The "real black power": Mattie Coney and the pragmatic politics of black conservatism

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Entitled
THE "REAL BLACK POWER": MATTIE CONEY AND THE PRAGMATIC POLITICS OF BLACK CONSERVATISM

For the degree of Master of Arts

Is approved by the final examining committee:

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Head of the Departmental Graduate Program Date
THE “REAL BLACK POWER”: MATTIE CONEY AND THE PRAGMATIC
POLITICS OF BLACK CONSERVATISM

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Submitted to the Faculty
of
Purdue University
by
Olivia M. Hagedorn

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of
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In memory of Denise K. Barker, whose passion and commitment inspired this all.
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ABSTRACT


This project examines the life and activism of Mattie Rice Coney, a black civic leader from Indianapolis, Indiana. Coney founded the Citizens Forum, Inc., in July 1964 to facilitate the smooth implementation of recently enacted civil rights legislation such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Indianapolis’s Open Housing Ordinance. Employing a language of racial uplift and civic duty, Coney deftly crafted an image of black conservatism that appealed to moderate white conservatives. In articulating a “quiet,” alternative civil rights agenda centered on individual improvement, Coney legitimized her sociopolitical status among whites as a respectable black leader. This status helped Coney secure funds and recognition for her organization, which combatted the effects of poverty through neighborhood cleanup and beautification, job training and placement, and voter registration and education.

I argue that Coney’s embrace of conservatism was pragmatic as it enabled her to advocate openly for meaningful black equality post 1965. The history of Mattie Coney’s life and activism sheds light on the various ways in which African Americans struggled to gain meaningful equality at the grassroots level in the wake of federal civil right policy.
changes. Moreover, this study offers a more nuanced history of the long civil rights movement by examining the intersections of civil rights and modern conservatism, in effect revealing the varied forms of civil rights activism—including black conservatism—after 1965.
INTRODUCTION

In 1969, a nineteen-year-old woman named Diana Bailey delivered a speech entitled “Youth and Adult Responsibility” to an audience of Citizens Forum members. In it, Bailey castigated the rising militancy of her peers. According to Bailey, young, militant rabblerousers spewed words of hatred, not songs of equality. They wanted to “kill whitey and take over” and build a separate black nation upon the backs of innocent whites. Bailey argued that these black radicals were living in the past, and by doing so, they threatened to sabotage their futures. With their separatist agendas, dashikis, and afros, militants risked upending blacks’ recent gains toward civic and economic equality. According to Bailey, black militants and black nationalists did not promote black power; rather, they risked undermining it.

Moderate civil rights leaders such as Roy Wilkins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) repudiated black militants and maintained that they were racist, anti-white, and reactionary. Diana Bailey echoed many of these sentiments in her 1969 speech. Yet unlike Wilkins, Bailey did not repudiate black power outright. Rather, she reframed it, placing it within the realms of racial uplift and respectability:

Black people are accomplishing things we thought we would never be able to, simply because we are being accepted as equals. Some of our black people are taking all their education and talents and putting them to good use. They are developing programs that will teach our people to how to live…better. These are
the people I am proud to say are my people, the black people. This is the real black power!

“Real” black power advocates celebrated their African heritage, but they were not defined by it, Bailey concluded. They understood that being a proud black man or woman and being a proud American citizen were not mutually exclusive but rather mutually constitutive.¹

Diana Bailey was the nineteen-year-old secretary who worked at the Citizens Forum, Inc., an Indianapolis-based self-help program founded by Mattie Rice Coney in the summer of 1964. Upon giving her speech, the Freedom’s Foundation at Valley Forge awarded Bailey the George Washington Honor Medal, which acknowledged her “outstanding accomplishment in helping to achieve a better understanding of the American way of life.”² In her acceptance letter to the Foundation, Bailey credited Mattie Coney as a mentor and counselor, and Bailey rooted her vision of black power in Coney’s pragmatic civil rights strategy. In the letter, Bailey revealed how Coney had taught her the United States was the “greatest country in the world.” “Being born an American is a privilege,” Bailey concluded, and Coney had shown her that advocating black power meant harnessing that privilege and “putting it to good use.”³

Diana Bailey’s speech on “Youth and Responsibility” elucidates the ways in which both Coney and members of the Citizens Forum understood their civic agenda in relation to the broader civil rights movement. Indeed, Diana Bailey’s speech highlights

² Award certificate, February 1969, box 84, Lugar Collection, University of Indianapolis Institute for Civic Leadership and Digital Mayoral Archives (hereafter cited as UIMA).
³ Diana Bailey to Kenneth D. Wells, February 18, 1969, box 84, Lugar Collection, UIMA.
the ambiguities of the term “black power,” revealing how its meaning was both contested and exploited by radical and conservative African Americans, who all struggled to gain meaningful equality in the wake of federal civil rights policy changes. Unlike black separatists or black nationalists, Coney argued that integration and capitalist success were the ultimate markers of black civic, economic, and social equality. Accordingly, Coney and the Forum sought to work within existing white institutions, not dismantle them.

Mattie Coney, along with her husband Elmo, founded the Citizens Forum in July 1964 to facilitate the smooth implementation of recently enacted civil rights legislation such as the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and Indianapolis’s Open Housing Ordinance, which was passed in July 1964. Originating as a “Better Neighborhood Program” dedicated to residential integration, the Citizens Forum quickly expanded into a nationally recognized self-help organization that sought to improve the health, safety, and beauty of Indianapolis’s inner-city neighborhoods by trumpeting the values of individual responsibility, pride, good conduct, and citizenship. As a grassroots rehabilitation organization, the Citizens Forum encouraged the implementation of civil rights legislation by educating black residents about their responsibilities and duties as good citizens. Newly enacted legislation placed more responsibilities upon the black citizens of Indianapolis, Coney reasoned, because every newfound right resulted in a corresponding duty. Before black citizens could expect to enjoy the blessings of human liberty and unrestricted freedom, they first had to embrace their obligations as good citizens and neighbors.

Coney expounded on the longstanding principles of racial uplift and respectability, namely the belief that educated, middle-class blacks were somehow
responsible for improving the welfare of the black majority. Forum programs focused on “improving” the image of the race in the hope that reluctant whites would recognize black people’s humanity and honor their claims to equal citizenship. At the same time, Coney employed uplift’s language of self-improvement to construct an image of black conservatism that would appeal to Indianapolis’s white moderates. On the one hand, Coney’s brand of conservatism was rooted in the ideologies of uplift and respectability, which emphasized self-help, personal responsibility, and morality. On the other hand, her conservatism reflected principles historically linked to the modern Republican Party: anticommunism, limited government intervention, free market capitalism, and individual responsibility. Coney invoked these principles to condemn her critics and legitimize the Citizens Forum’s programs. In the process, she secured funds for her organization, which she then used to combat the effects of poverty in her community through clean-up campaigns, job fairs, and political education and mobilization. Coney thus used conservatism to undergird her attempts to outline an alternative civil rights agenda that encouraged blacks to take responsibility for their own racial and economic uplift and empowerment. This, she declared, was the “real” black power.

Until recently, the role of black women in the civil rights movement was generally overlooked or downplayed. Even during the height of the movement, women’s contributions often were considered secondary. Contemporary newspaper and broadcast accounts focused primarily on canonical figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael. For the most part, historians followed suit, and much of the early historiography on the civil rights movement ignored black women’s vital contributions. Yet women played a pivotal role in the movement. They were active
participants who regularly attended meetings, rallied communities, and organized mass demonstrations. A number of scholarly works about women in the civil rights movement have been published in the past twenty years. For example, in 2001, Lynne Olson published a popular history titled, *Freedom’s Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970*. Citing memoirs, interviews, and letters, Olson examines the broader story of the movement’s female foot soldiers. In this impressive, synthetic work, Olson identifies, acknowledges, and celebrates the contributions of ordinary women activists, journalists, and students.⁴ Other valuable additions focus on major figures and individual leaders such as Rosa Parks, Ella Baker, and Fannie Lou Hamer.⁵ Despite these important studies, the broader history of women’s contributions to the movement remains largely unwritten, though.

These more recent histories on women and the civil rights movement focus almost exclusively on liberal activism, ignoring almost completely the role of conservative black women who, like their liberal counterparts, were progressive regarding civil rights and racial justice. Over the past two decades, numerous scholars have considered the intersections of race, ideology, and conservative American politics, yet most analyze the

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conservative movement as a reaction against the African-American freedom struggle. More recently, historians have attempted to bridge this divide.

Foremost among them is Leah Wright Rigueur, whose book, *The Loneliness of the Black Republican*, offers the first expansive history of black Republican involvement, beginning with the political realignment of the New Deal and ending with the Reagan Revolution. Rigueur uncovers the forgotten efforts of black Republicans by providing insights into the links between the black freedom struggle and the American conservative movement. Rigueur convincingly argues that black Republicans attempted to reshape and expand the boundaries of conservatism to include racial egalitarianism and civil rights activism. However, whereas Rigueur’s project is national in its scope and emphasis, my project uses the life and activism of Mattie Coney to detail how these broader political trends manifested at a local, grassroots level. Moreover, my aim is to connect these trends to the longstanding traditions of black racial uplift, respectability, and progress, while paying special attention to the myriad contradictions and tensions

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inherent in Coney’s conservativism, including its ironic similarities with black nationalism.

This project examines the fluid, and at times contradictory, nature of Coney’s activism in Indianapolis, Indiana, from 1964, when she founded the Citizens Forum, to 1988, when she passed away at the age of seventy-nine. Too often, the civil rights movement is depicted as a linear, one-dimensional struggle that began in 1954 with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and declined rapidly following the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. My aim in this project is to offer a more dynamic understanding of civil rights activism, one that complicates simple binaries such as “radical” and “conservative”; draws attention to underlying commonalities; and refuses the simple closure of a linear narrative arc. This project is a response to Jacqueline Dowd Hall’s 2005 essay, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past.” As Hall writes, “The civil rights movement circulates through American memory in forms and through channels that are at once powerful, dangerous, and hotly contested.” Writing and commemorating civil rights history, she adds, is as much about forgetting as it is about remembering, as “the dominant narrative of the civil rights movement—distilled from history and memory, twisted by ideology and political contestation, and embedded in heritage tours, museums, public rituals, textbooks, and various artifacts of mass culture—distorts as much as it reveals.”

