He downplays, for example, the psychological implications of the dearth of Black male partners available to successful middle-class Black women. Speaking of these Black women, he states, *"none seems desperate of finding a man" and most seem quite happy-with good jobs, high incomes and no children or spouse to worry about, they tend to be financially savvy and secure."* Here he reduces Black women to be good workers who have nary a concern about their intimacy needs and their wishes to have children who will give additional meaning to their lives. At John Jay College, I teach a class on *Masculinities* attended mostly by young Black female undergraduates who are confident about their ability to be professionally successful and financially secure, but express despair about

finding male partners of commensurate status. Young and passionate, they do not take the stoic position that Robinson seems to portray.

Robinson struggles, as we all do, to make sense of the middle class. For Blacks the paradoxes are especially keen. They feel that they have come a long way compared to their parents but they do not feel financially stable, and they are uncertain about how far they can progress in a still sexist and racialized workplace. Their attempts at intimacy, as Robinson indicates, are mixed. They also worry about the fate of their less well off brethren. Robinson tends to put a positive spin on these issues and does not convey the fragility of Black middle class life and the attendant psychological costs.

The Emergent group includes two subgroups: the children of non-American blacks who have migrated to the United States and the offspring of racially mixed marriages, like President Obama. The first group can be thought of as the black version of a model minority; highly successful immigrants who have overcome obstacles and have successfully assimilated into the American mainstream. They too are divided into two sub-groups. The first is made up of highly skilled immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean, who are encouraged by favorable immigration policies to migrate to the United States. Their children grow up in two parent homes where education is highly valued and the parents are able to provide the psycho-social and material support necessary to excel in the United States. These students, many of whom attend private schools, constitute a significant proportion of Black students who are admitted to top tier American colleges.

The second subgroup is also comprised of immigrant parents with either modest formal skill sets or credentials that are not formally acknowledged in the United States. Many of us know teachers from the Caribbean who work in the United States as nannies; one of Robinson's cases is a former Ethiopian military officer who is now a security guard. Many of the children of this second group also outperform their American peers in schools. Robinson argues for a degree of racial pride that inoculates the children in this emergent group from the confidence- sapping effects of American racism.

Immigrant parents with marketable skills and an appreciation of the importance of an education are able to send their children to private schools and provide good after-school supervision and stimulation. This is not as likely for many of the poor and working class West Indian and West African immigrants in New York or the Somali in Minneapolis. Robinson does not comment on the last subset of the emergent group, many of whom I see from my position as a consulting clinical psychologist when they surface in the criminal justice, mental health and foster care systems.

In both Minnesota and New York, as in other immigrant enclaves, you will find increasing numbers of immigrant youth who excel in schools and increasing numbers who are sliding into a life of low aim and despair. According to Robinson's broad categorical scheme, all of these young people share similar backgrounds, and it is not easy to discern why one group succeeds as the other fails. This phenomenon can also be observed in other immigrant groups such as Latinos, Indo-Americans and Asian-Americans. Robinson does not acknowledge this subset within the Emergent group that is fast becoming part of the so-called Abandoned.

Robinson identifies his second emergent group as children of mixed racial background. He argues that these children are far removed from the experience of structural racism that characterized American life way into the twentieth century. Given their cultural heritage they are not as skeptical towards white mainstream culture as their fully black elders and peers. They are embedded in loving relationships with parents who have fully experienced both the Black and the White cultures, and are therefore disinclined to adopt blatantly racist perspectives promulgated by either Blacks or Whites. "*I have seen the future*" Robinson says. "*And it is beige.*"

I am not that optimistic but I can imagine a future in which this bi-cultural group will soften the edges of bigotry. Many are Black identified and with them lay all sorts of possibilities. Some will be in the vanguard of a resurgent Blackness reminiscent of 1950s America while others will forge Black identities that incorporate other cultural groups including whites.

It is too early to say what this means, but it speaks to Robinson's sense that the Emergents will be a force to reckon with in the ongoing attempts of Blacks to define and sustain diverse ethical places in which to flourish.

Robinson's fourth category, the Abandoned, comprises ten to fifteen percent of Black America. They are a highly visible group of Black Americans who are poor, live in sub-standard housing, have inadequate formal education, are beset by various psychological and physical problems, have high rates of premature pregnancy, single parenthood, unemployment and under-employment, and are poorly served by schools, hospitals, social services agencies and the justice system.