Much of this distortion results from scholars’ narrow focus on the divisive elements in the struggle, namely the dichotomous positioning of civil rights liberalism

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and racist conservatism. As Hall argues, integral to writing a more inclusive, expansive civil rights history is the dialectic between the movement and modern conservatism. Historians often identify the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts as the culmination of the movement, which subsequently fractured over the meaning of equality and how best to attain it. As a result, the popular struggles of the 1970s and 1980s are depicted as nothing more than identity politics and the rise of the Silent Majority marks the end of the civil rights movement and the beginning of a separate story. Writing a history of the long civil rights movement entails moving beyond such histories of sudden declension and collapse, which are teleological and ahistorical. Indeed, as a woman who believed that uplift, respectability, and the gospel of individualism offered valid pathways to black social equality, Coney’s history forces us to reconsider the multiple and varied forms of civil rights activism post 1965, including black conservatism.

While the dominant narrative focuses on efforts to change national law and policy, my study considers how activists worked to secure meaningful equality once these laws were in place. An examination of the local politics in Indianapolis illuminates the ways in which federal policy played out at the grassroots level, namely how blacks attempted to translate federal protections into tangible changes for African-American communities. At the same time, Coney’s history suggests that the civil rights movement did not effectively end in the 1970s with the rise and fall of black power, or that civil rights activism remained confined within the New Left. The impulse to reject black conservatives as traitorous racial apologists, complicit in the New Right’s crusade to

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10 Ibid., 1235.
undermine the black quest for racial equality, is undoubtedly a strong one. Yet as Rigueur argues, the curiosity and frustrations surrounding black conservatism often obscure black Republicans’ agency, specifically the notion that black conservatives, in fact, choose to identify as Republicans because they understand conservatism as a valid solution to racial inequality and social injustice.11

In many ways, Coney’s story suggests the need to look beyond the civil rights movement’s obvious ties to liberalism and the Democratic Party. Though Coney was conservative in her respect for law and order and distanced herself from civil disobedience and black power, she was progressive in regard to civil rights and racial justice. For Coney, the gospel of individualism promised black economic independence, which constituted the logical end to the ongoing civil rights movement. Coney thus stood at the seemingly impossible intersection of civil rights and American conservatism, and her story provides useful insights into the complex interplay between civil rights activism and conservative politics. She adopted the ethos of individual self-improvement and achievement to articulate an alternative civil rights movement that centered on the acquisition of black economic independence and social equality. In doing so, she invoked the same ideas of uplift, respectability, and economic self-sufficiency articulated by a previous generation of black conservative elites, most notably Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey.

Nevertheless, because Coney’s self-help program and alternative civil rights movement fell within the frameworks of modern conservatism and progressive uplift

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11 Rigueur, Loneliness of the Black Republican, 3.
ideology, Coney was beholden to the norms and expectations of dominant American society. As such, Coney negotiated for black social and economic rights in a system that she did not control, and her vision of race progress remained trapped in a hegemonic order that linked black people’s humanity to their willingness to subscribe to white norms, values, and aesthetics. As Coney struggled to articulate a positive, independent black identity, she constructed class and cultural hierarchies within the black community, and in the process, she implicitly validated longstanding racial fictions about lower-class blacks’ alleged inferiority. This project attempts to make sense of these tensions and contradictions inherent in Coney’s civil rights agenda. As such, this study renders a more complex account of the ways in which class, race, and politics shaped civil rights activism in the decades following the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts.

Finally, one of my central goals in this study is to examine the ambiguous concept of equality and in part, to reveal how oppositional binaries of black conservatism and black radicalism obscure significant areas of overlap in goals and strategies. Coney used prominent black power figures such as Stokely Carmichael as a foil, yet many similarities connected Coney and her radical opponents. Both factions struggled to effect meaningful change at the grassroots level following the legislative victories of the mid-1960s, and both embraced economic, cultural, and educational uplift as pathways to black social equality. Despite Coney’s claims to the contrary, black conservatives and radicals defined equality in terms of black autonomy and self-consciousness, and both struggled endlessly to articulate a positive black identity in the face of continued oppression. This overlap certainly does not belie the ideological and tactical divisions separating black conservatism and black radicalism. Nonetheless, these significant—and at times ironic—
areas of overlap suggest the need for a further recasting of civil rights historiography, namely a move away from the notion of two opposing movements.

The first chapter lays a foundation for understanding the ways in which racial uplift and respectability undergirded Coney’s efforts to develop a positive black identity. Chapter 1 briefly outlines the various forms of uplift ideology that have manifested since the late eighteenth century, and it attempts to place Coney’s early life and activism in conversation with these longstanding traditions. In addition, Chapter 1 considers the ways in which Citizens Forum initiatives linked self-help and respectability to the acquisition of full citizenship and equality. Chapters 2 and 3, on the other hand, consider how Coney developed and articulated an alternative civil rights strategy that appealed to Indianapolis’s conservative base yet ultimately offered tangible benefits to black communities. The first half of Chapter 2 explores the nuances and contradictions inherent in Coney’s conservative platform, namely her attempt to identify and define a black Silent Majority. The second half of Chapter 2 examines how Coney catered to white conservatives and manipulated the white media to legitimize her cause and secure funds for her organization. Finally, the third chapter of this project outlines the basic goals and strategies of Coney’s alternative civil rights movement, which linked civil rights progress to black economic independence. In addition, Chapter 3 briefly considers the effectiveness of Coney’s strategy by outlining the benefits her program wrought in black communities and neighborhoods.

This project does not provide a comprehensive biography of Mattie Coney’s life, nor does it attempt to gauge, in any significant detail, the black community’s response to her programs. Instead, this study offers a critical investigation of how one African-
American woman struggled to effect meaningful changes in her community in the rapidly changing political and social milieu of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Coney’s agenda was undoubtedly classist, as it privileged the perspective of the black middle class over the needs of the black lower classes, and, as we will see, it was laden with tensions and contradictions that she neither addressed nor resolved. However, while I am critical of Coney and the Citizens Forum’s agenda, my goal is not to impugn or discount her commitment to racial egalitarianism and social justice. Rather, I explore how concerns over class, race, and politics shaped Coney’s definitions of equality and influenced the trajectory of her broader civil rights agenda. Coney identified with conservatism because it seemed to offer the most direct route to black social and economic equality. Indeed, like all African-American civil rights activists and protesters, including those individuals whom she so strongly and vocally opposed, Coney struggled endlessly to define a positive black identity in a racist system that she ultimately did not control.
CHAPTER 1. MATTIE CONEY AND THE POLITICS OF RACIAL UPLIFT AND RESPECTABILITY

1.1 Introduction

In May 1965, Mattie Coney delivered a speech to the Coppin Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Indianapolis, Indiana. In her speech, Coney outlined the basic goals and functions of the Citizens Forum, Inc., which was only in its tenth month of existence: “It is the purpose of the Citizens Forum to encourage and assist our citizenry to drastically improve citizenship standards and to lift [our people] to a higher level of citizenship…We must think and talk about things that will make us all more acceptable to the public.” Only through uplift, she concluded, could blacks ever expect to enjoy the blessings of human liberty and unrestricted freedom. In essence, the Citizens Forum was an organization dedicated to the civic uplift of the African-American people.

In their daily lives and public utterances, members of the Citizens Forum promoted the principles of racial uplift, respectability, and progress. As Coney’s speech reveals, she believed that uplift would, in fact, lead to the development of a positive black identity, one that could turn race into a source of pride and dignity rather than shame and embarrassment. Forum members deemed the promotion of morality and self-improvement as a legitimate pathway to black empowerment, and thus, Forum policies and programs reflected black members’ earnest attempts to “lift” the race to a higher level of citizenship. Like all proponents of black uplift, Coney understood racial uplift
ideology as a form of cultural currency. Evidence of black self-improvement, she reasoned, would hasten the ongoing integration process in Indianapolis and force white citizens to recognize the equal status of their black counterparts. Forum programs and policies therefore emphasized a positive representation of Indianapolis’s middle-class blacks, who embraced the tenets of good citizenship and shared white residents’ distaste for lower-class blacks’ unseemly behaviors.

Forum members’ overt claims to middle-class respectability rested upon the construction of class divisions within Indianapolis’s black community. Forum members’ status as the moral guardians and judges of their communities was interdependent with the image of the immoral, lowly black masses that allegedly needed supervision. This attempt to bifurcate the African-American community signaled Forum members’ awareness that their destiny was inseparable from that of the black masses. Yet in their attempts to improve their image and demonstrate middle-class blacks’ preparedness for civil and social equality, Forum members replicated longstanding racial stereotypes, even as they worked to challenge whites’ racist assumptions. Forum members thus engaged in the contradictory task of using uplift ideology and respectability politics to expose the moral bankruptcy of white supremacy while tacitly confirming its racist assumptions.

In many ways, uplift ideology and its images of urban pathology implied a normative view of social order that affirmed white middle-class respectability. At the same time, Citizens Forum members obfuscated the culpability of racist whites and downplayed the devastating effects of structural forms of power and oppression. Forum

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members located the source of enduring racial inequality within the black community itself, hence the Forum’s attempts to correct the alleged waywardness of black culture and behavior. Rather than challenging hegemonic forms of power and oppression, Forum members implicated themselves in these structures. Nevertheless, though we must recognize the tensions and contradictions inherent in this strategy, we must also recognize its potential. Indeed, Coney and her fellow Citizens Forum members understood and embraced uplift and respectability as pathways to economic, civil, and social equality.

1.2 Overview of Uplift Ideology and the Politics of Respectability

As historian Kevin Gaines aptly notes in his book, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, since the late nineteenth century, the term “uplift” has held mixed meanings and connotations for African Americans. On the one hand, uplift can be traced to the antislavery folk religions of enslaved peoples such as Jupiter Hammon, whose poetry spoke of a collective, religious transcendence of worldly oppression, misery, and enslavement. In “An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York,” which was delivered in 1787, Hammon advised his audience to “think very little of bondage in this life.” He urged his fellow slaves to obey their masters and instead focus on seeking glorious salvation from God. Hammon rhetorically asked his audience, “What is forty, fifty, or sixty years, compared to

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At the same time, the term “uplift” describes the outpouring of a “liberation theology” that stressed a group struggle for black freedom and social advancement during Reconstruction. African Americans who espoused this optimistic form of uplift regarded group education as the key to black liberation, and they based their claims for equality on natural rights arguments. Freedom, they maintained, was not a reward for cultured behavior but rather a moral right ordained by God.

Yet the term “uplift” perhaps is associated most strongly with the prominent response of black middle-class leaders to the rising tide of Jim Crow, lynching, and the general deterioration of race relations in the closing decades of the nineteenth century—a period historian Rayford Logan termed “the Nadir” of American race relations. These black, middle-class leaders and reformers adopted a language of racial uplift that emphasized self-help, temperance, thrift, social purity, patriarchal authority, and respectability. These men and women claimed middle-class status and authority by distinguishing themselves from the presumably undeveloped and uncivilized lowly black masses. As such, these early race reformers aggrandized themselves as middle-class “agents of civilization” whose ultimate duty entailed “uplifting the race.”

Historians generally have framed the concept of racial uplift narrowly, stressing the seemingly intractable divide between self-help and liberal civil rights agitation, embodied by the ideological separation between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du

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4 Gaines, Uplifting the Race, 1-2: 31-33.
6 Gaines, Uplifting the Race, 2.
Bois. However, as Kevin Gaines argues, such dichotomous and narrow constructions of black leadership often obscure more popular utterances of racial uplift and self-help ideology, such as those espoused by black clubwomen in the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and the black Baptist women’s convention movement. For example, the Women’s Improvement Club of Indianapolis (WIC), which associated itself with the NACW in 1903, was comprised of some of the city’s most socially prominent black female leaders and educators in the city. Group leaders established strict guidelines and regulations regarding the behavior of its members, and members identified self-improvement through community philanthropy as the organization’s foremost objective.

According to Stephanie J. Shaw, the author of “Black Club Women and the Creation of the National Association of Colored Women,” the founders of women’s clubs such as WIC and the NACW drew upon a historical legacy of collective racial consciousness and mutual associations within the black community. In many ways, the formation of the NACW, the first national self-help organization dedicated to black women, was indicative of African-American women’s longstanding commitment to the principles of community improvement, self-help, and racial uplift, hence the organization’s motto, “lifting as we climb.” Shaw notes that the NACW was the next “logical step in African-American women’s efforts to maintain and/or improve important historical mechanisms for racial self-help.”

Coney’s reforms in the mid-1960s were an

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7 Ibid., 3.
extension of these women’s earlier efforts and were a part of this longstanding legacy of black clubwomen’s community involvement. As we will see, many of Coney’s platforms mirrored those put forth by earlier organizations such as WIC, which initiated neighborhood cleanup campaigns similar to the ones Coney spearheaded more than sixty years later.

At the same time, members of the black Baptist women’s convention movement embodied a legacy of evangelical racial uplift. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, more than one million black Baptist women promoted middle-class ideals of individual improvement and self-respect in the hope that such efforts would ensure collective racial uplift and garner respect from white Americans. These duty bound women linked middle-class respectability—epitomized by temperance, industriousness, piety, thrift, and chastity—to the advancement of the race as a whole. In this sense, uplift ideology and middle-class respectability assumed political importance. Respectability enabled black Baptist women not only to counter prevalent racist stereotypes and Social Darwinist explanations of black biological inferiority, but also to condemn perceived negative practices among their own people.

However, as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham points out in her seminal work, Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, black Baptist women’s preoccupation with respectability “reflected a middle-class vision that vacillated between an attack on the failure of America to live up to its liberal ideals of equality and justice and an attack on the values and lifestyle of those blacks who

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11 Ibid., 187, 192.
transgressed white, middle-class propriety.”

In denouncing black people who rejected the “proper,” middle-class values of temperance, hard work, piety, cleanliness, and sexual purity, organizations like the black Baptist women’s convention constructed class divisions within the black community and unwittingly lent credence to stereotypical images of African Americans. Women who claimed membership in WIC similarly imposed class barriers. WIC prided itself on exclusivity, and thus, the organization limited its membership to thirty women, whose backgrounds and personal lives were scrutinized during an intense selection process. As a result, membership came to reflect clubwomen’s social status and search for identity both within Indianapolis’s black community and within the Indianapolis community in general.

These organizations’ emphases on individual behavior seemed to privatize discrimination and discount the existence of structural forces of oppression. Simply put, uplift ideology and its attendant expectations sometimes led African-American elites to blame blacks for their own victimization and mistake the effects of oppression for its root causes. In this misplaced equation, black elites identified black nonconformity, rather than structural or systemic racism, as the source of black social, political, and civic inequality. As a result, inequality and discrimination became private matters, which could not be regulated or controlled by government authorities. Coney inherited this misplaced logic when she founded the Citizens Forum in 1964. Like her predecessors, Coney invariably neglected the structural forces ensuring continued black oppression.

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12 Ibid., 15.
13 Ibid., 194-195; Gaines, Uplifting the Race, 3.
14 Hine, When the Truth Is Told, 36-37.
15 Gaines, Uplifting the Race, 6.
16 Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent, 202-203.
and she unwittingly lent credence to racial fictions. Thus, Coney attacked “rusty knees,” boisterousness, and the behavior of “incorrigible” black children rather than systemic and institutionalized forces of oppression. Much like her predecessors in the NACW, WIC, and the black Baptist women’s convention, Coney privatized discrimination by attacking blacks’ alleged cultural and behavioral deficiencies. In doing so, she undermined her broader struggle for civic and social equality.

Thus, the history of racial uplift ideology is a history of tensions and contradictions; of empowerment and powerlessness; of resistance and accommodation. As Kevin Gaines writes, racial uplift ideology was a “discrete set of values that was understood by educated blacks and yet was at the same time unfinished, provisional, contradictory, and always subject to revision.”

When Mattie Coney founded the Citizens Forum in 1964, she not only drew upon a tradition of racial uplift ideology dating back to the colonial period; she also inherited the ideology’s tensions, particularly its tendency to emphasize vertical class divisions within the black community while deemphasizing horizontal divisions within American society in general. Yet Mattie Coney was a product of her upbringing, and her particular brand of racial uplift ideology, her self-described “commonsense philosophy,” reflected her experiences as a black child who grew up in one of Indianapolis’s few integrated, middle-class neighborhoods.

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17 Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 129.
1.3 Living and Teaching Respectability

Born in Gallatin, Tennessee, on May 30, 1909, Coney was only six weeks old when her family moved to Indianapolis, Indiana. Her mother, Delia, a caterer for a local party store, met Coney’s father, a racehorse jockey, when she was just sixteen years old. The two married and welcomed Mattie shortly thereafter. Coney’s father and mother eventually divorced, and her mother later married Oscar Weathers, a hod carrier whose father was a local business agent and close friend of labor organizer John L. Lewis.\(^\text{18}\)

This connection proved beneficial for Coney and her family, for they never struggled to find work or adequate housing, even during the Great Depression, which disproportionately affected African Americans. In fact, the family could afford to live in a two-story house west of Indiana Avenue in one of Indianapolis’s few interracial neighborhoods.\(^\text{19}\)

There, Coney lived next to two German families, shopped at an Italian grocery, and played with Jewish children, an experience that she later would describe as both unique and formative. “Everybody had a hand in seeing that you were a well-behaved little girl,” Coney later recalled. “White or black…, they all had a hand in disciplining us.”\(^\text{20}\)

Interracial interactions and community discipline, rather than economic hardship and racial discrimination, characterized Coney’s childhood. Coney was insulated from the harsh realities of racial violence in the Deep South, and she claimed to be protected from the bluntest forms of racial discrimination in the North. Nevertheless,

\(^\text{18}\) Mattie Coney Interview, by Greg Stone, June 30, 1983, Indiana University Center for the Study of History and Memory, Bloomington, IN, 083-031, Tape 1, A.

\(^\text{19}\) Ray Boomhower, “Mattie Coney,” Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History (Fall 1996): 58.

\(^\text{20}\) Coney Interview, Stone, Tape 1, A; Emma Lou Thornbrough, “Segregation in Indiana during the Klan Era of the 1920’s,” The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, 47, no. 4 (March 1961): 602-603.
Indianapolis’s Jim Crow laws imposed restrictions on her daily life and reminded her of blacks’ inferior social status. For example, black people in Indianapolis could not patronize certain theaters in the city, and the local five and dime store on Coney’s block refused to serve African-American customers. Reflecting on her childhood in a 1980 interview, Coney claimed that she was a “happy little girl” who “didn’t know” or “didn’t care” that Indianapolis’s white residents were sometimes less than welcoming to African Americans. This unique perspective perhaps could be tied to the fact that Coney lived in a middle-class, interracial neighborhood and attended Shortridge High School, one of city’s integrated institutions. There, Coney encountered some resentment, but she generally ignored it.21 Moreover, Delia Weathers sheltered her daughter from the daily reminders of Jim Crow. Weathers prepared homemade custard and baked cookies and cupcakes for her daughter and her friends, so they would not have to be turned away from the local five and dime store.22

At the same time, Weathers instilled in her daughter the importance of being polite, courteous, and respectful of other people, including racist whites. Weathers warned her daughter not to be angry about racial prejudice or discrimination. “Don’t wear a lot of anger on [your] shoulders,” she warned Mattie. Weathers advised her daughter to “be kind to people, [especially] the ones [who] look the saddest and the

21 It should be noted that the Indianapolis school board voted to build a separate school for the city’s black high school students in 1923. Crispus Attucks High School opened in 1927, and in 1929, the Indianapolis school board removed the last few black pupils from the remaining racially-mixed schools, including Shortridge High School. Coney graduated from Shortridge in 1927, merely two years prior to this move. Indianapolis public schools remained officially segregated until 1949, when the state legislature passed a bill prohibiting segregation of students based on “race, creed, or color.” Crispus Attucks High School is now Crispus Attucks Medical Magnet High School. See Hine, *When the Truth is Told*, 71-71, 77; Thornbrough, “Segregation in Indiana during the Klan Era,” 602-603.

22 Coney Interview, Stone, Tape 1, A.
meanest.” Coney later recalled, “My philosophy, like hers, is that there is some good in everybody.”

This philosophy probably informed Coney’s seeming disregard of her family’s violent history. Coney’s maternal grandmother was the daughter of a slave girl and her white master, yet Coney denied feeling bitter or resentful. In fact, she insisted that her white great-grandfather was “very good to his black children,” giving them land, money, and an inheritance. Coney even expressed gratitude for her interracial, “mixed-up” past. Americans, she argued, were a “melting pot people,” and thus, this “mingling” between her great-grandmother and a white slave master somehow made Coney’s family more American.

Part of being an American entailed being self-reliant and embracing the principles of free enterprise, Coney continued. “Our family always believed in the free enterprise system,” she said, pointing out how one of her grandfathers was a successful tobacco farmer while two of her uncles operated stands in the city market, one owned a successful barbershop, and another owned the largest and most successful hot tamale business in Indianapolis. Through these personal examples of success, Coney learned the value of hard work, self-reliance, and personal ambition. According to her worldview, ambition was rewarded. Success was simply a matter of struggle, and people who were capable ultimately succeeded, whether they were white or black. Those individuals who were lazy and lacked ambition, on the other hand, were lost in their own self-pity.