Robinson speaks at length about the lack of adequate support systems among this group and suggests that such supports were previously more available to them. This is a questionable argument. It is only within the last four decades that we have begun to generate research methodologies rigorous enough to disaggregate the complex factors contributing to poverty. And certainly such poverty has always existed. Robinson notes that while he was growing up in a college town with parents who were credentialed professionals, "*it was obvious that my life*

was different from the lives of the kids growing up in Sunnyside, a neighborhood of shotgun shacks where abject poverty and noxious dysfunction were evident for all to see." So the 1950s were not without their Abandoned after all. Yet we do not hear much from Robinson about these fault lines in pre-civil rights Black America such as Dubois' displeasure with the 'debauched tenth', for example. Nor does one get a good sense of the class pretensions and the policing of status boundaries that was a hallmark of the Black middle class, prior to the 1960s. When I attended high school in Guyana in the late 1960s, the curriculum controlled by an Afro-Guyanese elite focused on English history with no mention of the histories of the origins of the Indo-Guyanese or Afro-Guyanese who constituted the majority. It would have been interesting to know how Robinson's family managed the vexing issue of how light skinned one was, or the degree to which one had European facial features.

While Black Americans and the peoples of Guyana were subordinate in status, all too often the leadership in these communities struggled to make sense of the cultural divisions in their midst. Robinson does not make much of this, instead noting that the crucial marker was not poverty but race. He states, "*it was a given that the factors that might have divided us were far outweighed by a single attribute that both defined and united us: We were all black, and to be black was to live under assault."* While this might be historically correct it is not a cogent argument. Race and class are uncomfortable but difficult to separate bedfellows in the Americas, with race often obscuring the class factors at work.

In the 1950s in rural Jamaica, where I grew up in circumstances somewhat similar to those of Robinson's family, it was evident to me that there was racial discrimination. It was however made clear to me, painfully clear at times, that I was not like those poor (Sunnyside-like) black people and I was expected to adhere to high standards of conduct. Yet my grandmother also made it plain that there were needy folks among us and that we had an obligation to assist them. So on Sundays, she would note that one of our neighbors was without food. I would be then sent to ask them for a container in which my grandmother would place some food for them. Concerned about having to make two trips I asked why I could not simply carry the food over in one of our plates. Being a card carrying member of the petty bourgeoisie, my grandmother would give me a disapproving look and say to me, "You think I want *my* plate to go over *there*?" Our neighbors may not have been completely Abandoned, but we, who were far from affluent, were not like them. And the fact that we lived in a racist society did not trump that realization.

Robinson nods to these issues but he tends to undervalue their potency and their negative potential in favor of the easier target of pervasive white oppression. The challenge is to be able

to hold both in tension; to fail to do so, as Robinson sometimes does, is to unwittingly gild the past.

Robinson does note the strong and enduring welfare ties between mainstream blacks and the so-called Abandoned. Many of us who are ensconced in the middle class continue (on an ongoing basis and at no small cost), to fulfill our emotional and material obligations to family members and lifelong friends who are among the "Abandoned." This raises questions about what Robinson means by abandonment. If it means government neglect then this is not new. In fact it is not nearly as clear cut as it used to be. I teach at John Jay College a unit of the grossly underfunded City University of New York, an institution that makes explicit its commitment to be available to our less affluent residents. My students are among the youngest and poorest students in the university. Most of them must earn an income; as a consequence, they work too many hours and study far less than their peers at other colleges. Thirty to fifty percent of them lack the skill sets necessary to excel in college. Yet they have strived and have managed to get into college—no small feat. Although the faculty may complain about these students, and the funding is never enough to provide them with the supports they truly need, we are fiercely committed to them. Time and again the faculty and administrators are compassionate and creative in engaging these students to overcome their deficits and maximize their talents. They are certainly not abandoned.

Furthermore, Robinson does not seem to make much of the adaptive resistances of the Abandoned. Yet the cultural productions that express their anguish and growing skepticism about 'the system' are resonating strongly across poor, working and middle-class America. Their assertion that the game is rigged is not an argument peculiar to poor Blacks. The recent financial fiasco has given many Americans reason to wonder whether the rules are fair and whether, if they act from a place of ethical constraint, they can hope to flourish, to achieve their piece of the American dream. Robinson's Abandoned articulate a narrative that most pointedly challenges the unmet promises of American morality. The rationale they have articulated to explain their suffering has engaged others in the ongoing challenge of defining an ethical American space.

Equally interesting, Robinson does not acknowledge how tenuous a hold many Emergent and middle class Black folks have on material success, which he tends to overvalue. There is no shortage of research that establishes the shaky relationship between having an overabundance of material goods and a sense of well-being. Nor does he question the capacity of a capitalist ideology to undermine spirituality, especially around issues of restraint and sacrifice. For too many of us, well-being means having more materiality while also feeling spiritually impoverished.

Yet we know of whom Robinson speaks. I would argue that they are a small subset of the poor, but that they exercise a disproportionate pull on our imaginations, given the visibly desperate nature of their lives. They are probably less than ten percent of the African American population. So it is important not to conflate poor Blacks with so called Abandoned Blacks. A more telling distinction might be spiritual poverty. By that I mean the sense that life lacks some transcendent purpose, that there is an abandonment of hope, and therefore many resort to drugs, violence, sensuality and materialism as ways of assuaging that soul pain. Were we however to use that category to classify the Abandoned the number would be huge and it would not be limited to the poor or to inner city Blacks. Robinson is too tightly wedded to the idea that an ideal Black identity is defined in terms of educational and material success and can clearly distinguish Blacks from other ethnic groups.

Jay-Z, in *DECODED*, his fascinating and often enigmatic biographical riff, lays out the core dilemma facing not just poor disaffected Black youth, but also the restless individual in twenty-first century America. How does one gain recognition, live an exciting and bountiful life, and not suffer a premature spiritual or literal death? How is it possible, in the pursuit of the good life, not to marginalize ethical constraints and veer into nihilism? Sensitive to the traditions of tragedy that stalk those who yearn for glory, Jay-Z is undecided whether to attempt to soar with fleeting acclaim and die prematurely, or to be more respectfully circumspect and ethically constrained, and settle for what would be for him, ultimately, the unsatisfying minor glory that comes with a modestly creative but relatively risk free life. Jay-Z appears to identify with both of these eternal pathways, selectively enacts features of both, and ultimately leaves us wondering who he truly is.

Jay-Z was inspired to become an artist by rappers in the Marcy Projects in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, where he lived. He admired their skills and believed he could be as good as them: "*This is some cool shit*, was the first thing I thought. Then, *I could do that.*"

Although the projects were dangerous, there were spaces where one could be inspired, and be acknowledged as creative, although insufficiently shielded from danger. Reflecting on the edgy culture of the street performances, Jay-Z uses military/sports metaphors and notes, "*It wasn't a Marquess of Queensberry situation."* Jay –Z credits his father with tutoring him on how to be perceptive about his surroundings. He also taught him to be a critical thinker, in part by teaching him how to play chess, and how to analyze people and the cues in his environment. One of the more baffling moments in this book is when, despite acknowledging his father's contributions before he left the family, Jay-Z questions whether he was lucky to have known his father. He credits his mother with encouraging him to write his lyrics when he was a

preadolescent. He also studied the dictionary and listened critically to the rap pioneers who preceded him. He is reticent about his formal education beyond saying that he did very well in grade school.

There are huge gaps in Jay-Z's narrative, so one must often speculate how he went from rapping about hustler-ism, like the many inner city kid wannabes, to hustling. He portrays his parents as minor and increasingly irrelevant figures, unable to place any constraints on him or buffer him from the lucrative but deadly drug market of the projects. His father, inconsolable over the murder of his brother (Jay Z's uncle), took to drink and abandoned the family when Jay-Z was nine. This apparently placed financial strain on the household. Jay-Z recounts his attraction to the seemingly lucrative drug trade: "*Fuck waiting for the city to pass out summer jobs. I wasn't a teenager yet and suddenly everyone I knew had pocket money. And better.*" The deadly irony here, as many studies have shown, is that the street-level dealer often earns less than the minimum wage.

Jay-Z quickly loosens his ties to mainstream ethical constraints. He notes that he began providing funds to his mother from dealing drugs, effectively silencing her, and that many of his peers were toting automatic weapons. Most telling of all, he observes that they had little respect for former aunties and uncles who were now their main drug customers. Those adults who were not drug users were busy defending themselves against their murderous offspring who sold drugs and fought deadly turf wars.