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23 Ibid., Tape 1, A.
24 Ibid., Tape 1, A.
25 Ibid., Tape 1, A; Boomhower, “Mattie Coney,” 58.
26 Coney Interview, Stone, Tape 1, A.
initiative was the sole determiner of one’s success, she concluded, citing her family’s success as evidence.

Not surprisingly, Coney attributed her success in the classroom to her individual dedication and determination. Coney boasted of how she put herself through a two-year teacher training course at Butler University by delivering newspapers and waiting tables at a local tea room, and she denied ever feeling ostracized on campus because of her race.\(^{27}\) Moreover, she expressed frustration when asked about racial prejudice at the university. She deflected such questions and focused instead on her grades and personal achievements. When interviewer Greg Stone asked Coney whether she had encountered racism at Butler University, she responded, “I worked hard. There wasn’t any use for fooling around in those days…There were people that were very happy to be unhappy. But I wasn’t going around looking [for trouble]. I went to school to get my lesson.”\(^{28}\)

Coney seemed to be sheltered from the harshest effects of racial discrimination, Klan violence, and white supremacy. When she did encounter hostile whites, she heeded her mother’s advice and never “wore a lot of anger on her shoulders.” “People are mean, regardless of their race [or] their color,” she later recalled. “It doesn’t bother me too much,” adding that she simply avoided associating with hostile individuals.\(^{29}\) Moreover, though Coney’s family lived through the Depression, they did not suffer economically like most African Americans. George Weather’s connections as a local business agent meant that Coney’s stepfather Oscar Weathers always had employment, even during the height of the Depression. In addition, Coney witnessed firsthand how her family seemed

\(^{27}\) Boomhower, “Mattie Coney,” 58-60.
\(^{28}\) Coney Interview, Stone, Tape 1, B.
\(^{29}\) Ibid., Tape 1, B.
to profit from the free enterprise system, and she fondly recalled their successes. Thus, the basic principles of uplift that Delia Weathers worked to instill in her daughter—individual initiative, industriousness, morality, responsibility, and respectability—seemed to bring both economic and social success to the family. Indeed, according to Coney’s worldview, success was directly correlated with hard work and individual initiative; success was simply a matter of struggle and perseverance.

Coney’s fond recollections should be scrutinized as reflections of her political agenda and savvy. The early to mid-1920s—the period during which Coney was a “happy little girl”—marked the highpoint of Klan intimidation and violence in Indiana. In 1926, the year before Coney graduated from high school, Indianapolis’s city council, which was dominated by Klan members, passed a zoning ordinance intended to maintain residential segregation. Though the ordinance eventually was declared unconstitutional, efforts to restrict black housing persisted. Yet Coney never mentioned the Ku Klux Klan or Klan violence in any of her interviews or speeches as the Forum’s executive director, and as her 1980 interview suggests, she downplayed the pervasiveness of Jim Crow segregation in Indianapolis. Undoubtedly, Coney and her family, like all African Americans in Indiana at the time, lived in the shadows of the Klan’s influence and power. Indeed, one wonders whether Delia Weathers’s motherly advice to remain calm and speak with deference reflected the pervasiveness of violence, not the absence of it.³⁰

At the same time, Coney had good cause to downplay any past encounters with racist whites. On the one hand, such denials fit within her broader attempts to locate the

source of enduring black inequality within the African-American community itself. By emphasizing the successes of her family while simultaneously disregarding the degrading effects of the Jim Crow system, Coney testified to the effectiveness of individual self-help and personal uplift, the tenets upon which she based her program. According to this logic, her family’s success belied black radicals’ claims the capitalist system had failed African Americans. Furthermore, in denying that she ever “went around looking for trouble,” Coney reinforced her carefully crafted image as a benign figure who, even at a young age, despised rabblerousers and campus fomenters. In other words, Coney’s refusal to acknowledge the devastating effects of systemic racism perhaps reveals more about her efforts to cultivate an image of conservatism than her lived reality.

Upon earning her degree from Butler University, Coney embarked on a thirty-year teaching career in Indianapolis. It was then—as a fourth grade teacher at Indianapolis Public School Number 4, an all-black neighborhood elementary school—that Mattie Coney first began preaching the principles of racial uplift and self-help to Indianapolis’s black community. Charged with teaching fifty “incorrigible” children, Coney focused on practical, commonsense solutions to everyday problems. In many ways, Coney embraced the same philosophy articulated by Booker T. Washington, who famously disavowed liberal education in favor of industrial training in the early twentieth century. Like Washington, Coney maintained that learning foreign languages or mastering advanced mathematics was not as important as mastering basic rules of living. Thus, she not only pushed her students to improve their diction and hone their spelling skills; she also advised children to speak “respectfully” in a well-modulated voice, to walk instead of run, to eat their food quietly and keep their mouths closed when they
chewed, and most important, to be kind, courteous, and respectful of all people, even those individuals who were prejudiced against African Americans.31

At the same time, Coney advised her students on the virtues of responsibility, thrift, and cleanliness. On the one hand, students learned how to conserve and protect their school supplies. For example, Coney taught pupils how to wrap library books in protective newspapers, so students could enjoy them the following year.32 On the other hand, Coney introduced children to simple economics and thrift. When a little girl could not afford to pay her book rental fees one year, Coney helped her secure a morning paper route for the city’s black newspaper, the Indianapolis Recorder. After the girl paid her fee, Coney helped her manage the leftover money and rewarded her by submitting her picture to the newspaper for publication.33 In addition, Coney emphasized the importance of cleanliness. She talked about “rusty knees,” grooming, and dirty toes, and she never hesitated to inform a student that her face was dirty or that her hair needed to be shampooed and combed.34 As one former student recalled, Coney simply wanted her pupils to look and act perfectly.35

According to Coney, elementary school teachers were obligated to teach students about their responsibilities as American citizens. Not every student could become an astronaut, she reasoned, but every student could, in fact, become a good neighbor and citizen:

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32 Coney Interview, Stone, Tape 1, B.
34 Coney Interview, Stone, Tape 1, B.
35 Boomhower, “Mattie Coney,” 60.
There is no greater need [for character development] anywhere than in our elementary schools. We must turn out and feed into high schools children with better characters. Book learning is good, but the development of the character is most important.\footnote{“Needs for Higher Citizenship Standards Cited by Teacher,” \textit{Indianapolis Recorder}, July 25, 1964.}

Character development entailed teaching children how to be good neighbors, how to maintain a clean home and body, and how to set a good example. Teachers needed to instruct students in neighborhood pride and decorum, or they would succumb to society’s degrading influences, she argued.\footnote{“Citizens Forum Boosted by over 40 Block Clubs,” \textit{Indianapolis Recorder}, November 28, 1964.} In this way, Coney attributed incidents of boisterousness, vandalism, and profanity to improper training in the classroom. Such behaviors, she warned listeners, would lead to increased school dropout rates and general unhappiness in the black community.\footnote{“Need for Higher Citizenship Standards Cited by Teacher,” \textit{Indianapolis Recorder}, July 25, 1964; “Citizens Forum Tackles School Dropout Problem,” \textit{Indianapolis Recorder}, October 24, 1964.}

1.4 The Citizens Forum: Black Empowerment through Uplift

Such behaviors did not simply endanger students’ chances of lifelong success and happiness. Such unseemly behaviors ultimately jeopardized the entire black community’s chances at success—at least that is what Coney and a group of civic-minded professionals argued in the summer of 1964. That summer, the Indianapolis City Council debated whether or not to pass an open housing ordinance that would prohibit Indianapolis real-estate agents from refusing to show homes or negotiate sales based on a person’s race, creed, color, or national origin.\footnote{Boomhower, “Mattie Coney,” 60.} After listening to City Councilman Rufus C. Kuykendall and Reverend James Cummings lament that local realtors were using poor
neighborhood conditions in black communities as a wedge against the open housing ordinance, Coney organized a community meeting at the Fall Creek YMCA. At the meeting, Coney and several prominent black and white citizens who were “bent on furthering the quest for equality” discussed potential ways to quell white homeowners’ fears.\textsuperscript{40} “It was my hope,” she later said of the July 9 meeting, “that we could talk among ourselves and work some of these problems out. It seemed to me that if I were a good citizen, there shouldn’t be any reason…that I couldn’t move into a neighborhood that was more comfortable.”\textsuperscript{41}

Coney and the Fall Creek civic group proposed a temporary educational program to teach Indianapolis residents “where their privileges as a citizen ended and their responsibilities as a citizen began.” Such a program, they argued, would prompt each black resident to accept his or her individual responsibility of becoming a better neighbor. Put simply, “an informed neighbor made a better neighbor.”\textsuperscript{42} This proposal appealed to the City Council, and the Fall Creek group claimed a surprising victory when the Council voted five to four in favor of the ordinance, effectively allowing people of any race, creed, or color to move into any neighborhood in the city “as long as the standards of that neighborhood were met.”\textsuperscript{43}

This surprise victory prompted the incorporation of the Citizens Forum, Inc. The Citizens Forum, Coney argued, was an education program for Indianapolis’s masses.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 60; History of the Citizens Forum, July 12, 1983, box 5, folder 17, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
\textsuperscript{41} Lennis, “Hoosiers in Profile,” \textit{Indianapolis Star Magazine}, February 8, 1970.
\textsuperscript{42} History of the Citizens Forum, July 12, 1983, box 5, folder 17, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
“With the enactment of the Federal Civil Rights Law and the City Open Occupancy Ordinance, it is the Negro’s duty to drastically improve citizenship standards,” Coney told an audience of black clubwomen in 1965. Before black residents moved into white neighborhoods, they had to be sure that they could uphold that neighborhood’s current standard of living. Otherwise, white residents would abandon it, and integration would fail.\textsuperscript{44} New laws would not give true equality, she reasoned; only self-improvement and self-confidence on behalf of blacks could garner respect from white America.\textsuperscript{45}

Working alongside her husband Elmo, a local company salesman and distributor, Coney began her “Better Neighborhood Program” by organizing block clubs throughout the city. These clubs were essentially community action groups comprised of concerned citizens who were committed to initiating “positive changes” in their neighborhoods through self-help and uplift.\textsuperscript{46} Though block clubs functioned somewhat autonomously, Coney supplied each club president with an initial startup packet that included rules of conduct and suggested emphases. Coney urged block club members to be considerate of opponents who might resist change or criticism, but she also demanded that club members “stand their ground” and uphold the law in their communities. Forum officials maintained that illegal acts such as littering, boisterousness, and trespassing weakened the status of black neighborhoods. This, in turn, tarnished the black community’s image and impeded ongoing integration efforts.\textsuperscript{47} Accordingly, Forum leaders urged block club

\textsuperscript{44} “Need for Higher Citizenship Standards,” \textit{Recorder}; Coney Interview, by Mr. Haroldson, March, 6, 1967, box 6, folder 3, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{National Geographic}, March 1969, box 6, folder 1, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
\textsuperscript{46} Block club materials packet, box 6, folder 22, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.; Block club flyer, box 6, folder 24, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
members to take necessary steps toward improving not only their communities but also their images.

Coney encouraged block club leaders to “trumpet the sounds of morality, decency, and the dignity of hard work” to their neighbors in the hope that residents would develop an awareness of their responsibilities and obligations as American citizens.\(^{48}\) Using simple terms and language, Coney started by teaching block club leaders how to be good citizens and neighbors. She reasoned that club leaders would, in turn, pass those lessons on to their neighbors at monthly club meetings in their homes.\(^{49}\) The Forum proposed the following advice to block club members: keep your property neat and attractive; maintain a “well-groomed” appearance; conduct yourself in a “quiet and dignified manner”; respect neighbors’ property and privacy; avoid loitering; keep noise to a minimum; be alert and guard against degrading influences; instruct children in neighborhood pride, decorum, and respect; and finally, set a good example.\(^{50}\) According to Coney, the success or failure of the Open Occupancy Bill depended upon whether or not Indianapolis’s black residents adhered to these ten standards. In other words, the acquisition of black social equality depended on individual citizens’ willingness to embrace the tenets of racial uplift ideology and white middle-class propriety.

By 1966, the Forum claimed over 500 block clubs, and by 1971, the organization boasted over 2,000 clubs. These clubs operated somewhat autonomously, and each club maintained a different set of goals and expectations. Nevertheless, each club embraced

\(^{48}\) Citizens Forum to G. Wilbur Litter, February 27, 1979, box 6, folder 9, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.

\(^{49}\) Boomhower, “Mattie Coney,” 60; Coney, untitled, speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.

\(^{50}\) “Citizens Forum Series to Focus on Local Housing Opportunities,” Indianapolis Recorder, August 8, 1964.
the self-help ethos espoused by Coney and the Forum, and most clubs participated in Forum programs such as the “Go One Step Further Campaign,” which urged residents to sweep a foot beyond the street curb to help prevent drainage problems. The “De-RAT-ification” competition worked to reduce the city’s disease-causing rodent population. The Forum coordinated with various city agencies and religious organizations to promote the campaign, and Coney recruited participants by offering a monetary reward of 150 dollars to the champion “rat-killer.” The “Bloom-in,” on the other hand, encouraged residents and local greenhouses to donate spare seeds, flowers, and shrubs, so they could be redistributed among neighborhoods. Other programs included the Dogwood Tree Caravan, Visit Your Neighbor Month, a city-wide beautification program, Adopt-A-Park, Rake-A-Thons, and Concerts in the Parks.

Yet the Helping Hand Program, which began in 1973, was perhaps the Forum’s most successful and widely-recognized program. Originally titled “Improving the Citizenship of Our Children,” the Helping Hand program was a proposed solution to the problem of “unruly” children who allegedly threatened neighborhood stability. Children needed to act and play in a “civilized way,” Coney argued, and they needed to be taught the basic principles of neighborhood pride, decorum, and respect, both at home and at school. The Helping Hand program encouraged children and their parents to accept their individual responsibilities in promoting good citizenship and improving

53 Helping Hand handout, box 9, folder 15, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
neighborhood standards of good conduct.\textsuperscript{54} Children developed a sense of neighborhood pride and decorum by removing litter from streets, yards, and alleyways. In addition, the program cultivated a sense of civic duty by encouraging students to participate in patriotic activities such as displaying the American flag on appropriate holidays, writing letters to congressmen, and attending political workshops at the state legislature. Finally, the citizenship program encouraged participants to interact and cooperate with local law enforcement officials, so they could gain respect for the law and the people who enforced it.\textsuperscript{55} By 1980, the program spread to dozens of cities and towns throughout the country, including the nation’s capital. Indeed, the program boasted over eleven thousand volunteers in Indianapolis alone.\textsuperscript{56}

Like all Citizens Forum programs, the Helping Hand initiative reflected the organization’s broader attempts to ameliorate the image and status of Indianapolis’s black community. Helping Hand volunteers received a poster depicting a large red hand, which participants displayed prominently in a front window or doorway. The sign warned students that an adult was monitoring their behavior as they walked to and from school. “How is your ‘image’ showing?” it asked, reminding African-American youngsters that their behavior influenced the image of the entire black community.\textsuperscript{57} In this way, the Helping Hand program represented a continuation of the character development strategies that Coney initiated as a fourth-grade teacher. Though Coney retired from teaching in 1965, the projects she developed as executive director of the Forum reflected her belief

\textsuperscript{54} Letter to Indianapolis public school principals, box 9, folder 19, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
\textsuperscript{55} Goals of ‘Improving the Citizenship of Our Children’ program, box 11, folder 10, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
\textsuperscript{56} Quarterly report, box 2, folder 8, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
\textsuperscript{57} Helping Hand poster, box 9, folder 15, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
that education entailed more than book learning; education also included character
development, a principal strategy of racial uplift.

Coney praised participating schools that introduced concepts like self-control,
punctuality, obedience, cleanliness, and industry into their curriculums. Such training,
she contended, helped “lift the negative self-image” of black pupils and gave them a
sense of belonging.\footnote{Citizenship suggestions, box 11, folder 10, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.} According to Coney, character development programs not only
improved the psyches of young black children; character development also uplifted the
psyche of the race as a whole and improved the image of the black community. Black
children who spoke in well-modulated voices and exhibited controlled smiles and laughs
were “good citizens” and credits to their race. Conversely, children who failed to adopt
these habits were detriments to both their race and their nation.\footnote{Improving Citizenship flyer, box 11, folder 10, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.}

At the same time, Helping Hand citizenship programs reflected Coney’s ideas on
citizen obligation and self-help. According to Coney, if someone claimed the benefits of
U.S. citizenship, then he or she had a corresponding obligation to be a good citizen. All
Americans—whether young or old, and regardless of race, creed, education, or
socioeconomic status—were obligated to contribute to their communities. “The survival,
sound growth, and development of modern America,” Coney argued, depended on each
individual’s ability to build constantly and consistently “the character that insures human
freedom and individual dignity.”\footnote{Ibid.} In short, the survival of modern America hinged upon
whether or not black children became “good citizens.”
Though the Helping Hand program focused primarily on citizenship training and character development in schools, Coney contended that such training should begin in the home with example and precept.\textsuperscript{61} Wives and mothers, in particular, needed to maintain healthy and productive home environments. Inner city home environments were “going down the drain” because women consistently neglected their duties as responsible wives and mothers. Consequently, youths were unruly and wholly unaware of their responsibilities as budding American citizens. Mothers, she insisted, needed to realize that citizenship must be taught in the home and practiced on a daily basis.\textsuperscript{62} Being an American citizen, Coney reminded black mothers, meant being responsible and acting constructively, yet it also entailed conforming to certain standards of propriety, in particular good grooming. Indeed, a child who failed to maintain a well-groomed appearance “painted an unfavorable image” of the race, and consequently, he or she affirmed whites’ suspicions of black cultural impropriety.\textsuperscript{63}

Thus, parents were obligated to keep their children “well-groomed” at all times. Forum member and elementary school teacher Bertha D. Brown cautioned African-American parents about their duties to keep up their children’s appearances:

Remember that the care and appearance of your children are your responsibility…They are citizens who will represent and carry on this cultural development in this great awakening into the future. This is good training for them…that will make [them] a desirable neighbor for anyone.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Coney, grant proposal, box 2, folder 23, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
Brown advised boys against wearing shorts, and she cautioned young girls against wearing pin-up rollers in public. Such behaviors, she wrote, were immodest and unbecoming, and therefore, they were contrary to basic American culture and values. Any black mother who failed to uphold these standards was, in fact, failing her duties as both a mother and an American citizen, Brown concluded. As Brown’s article suggests, Forum leaders articulated a gendered form of uplift ideology that linked respectable black motherhood to a woman’s ability to claim the status of “good citizen.” Pure black motherhood became both a requisite and signifier of black citizenship and uplift. Accordingly, black motherhood assumed a politicized status of importance, as the image of the race depended upon whether or not black mothers upheld their duties.

In this way, Coney and her colleagues at the Citizens Forum tied racial uplift and the politics of respectability to American citizenship. According to this equation, individuals who repudiated white middle-class norms were lesser citizens who posed a threat to the progress of the race as a whole. Because white eyes were scrutinizing black behavior more closely than ever, black residents had to remain vigilant and do everything in their power to assure whites that blacks were worthy of mutual recognition and respect. Thus, Bertha Brown concluded:

The lag in cultural standards on the part of Negroes has given…the white race reason for our being undesirable neighbors to them…We would resent the criticism that we are a race with little pride, decency, or a little knowledge of what is appropriate. Therefore, to avoid this criticism, let us take an introspective view and act accordingly.66

65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
Coney agreed, adding that no minority group could ever rise above the conduct of the majority of that group.\textsuperscript{67} If black residents failed to live up to the standards of moral decency and neighborliness, then they essentially “crucified their own” and gave prejudiced whites a wedge which they could use to fight integration.\textsuperscript{68}

1.5 Conclusion: The Contradictions of Uplift and Respectability

To help mitigate this threat, Coney articulated a vision of race progress epitomized by home stability and mutually rewarding relations between the “better classes” of whites and blacks in Indianapolis. Like the black clubwomen and churchwomen of the Progressive period, Coney constructed a barrier between “respectable Negroes” who embraced middle-class morality, and the “vulgar and common” masses of inner-city blacks who seemed to repudiate such norms. On the one hand, Coney pleaded for whites to recognize her individuality and not refer to blacks as “you people” or “they.” African Americans did not constitute a monolithic group, she contended. “There are as many different kinds of Negroes as there are white people, and most of them deplore the bad reputation they have been given,” Coney informed an audience of churchwomen in Peoria, Illinois. “Responsible Negroes respect life and property,” she added, creating a binary between African Americans who respected life and property and African Americans who allegedly destroyed them.\textsuperscript{69} Such rhetoric drew parallels between her respectability and the respectability of her white counterparts. “I’m