The desire to acquire material goods and women seems to be the driving force behind much of this behavior. He sums up the ethos of the street life as follows: "*chicks taking off their clothes, guns popping, drugs getting sold, and spending money.*"

The mid to late 1980s were the early days of the crack epidemic, and Jay-Z portrays them as intertwined with the development of rap. Ever analytic and strategic, he thought about how he could speak in his own voice—the voice of a hustler. Here we see the birth of the Janus faced Jay-Z: ruthless drug dealer and admired artist. He notes that while selling drugs he would also be writing lyrics, much to the annoyance of his business partners, who needed him to focus in a business where lack of vigilance will get you maimed or killed.

Jay-Z cogently argues that the risks involved in sustaining one's status in the rap business were in many ways as deadly as selling crack. He argues that many good to great artists such as Tupac and Biggie died just as they were becoming famous. Others like him were haunted not just by the possibility of being killed, but of being dethroned. The metaphors he uses to convey this point are artistic and chilling:

"*You become a target. People want to take your head, your crown, your title. They want to emasculate you, make you compromise or sacrifice in a way that no man, or woman should. And you resist it until one day your albums aren't moving and the shows aren't filling up and it seems like the game might have moved on without you. Then you start to change, you do what you have to do to get back in the spotlight. And that's when you are a walking dead. One way or another, they get you."*

And then there is this: "*See success is like suicide, it's a suicide. If you succeed be prepared to be crucified*." It is not difficult to see this as reflective of a larger ethos within the power precincts of corporate America.

Jay-Z is all too aware of the hollowness and riskiness of the treadmill called fame, and yet his ethos seems to be, *"I'd rather die enormous than live dormant."* This might be cogent, but one must pause to ask which Jay-Z is speaking here. In the same breath he ties this to the American credo of Live free or die trying but also links it to Buddhism by invoking the need to take a "break from the spending and buying, a retreat to reveal my ultimate goals." This seems to set the stage for the reinvention of the self, which is the only way to stay on top in an entertainment world driven by fickle taste, short attention span and an insatiable need for new content.

The social landscapes that he describes are at a remove from most folks. Glimpsed on television and the crime section of the newspapers, these are places where morality is narrowly and disingenuously constructed, is often primitive, concrete and arbitrary.

Jay-Z's central argument is that the actors in the life he portrays were at the mercy of massive oppressive forces. They therefore played the hands they were dealt; not ones of their own choosing. Given this, they cannot be held fully morally responsible for their actions. He states, "*Here is where life gets 'complex'. I 'm innocent because I didn't invent the game; the game came to the hood via a bunch of people from the outside: the big drug suppliers, the gun merchants, the corrupt officials who, at best, let it happen, or, at worse, were actively involved. And we-the hustlers at the street level-definitely didn't invent the poverty and the hopelessness that drove a generation of desperate kids to start selling drugs. But then there's a point where I'm not so innocent anymore. It's when 'I do it twice'. The second time is not out of desperation to survive or to resist the status quo, but out of greed for the spoils of the game."*

The world he portrays is ethically compromised and lacks safe places in which to reflect. It appears far removed from the mainstream. It is autistic in the sense that dreams, passions and actions appear to be only faintly connected to reality. This can lead to one of two equally problematic outcomes. In the first instance is an unfettered youth who is not constrained by

caring and morally upright individuals, nor is he embedded in a safe environment that constrains even as it facilitates ethically informed risk taking. Driven by his age-appropriate passion, impulsivity and sense of invulnerability, he enacts a fantasy of fame and fortune by any means necessary—a fantasy which results in injury or death for many of Jay-Z's peers. As Jay-Z notes, they have no protection from themselves.

In the second instance the youth is smothered with protection in the form of prohibitions and cautions. He must keep a tight rein on his actions; he stays within tightly drawn ethical boundaries. He too has little access to an everyday reality that can help him realize his ethically informed dreams. I recently met a John Jay student who comes to school late at night because she must work to support herself. She is about to graduate and wanted information about going to law school. Her GPA is 2.1, and she was unaware that the college had a Pre-Law Institute that would assist her. She has no substantive connection to her peers or to faculty. As I explored career options with her, she wept and said to me, "I try so hard, so hard, but I just can't seem to get ahead."