\textsuperscript{67} “Citizens Forum Boosted by over 40 Block Clubs,” \textit{Indianapolis Recorder}, November 28, 1964.
\textsuperscript{68} Transcribed interview, box 6, folder 3, Citizens Forum Records, IHS; Donna Knight, “Mattie Coney Asks Neighborliness,” 1971, box 4, folder 32, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
\textsuperscript{69} Coney, untitled, speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
an individual. I am an American,” she insisted, asserting that she was, in fact, no different than her white, middle-class audience.70

Coney drew parallels between white and black middle-class respectability in other ways. The press invariably referenced Coney’s marital status, oftentimes referring to her as “Mrs. Elmo Coney.” Historically, African-American women have used titles to defend their names and images against the verbal slander of racist whites. For example, black clubwomen of the late nineteenth century asserted their respectability by using such as titles “Mrs.” or “Madam.” Mary McLeod Bethune, an educator and founder of the National Council of Negro Women, famously chided a young white nurse who referred to her simply as “Mary.” On another occasion, when a White House guard patronizingly referred to her as “auntie,” Bethune deflected his insult by asking earnestly, “Which one of my brothers’ children are you?”71 Members of the Citizens Forum employed similar tactics. In their daily lives and public utterances, members emphasized their respectable status by using titles such as “Mrs.,” “Miss,” or “Mr.” and by adorning suits, dresses, and hats. Indeed, reporters often complemented Coney’s fashionable hats and clothes, and they even commented on her beauty, noting how she was light-skinned, attractive, and fashionable.72

However, by emphasizing and adopting the terms of white middle-class morality and respectability, Coney validated an evolutionary theory of progress that placed her and

70 “Mrs. Coney Inspires Arts and Study Club,” Zionsville Times, November 18, 1971, box 4, folder 29, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
71 Gaines, Uplifting the Race, 57.
other “respectable Negroes” above ostensibly lower-class blacks who allegedly lacked such pride and initiative. Most important, Coney relied on racist images and associations to bolster her claims of class superiority, for her positive representations of assimilated, well-educated blacks were interdependent with the image of the supposedly morally deficient lower classes.73 For example, Coney often described lower-class, uneducated African Americans as lazy, ignorant, and idle, descriptors with firm roots in proslavery rhetoric.74 Indeed, Coney did not contradict negative racial stereotypes; rather, she affirmed them in her rhetoric. Here again, Coney mimicked her predecessors in the NACW and the national black Baptist women’s convention. Like the previous generation of black clubwomen and churchwomen, Coney confirmed her superior social status by unwittingly reinforcing negative racial stereotypes linked to theories of urban pathology and black deficiency. In other words, racial uplift’s moral assumptions of urban pathology “reflected a developmental construction of race and class that bestowed on ‘better class’ blacks an illusionary sense of self-importance, even as it divested poor urban blacks of agency and humanity.”75

In doing so, Coney confirmed the commonplace belief that urban poverty and blighted neighborhoods in black communities were linked to black people’s own moral and cultural deficiencies. Coney overlooked systemic racism as a source of ghetto malaise, and she often downplayed the culpability of racist whites. Indeed, Coney argued that black behavioral and cultural deficiencies were the sources of social and economic

73 Gaines, Uplifting the Race, 75.
74 See, for example, Coney, “Women’s Day Speech,” speech, May 16, 1965, box 6, folder 8, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
75 Gaines, Uplifting the Race, 158.
strife in America’s inner cities. Slums, she argued, were made by people, not bricks and mortar. One of her popularized expressions—what she and the press termed “Mattieisms”—reminded people that “bad neighborhoods develop because individuals fail…If one is sloppy in one part of town, he will be the same in another neighborhood. You just do not get culture on a moving van!”

According to Coney, no one was so poor that he could not place trash in a receptacle; no one was so underprivileged that he could not wash his face, comb his hair, or wear clean clothes; and no one was so culturally deprived that he had to loiter and avoid hard work.

Coney thus mistook the effects of structural racism for its causes and attributed entrenched social inequality—epitomized by bad neighborhoods, slums, and ghettos—to nonconformity. For instance, one “Mattieism” reminded readers that people needed to be taught to live in an acceptable way: “In a mobile society such as we have, those who live in a run-down, poorly kept, dirty neighborhood may move into a better one, bringing their negative habits with them.”

If newly arrived black residents failed to uphold a particular neighborhood’s standard of living, whites would simply abandon it for clean suburban one, and integration would collapse. As such, successful integration depended on black people’s ability and willingness to abandon “immoral” behaviors in favor of “moral” ones. This emphasis on individual behavior inevitably blamed blacks for their own victimization and seemed to privatize issues of racial inequality, in effect

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76 “Citizens Forum Series to Focus on Local Housing Opportunities,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, August 8, 1964; Citizens Forum pamphlet, box 84, Lugar Collection, UIMA.
77 Coney, untitled, speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
78 Citizens Forum pamphlet, box 84, Lugar Collection, UIMA.
diminishing the federal government’s authority to mitigate the causes and consequences of de facto segregation and discrimination.\textsuperscript{79}

Nevertheless, Mattie Coney’s claims to respectability invariably contained a subversive element. Individual adherence to the tenets of respectability certainly enabled Coney and other members of the Citizens Forum to counter racist images and structures, in effect giving them a semblance of control over their public images. Such assertions of respectability were explicit rejections of Darwinian explanations of blacks’ biological difference and inferiority. Moreover, racial self-help and uplift served as a platform from which African Americans could demand full civic equality. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues that black women who adopted the rhetoric of racial uplift were, in fact, civil rights activists who stood at the nexus between respectability and protest. As Higginbotham aptly notes, “Speaking up for rights constituted not the antithesis of respectability but its logical conclusion.”\textsuperscript{80} In other words, respectability politics and civil rights activism were not antipodes; rather, respectability offered a legitimate pathway to black equality and acceptance. Thus, Coney celebrated the 1954 \textit{Brown v. Board of Education} decision and welcomed black voter registration initiatives.\textsuperscript{81} The Citizens Forum’s articles of incorporation listed the smooth implementation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Indianapolis Open Occupancy Ordinance as the organization’s primary goal.\textsuperscript{82} Racial uplift engendered racial pride, she argued, linking uplift to black liberation.

\textsuperscript{79} Higginbotham, \textit{Righteous Discontent}, 202.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 221.
\textsuperscript{81} Coney, “Women’s Day Speech,” speech, May 16, 1965, box 6, folder 8, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
\textsuperscript{82} Articles of Incorporation, February 11, 1971, box 1, folder 16, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
Yet such overt emphases on the norms of middle-class respectability perhaps says more about the centrality of race in American society and culture and the vulnerability of blacks’ newfound equality than it does about Mattie Coney’s alleged agency or complicity.83 In many ways, Coney’s claims to middle-class respectability constituted a defensive appropriation of dominant racial stereotypes and images. The visible rise of black militancy and the black power movement helped fuel the burgeoning conservative movement that threatened to upend blacks’ legal, social, and political gains of the early 1960s. Coney worked within this conservative backlash—a theme that is explored more thoroughly in Chapters 2 and 3—and she appropriated its language to serve her organization’s interests. But this strategy was defensive. On the one hand, Coney’s claims to respectability contradicted the New Right’s gendered, stigmatizing labels like “welfare queen.” On the other hand, Coney’s rhetoric betrayed middle-class blacks’ concerns regarding the stability of African-American families and communities, most importantly, their enduring vulnerability post 1965.

Historian Darlene Clark Hine has used the phrase “culture of dissemblance” to describe the ways in which black women “created the appearance of disclosure or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma to whites.” According to Hine, black women’s ability to dissemble and achieve power through self-imposed invisibility enabled their survival in a hostile, racialized world that they neither made nor controlled.84 Hine uses the phrase “culture of dissemblance” to

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83 Gaines, Uplifting the Race, xv.
describe southern black women’s efforts to counter negative stereotypes regarding black female sexuality; nevertheless, the concept of dissemblance raises important questions about racial uplift ideology espoused by middle-class blacks like Mattie Coney, specifically whether Coney’s unwavering belief in the promises of racial uplift was grounded in resistance or whether it reflected her genuine embrace of white middle-class propriety and its attendant social norms and expectations.

Hine’s concept of dissemblance also suggests that racial uplift ideology and the politics of respectability cannot be reduced to a simple accommodationist stance or a compensatory ideology of passive resistance. Indeed, racial uplift ideology as espoused by Mattie Coney was as complex as it was fluid, and it contained both subversive and normative impulses. Racial uplift constituted a framework that enabled Coney to push quietly for social equality and recognition without engendering a white backlash. Moreover, uplift enabled Coney to control her public image by personally defying dominant racial stereotypes. Nevertheless, this framework was situated within the dominant framework of white middle-class propriety and its attendant norms, expectations, and values. Although Coney implicitly challenged racist assumptions by maintaining an organized and widely celebrated program that commanded respect from both blacks and whites, Coney was beholden to the expectations of middle-class respectability and dominant American society.
CHAPTER 2. THE PRAGMATIC POLITICS OF BLACK CONSERVATISM

2.1 Introduction

Shortly after Richard Nixon’s election as president in 1968, Mattie Coney delivered a speech before an audience of clubwomen. In her address, Coney heralded Nixon’s election as the nation’s dawn from a dark night of frustration. President Nixon, she insisted, would elevate every aspect of national life. With his emphasis on individual responsibility and community action, Nixon promised to regenerate the spirit of the nation and restore its sense of purpose. His election, she concluded, marked the beginning of a golden era for America:

Now is the time for old, wonderful, tested principles to be fully restored in American life, attached to brand new dreams for the Republic…Let us plunge ahead with new dreams of triumph, glory, and achievement for the people of America, united not in cankerous groups as white power, black power, establishment power, or anarchy power, but as Americans devoted to the American credo working toward the fulfillment of the American Dream.

This particular speech is significant, for it elucidates the ways in which Coney came to identify and celebrate traditional Republican values as pathways to the American Dream. Simply put, Coney associated individualism with the triumph of American glory. For Coney, modern conservatism not only promised the restoration of “law and order,” but also the restoration of America itself. When Coney founded the Citizens Forum in the summer of 1964, she stood at the intersection of race, civil rights, modern conservatism, and party politics. As the Forum’s executive director, she negotiated a seemingly
irreconcilable space between her commitment to black equality and modern conservatism.¹

Coney maneuvered within this tenuous space by articulating an alternative civil rights vision that appealed to conservative white audiences while offering tangible benefits to poor black communities. This chapter explores the origins, nuances, and contradictions of Coney’s unique brand of conservatism. In addition, this chapter considers the ways in which Coney mastered the nuances of the conservative political arena and manipulated the white media to legitimize her cause. In her speeches and writings to conservative white audiences, Coney ridiculed radical black nationalists and imbued the language of racial uplift with the language of conservative individualism. By adopting this rhetoric, Coney elevated the Citizens Forum’s platform and secured funds and recognition for her organization.

Coney’s pragmatic embrace of conservative rhetoric demonstrates the complex ways in which the black freedom struggle and the American conservative movement interacted and, at times, overlapped. As Chapter 1 revealed, Coney’s version of racial uplift cannot be reduced to simple accommodationism; likewise, Coney’s particular brand of conservatism should not be labeled as traitorous and therefore irreconcilable with the egalitarianism of the civil rights movement. Coney avidly supported the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and she genuinely believed that integration was a moral imperative. Yet Coney did not believe that laws alone could usher in true equality—only self-help and self-improvement on the part of African Americans could meaningful social equality

¹ Coney, untitled, speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
for black Americans, she argued. Thus, in the aftermath of 1964, as the GOP abandoned its overt attacks on integration and polished its coded, race-neutral rhetoric centered on individual rights, free enterprise, and freedom of choice, more African Americans, Coney included, began to support it.

According to Coney, embracing this gospel of colorblind individualism was pragmatic for the race as a whole because it promised to deliver black economic independence and social equality, two shortcomings of liberal civil rights legislation and protest. By the mid-1960s, Coney was disillusioned with the idealism and abstract dogma of Great Society liberalism, which she alleged had failed to effect tangible changes in urban black communities and left the country billions of dollars in debt. Federal overreach, she charged, cost African-American taxpayers billions of dollars each year, money that could and should be reserved for the preservation and beautification of black communities.² At the same time, Coney’s embrace of conservatism was pragmatic for her individually, both politically and socially. Her charged criticisms of Great Society liberalism and black power constituted practical ways to achieve sociopolitical power at the exact moment when the civil rights movement fractured and the Right strengthened its resolve to dismantle the welfare state systematically. In pushing her agenda through conservative networks and institutions, Coney cultivated political and social relationships with conservative leaders who not only showered her with praise and accolades but also promoted and funded her organization. Working within

² Coney, “Justice with Order,” speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
conservatism enabled her to fight for black equality even as white Americans’ interest in civil rights waned.

As the historian Leah Wright Rigueur points out, black Republicans did not blindly support the conservatism of the GOP; rather, they tried to expand the boundaries of the party’s ideology in order to include the needs and interests of America’s black citizens.\(^3\) For Coney, this entailed emphasizing the moral imperatives of integration, black voting, and equal housing while simultaneously injecting uplift ideology and the politics of respectability into conservative discourse. This rhetorical strategy created a division between the “good” behavior of blacks collectively and the “bad” actions of a few wayward individuals. At the same time, however, Coney invariably denied the existence of a black collective identity, in part because such an identity belied claims of black heterogeneity. Indeed, like the version of racial uplift from which it sprang, Coney’s brand of conservatism was complex, fluid, and, at times, contradictory.

2.2 1964: A Summer of Change

When Mattie Coney founded the Citizens Forum in the summer of 1964, she was responding to the rapidly changing political, social, and cultural milieu of 1960s America. The summer of 1964 marked a pivotal moment in the history of the long civil rights movement. On July 2, after months of intense Congressional debate and legislative maneuvering, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Bill into law. The Civil Rights Act constituted the most sweeping civil rights legislation passed by

Congress since Reconstruction. The provisions in it effectively outlawed segregation in private businesses such as hotels, theaters, restaurants, and stores. Furthermore, the act banned discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in employment and hiring practices, and it forbade segregation in public spaces such as libraries, public schools, swimming pools, and parks. Most Americans heralded the 1964 Civil Rights Act as a landmark accomplishment. The act represented the culmination of the ongoing civil rights movement, and many Americans, Coney included, believed it would usher in swift, profound, and, meaningful changes.⁴

Yet just a few weeks later, race-related rioting ripped through seven northern U.S. cities, including Harlem, Rochester, and Philadelphia. Anger over chronic poverty and enduring police brutality prompted the rioting, which resulted in hundreds of injuries, arrests, and deaths, and contributed to millions of dollars worth of property damage in urban communities. In Harlem, more than one hundred people were injured and another 450 were arrested during a six-day spate of rioting in mid-July. Three days of rioting in North Philadelphia injured 339 people and caused an estimated three million dollars worth of property damage to white-owned businesses.⁵ Northern rioting resulted in more than lost lives and property damage, though; the 1964 riots undermined the notion of racial progress and highlighted the urgent need for broad social and economic reforms in African-American communities outside of the South. In short, the 1964 Civil Rights Act did not change the lived realities of black people living in northern cities.

In Indianapolis, fear gripped both whites and blacks who worried that race-related rioting would rip apart their communities. Many black residents began fortifying their homes and businesses while black leaders pleaded with residents to think rationally about what, exactly, rioting accomplished. However, some black radicals welcomed rioting as a form of revolution. When the *Indianapolis Recorder* asked readers whether a riot could happen in Indianapolis, one black youth proclaimed that he would welcome violence if it erupted in Indianapolis.\(^6\) Such fear and restlessness, in combination with actual rioting in places like North Philadelphia and Harlem, jarred Mattie Coney, who worried about the negative, long-term consequences that such violence would have on the black freedom struggle. Indeed, Coney later recalled that the threat of an impending riot in Indianapolis was one of the underlying reasons she founded the Citizens Forum. Burning black communities, she reasoned, did not constitute progress toward black equality. It undermined it.\(^7\)

The 1964 Act did not eliminate racial violence in the South either. On August 4, 1964, a month and two days after President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, federal investigators uncovered the bodies of three missing civil rights workers in Neshoba County, Mississippi. The three men—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—had been volunteers working for a voter registration campaign known as Freedom Summer, which sought to dramatize southern racism and draw attention to violent voter repression in the state of Mississippi. On June 21, 1964, a day after Andrew Goodman set foot in Mississippi, he and the other two volunteers were murdered by

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\(^7\) Coney Interview, Stone, Tape 2, A.
Klansmen. The slayings of Goodman and Schwerner—two white, northern, college-educated men—outraged the American public and sparked a massive federal investigation. The state of Mississippi refused to arrest or bring charges against the culprits, many of whom were police officers and city officials. Finally, in 1967, the Justice Department indicted nineteen accused men, seven of whom received sentences of up to ten years, including Sheriff Lawrence Rainey and Sheriff’s Deputy Cecil Price. The case marked the first time since Reconstruction that federal prosecutors used federal civil rights legislation to prosecute and convict a lynch mob.\footnote{Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, \textit{We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi} (New York: Nation Books, 2006), xii.}

Nevertheless, the three murders cast a shadow on the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In many ways, the murders seemed to confirm just how deeply racism was ingrained not only in the South but also in the North. Members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) understood that they were making a calculated appeal to white Americans’ sympathies when they recruited northern white volunteers for the Mississippi Summer Project; however, SNCC veterans such as James Forman, Bob Moses, Dave Dennis, and Stokely Carmichael were appalled to see how effective this tactic had been. The government’s swift response and whites’ indignation over the murders revealed precisely how much more the American people valued white lives over black lives. SNCC’s veteran leaders simply could not stomach the fact that Mississippi might finally change as a result of the murders of two white men, when black men and women had been dying there at the hands of whites for the past century.\footnote{Ibid., 412.}
Thus, when Dave Dennis, the director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in Mississippi, gave a eulogy at James Chaney’s memorial service, he spoke cutting words to the audience:

I’m not going to stand here and ask anyone not to be angry, not to be bitter tonight! I’ve got vengeance in my heart tonight, and I ask you to feel angry with me…We’ve got to stand up. The best way we can remember James Chaney is to demand our rights…If you go back home and sit down and take what these white men in Mississippi are doing to us…if you take it, and don’t do something about it…then God damn you souls!

Black people, he insisted, had to stop bowing down to white supremacy. Instead, blacks needed to hold their heads up and demand, “We want our freedom now!”

Dennis’s call for immediate action signaled a fundamental shift in the tone of the civil rights movement, namely SNCC’s retreat from the youthful optimism of the early 1960s and its tactical shift toward radical militancy and black power. By the end of the summer, SNCC was a fundamentally different organization than it had been prior to the start of the summer project. In the aftermath of Freedom Summer, SNCC members began questioning the legitimacy of interracial equality and integration as more members heeded Dennis’s call and began demanding “freedom now.”

Though Coney supported Freedom Summer’s voter registration campaign and probably mourned the volunteers’ deaths, she renounced the radical turn that followed. Dennis’s anger did not accomplish anything for suffering black communities, she reasoned, because such anger bred disillusionment among blacks and alienated sympathetic whites. Anger, she concluded, was fruitless and destructive, not empowering.

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11 Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 412.

12 “‘Catalyst Talks to Women,’” *States-Item*, July 14, 1971, box 4, folder 29, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
Urban rioting, combined with SNCC’s public shift toward black nationalism, strengthened the burgeoning conservative movement. The most prominent conservative figure to emerge in the early 1960s was Barry Goldwater. Goldwater rose to national prominence as a hard-line senator from Arizona who opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 on the grounds that it interfered with states’ rights and individual choice. Goldwater’s unapologetic stance on issues like integration, federal overreach, and states’ rights appealed to white southern Democrats who increasingly felt alienated within the Democratic Party. When Goldwater announced his candidacy in January 1964 and subsequently won the Republican presidential nomination in July of that year, several prominent southern Democrats, including Governors George Wallace of Alabama, Paul B. Johnson, Jr., of Mississippi, and Orval Faubus of Arkansas, publically declared their support for the Goldwater ticket. While Goldwater lost to Johnson in a landslide election, he invigorated the New Right, and his candidacy marked the beginning stages of the conservative revolution of the 1970s and 1980s that attempted to roll back the civil rights victories of the 1960s.13

The founding of the Citizens Forum in July 1964 constituted Coney’s response to the broad social, political, and cultural issues surrounding these four separate but interrelated events: the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, race-related rioting, the rising militancy of activist organizations such as SNCC, and the reinvigoration of modern conservatism. On the one hand, Coney was a lifelong member of the NAACP, and she heralded the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which seemed to open up new

opportunities for African-American citizens. On the other hand, however, urban unrest and rising militancy troubled Coney, who worried that black radicalism would undermine the legislative gains of the mid-1960s. African Americans could not demand “freedom now” if they refused to embrace their individual responsibilities as American citizens, she concluded.14 Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Coney identified with conservative values such as personal responsibility, individualism, and an unwavering commitment to American institutions, traditions, and authority. Indeed, Coney believed that conservatism would succeed where Great Society liberalism had failed; conservatism, she argued, would forge new, more direct pathways to black social equality.