Both groups of youth are unfamiliar with mainstream America; an America that often views them with suspicion. Consistent with Muhammad's documentation of the exclusion of Blacks and Robinson's portrayal of an irreducible wariness on the part of Blacks to White America, Jay-Z notes, "*Growing up as a Black kid from the projects, you can spend your whole life being misunderstood, followed around department stores, looked at funny, accused of crimes you didn't commit, accused of motivations you don't have, dehumanized-until you realize one day, it's not about you. It's about perceptions people had long before you even walked onto the scene."*

What morality exists in this world is narrow and primitive, akin to the morality of the preschool classroom. Seemingly small slights trigger disproportionately violent reactions. Fragile capacities of reason and reflection are no buffer for the intense emotionality that fuels these primitive responses. Jay-Z cites an example where he was shopping with the intent to pay, when he noticed that he was being shadowed by the store's security personnel. This annoyed him and he decided that since they were treating him as if he were a thief, he would then steal something. This sort of thinking and behavior has a fatalistic feel to it. Many youth do not reflect on the script they are playing out or ask who is playing whom. This is due in large part to their exclusion from caring moral communities. Too often it seems such communities limit themselves to condemning these youth.

In such a fatalistic world, luck often substitutes for volition. In one incident, Jay-Z is stopped by highway police while he is transporting drugs, but the police are stymied by the lack of a canine unit to sniff out the contraband. They release Jay-Z and his partners, who later see the canine

unit speeding in the opposite direction. The irony of these morality plays is not lost on Jay-Z, who notes that he often experienced police stops that were illegal—on the surface, his crime was to be guilty of driving while Black—but he was also engaged in illegal activities, transporting guns and drugs.

Such an environment of ruthless competition is rife with betrayal and does not allow for friendship or intimacy. While Jay-Z appears to argue that this nihilism is in the service of fame and materiality, he is ambivalent about presenting these as ultimately satisfying; he sees their limits. Yet in this 300-page opus there are no riffs on the joys of intimacy, but much on the risks of friendships. In the final analysis, Jay-Z seems to say, you can only rely on yourself; this is a rather bleak manifestation of American individuality.

DECODED is both a fascinating and frustrating work. The central dilemma that cannot be resolved is who Jay-Z is, and where he is ethically situated. He does give us hope that for him and the young people growing up in situations similar to his, although the moral impulse may be weakened, it is still alive. Jay-Z states, '*They're standing in the mirror backwards because they can't face themselves. No matter how convincing you are to the rest of the world, you still know the truth, and in a private moment it shames you enough to turn away from your own reflection,* .

Given that his success is so tightly bonded to the street life, however, he cannot distance himself too much from its values. On all the key issues--violence, friendship, success and materialism--he waffles, never endorsing nihilism but not exactly repudiating it. Skeptical about materialism but pushing toward his first billion even as he conspicuously consumes.

One consequence of Jay-Z's symbiotic relationship with the street is that he is often mute about crucial developmental steps. We never read about schooling, girlfriends or family life. One wonders if disclosing such information would make him seem too average and too lovable, perceptions not consistent with his bona fides as a hard-ass. So we are left wondering how this clearly talented man entered and returned from the abyss and transformed himself into a corporate titan.

This is not the book to read if you seek to understand the majority of Black youth who, while living in the same types of inner-city communities portrayed here, do not engage in murderous or seriously illegal behaviors. I am sure that Jay-Z knows many of these youths and the moral codes that sustain them, but they get no mention here. So one is left wondering what are the factors that distinguish one group from the other.

Each of these three authors documents both bleak aspects of the black condition alongside hard-won opportunities for hope and transformation. Those who are dark-skinned are still vulnerable to a quotidian racism which tarnishes the noble idea that is the United States. Given their historical experiences of racist and inhumane treatment, Black Americans cannot take for granted that they are free and entitled citizens, but exist in a more transitional American space where they are always in the process of becoming free. Muhammad, Robinson, and Jay-Z suggest, in varying degrees, the existence of spaces in which to continually explore, create, discard and reinvent myriad morally informed ways of being Black. Such spaces will also be used to explore the opportunities afforded by global capitalism, the still unmet promises of liberalism, and the tension between these two forces. One cannot predict the many ways that being Black will be manifested.