2.3 A Black Silent Majority

Unlike far-right Republicans such as Goldwater, Coney embraced certain aspects of civil rights activism, and she tried to expand the boundaries of modern conservatism to include the needs of African Americans. Intellectual and political ideas of conservatism change over time, and definitions of “conservative” and “conservatism” are fluid because conservatism meant many different things to different people. Therefore, it is important to define loosely what it meant to be both “conservative” and black during the mid-twentieth century. On the one hand, black conservative thought in the mid-twentieth century was rooted in the twin ideologies of racial uplift and respectability, and it emphasized the importance of self-help. On the other hand, black conservatism drew upon a set of broad principles historically connected to the Republican Party:

14 Coney, “Citizenship,” speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
anticommunism; free market enterprise and capitalism; self-help and personal responsibility; limited federal intervention; and an unwavering respect for authority, tradition, and precedent.\textsuperscript{15}

Some of these principles have been essential elements of black political thought since the nineteenth century. For example, radical black leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, and Ida B. Wells spoke frequently about the merits of collective uplift, self-help, and community control. The premise of conservative individualism distinguishes black conservatives from their radical counterparts. Black conservatives living in the mid-twentieth century sought to transcend race and assert identities as individuals who were self-created and therefore independent of the black collective. Accordingly, black conservatives deemed race irrelevant and insignificant. Through racial transcendence, black conservatives allegedly departed from the flawed thinking of the collective and achieved self-realization and wisdom, which they imparted with brutal honesty to the broader African-American community.\textsuperscript{16} Nevertheless, all black Republicans understood conservatism as a legitimate solution, one that could further the quest for social equality and freedom in the United States. In this sense, black conservatives navigated a tension between emphatically denying the existence of a black collective and promoting black conservatism as a pathway toward black independence.\textsuperscript{17}

Furthermore, black conservatives generally defined equality differently than most African Americans. Whereas black radicals such as Stokely Carmichael and James

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Forman increasingly defined freedom using the nationalistic language of black power, Mattie Coney and other black conservatives defined freedom using terms such as individual responsibility, hard work, and initiative. “Freedom can be anything from a balanced order of liberty to extreme license, everything from responsible citizenship to anarchy,” Coney posited. She then distinguished between what she termed “negative freedom” and “responsible freedom.” Individuals who espoused negative freedom desired freedom from responsibility, she argued, and consequently, they exploited the hard work of others. Young black revolutionaries allegedly fell within this category. Self-indulgence and an interminable desire for wealth, power, and influence drove African Americans who sought negative freedom.¹⁸

On the other hand, African Americans earned responsible freedom through hard work and individual initiative. “Freedom is when citizens act positively, individually, or collectively to solve their problems,” Elmo Coney informed readers of the Indianapolis Star.¹⁹ Unlike negative freedom, responsible freedom was tempered with restraint and understanding, and it entailed being a good citizen and neighbor. Responsible freedom, in other words, demanded embracing the tenets of racial uplift ideology and middle-class respectability. Americans needed to talk less about freedom and equality and instead talk more about individual responsibility and respectability, Mattie Coney asserted.²⁰ Freedom was not free; it had to be earned through hard work, pride, and self-improvement. Anyone who was willing to “pay the price and accept their individual

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¹⁸ Coney, “Responsibility of the Underprivileged,” speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
²⁰ Coney, “It’s a State of Mind!,” speech, March 27, 1969, box 3, folder 5, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
responsibility as a good citizen is FREE,” Elmo Coney concluded, echoing his wife’s viewpoints.21

Thus, freedom was the earned product of a person’s initiative rather than federal law, and individual rights rested upon the virtuous citizenry’s willingness to defend traditional values and moral authority. African Americans who insisted that they were underprivileged or disadvantaged because of their race were simply “lazy,” Coney contended, again reinforcing racial stereotypes. Because freedom derived from one’s work ethic, being underprivileged was simply a “state of mind,” something that could be changed if someone possessed enough willpower. Since the enactment of the Civil Rights Bill, African Americans had access to more freedoms and opportunities than ever before: blacks had the freedom to vote, to work, to own property, and to enjoy a high standard of living. Blacks who claimed to be disadvantaged ultimately denied the existence of such opportunities and therefore chose to be disadvantaged. Conversely, anyone who chose to conduct himself like a “good citizen” seized newfound opportunities and chose to be free.22

As such, anyone who failed to be a productive citizen was essentially a parasite, someone who exploited the hard work of good citizens and stole taxpayer dollars. The tax-paying citizen assumed the expenses produced by the “sordid conglomerate of crime” proliferating in inner cities and on college campuses, Coney maintained.23 According to Coney, this group of dependents constituted a class of delusional “welfare slaves”:

22 Coney, “Responsibility of the Underprivileged,” speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
23 Coney, “Get up off Your Apathy,” speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS; Coney, untitled, speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
The idea of expecting a “Great White Father” to hand one something for nothing is an economic impossibility, and has created a class of irresponsible welfare slaves…We must get rid of the idea that all one needs is to satisfy one’s gullet, get drunk, have children, and throw them out into the community and someone will care for them. No one can act like an inferior and then demand respect as an equal.24

As this passage implies, Coney understood welfare dependency as a matter of personal choice rather than a reflection of systemic poverty rooted in economic, political, and racial injustice. Poverty was simply a “state of mind,” a reflection of people’s unwillingness to embrace their responsibilities as productive citizens. Poverty, she argued, was the inevitable product of negative freedom.

There was a vast disconnect between Coney’s rhetoric and the lived realities of black Americans, though. In many ways, Coney failed to distinguish between discrimination in law, *de jure*, and discrimination in fact, *de facto*. As a result, she overestimated the opportunities that civil rights legislation afforded to African Americans, especially those living in northern ghettos. Despite Coney’s proclamations to the contrary, the 1954 *Brown* decision and the 1964 Civil Rights Act did not change the majority of black people’s lived realities. As the previous discussion regarding the summer of 1964 revealed, federal legislation failed to protect civil rights workers from violent reprisals, and urban rioting destroyed any notion of racial progress in northern cities. By limiting her definition of discrimination to the legal realm, Coney downplayed the pervasive and devastating effects of discrimination in all of its varied forms, and she obfuscated the broad, systemic forms of oppression underlying black social and economic

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inequality. Thus, when Coney proclaimed that black people simply needed to “work harder” and seize newfound opportunities, she failed to acknowledge how those opportunities were limited, at best.

However, charged criticisms of black “welfare slaves” worked well rhetorically for Coney. Chapter 3 examines how Coney made allusions to slavery in order to legitimize an alternative economic and civil rights movement for African Americans. For the purposes of this chapter, though, it is important to consider how Coney used such rhetoric to cater to conservative benefactors and establish her sociopolitical status as a legitimate leader of the black community. Historically, black conservatives have been identified as complicit pawns in the white power structure. As a result, their motives are scrutinized by the broader black community, and black conservatives often struggle to legitimize their status as trusted race leaders. Indeed, Coney’s critics referred to her derisively as “Aunt Jemima,” and they accused her of being a modern-day Uncle Tom.25 When Coney inverted such criticisms and accused poverty-stricken blacks of being slaves, she recast herself as a free thinker who had transcended race, seized the opportunities that America had to offer, and assumed a race leader’s responsibilities, specifically one’s duty to criticize his or her community with brutal honesty.26

Of course, this rhetoric downplayed the exploitative nature of capitalism, which calcifies class boundaries, leaving most African Americans trapped toward the bottom of the economic pyramid. Coney’s logic rested on the flawed premise that the American economic system welcomes and benefits anyone who is willing to work hard enough.

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26 Smith, “The Individual Ethos,” 121.
Coney failed to recognize the fact that a relatively small number of white men own the vast majority of the nation’s resources and, more importantly, that those men control access to power and wealth. Simply put, no one could ever “transcend” his or her race, much less achieve social and economic wealth simply by working hard.\textsuperscript{27} However, such rhetoric fit within Coney’s social and political agendas. Her charged criticisms of blacks’ individual failures highlighted the stark necessity of self-help programs like those promoted by the Forum, and Coney’s critiques crystallized her sociopolitical status as a respectable black community leader in Indianapolis. Indeed, Coney relied on the language of dependency to create a binary between “bad” African Americans—protesters, fomenters, and sophisticates who wrought chaos and selfishly pursued negative freedom—and “good” African Americans—professionals, homemakers, and “good citizens” who abided by the law, valued their country, and sought responsible freedom.

Here, Coney drew upon the language of the so-called Silent Majority, a group crowned “Man and Woman of the Year” by \textit{Time Magazine} in 1970. According to the editors of \textit{Time}, the Silent Majority were men and women who prayed at home and in schools, scorned campus dissent, and readily displayed their patriotism by flying the American flag and unequivocally supporting American foreign policy. This group of purportedly hard-working, middle-class citizens blamed campus dissenters and “rabblerousers” for the nation’s perceived problems, and they nostalgically longed for the

return of “law and order.”28 Most important, the Silent Majority of middle-class suburbanites rejected explicit racism. Instead, members articulated a coded language that, on the surface, appeared colorblind. The Silent Majority depicted its members’ overall success as the product of hard work and individual initiative; residential segregation, on the other hand, was the “class-based outcome of a meritocratic individualism rather than the unconstitutional product of structural racism.”29

The Silent Majority’s seemingly race-neutral language was laden with racial consciousness, though. The rhetoric of the Silent Majority pitted the virtuous, innocent image of blue-collar and middle-class whites, who were generally depicted as orderly, law abiding citizens, against “rabblerousing” radicals, who were characterized as disorderly, criminal, and more often than not, black. As Matthew Lassiter asserts in his book, The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South, the Silent Majority “charted a middle-course between the open racism of the extreme right and the egalitarian agenda of the civil rights movement.” In adopting an ethos of colorblind individualism and freedom of choice, the Silent Majority “accepted the principle of equal opportunity under the law but refused to countenance affirmative action policies designed to overcome structures of inequality.”30 Nevertheless, Nixon and his advisors wrestled with the possibility of incorporating African Americans into the Silent Majority. Nixon vacillated between support and outright hostility toward civil rights and racial equality during his first term in office, and though Nixon cultivated support among the Silent Majority of white voters, he did not intend to alienate black voters, particularly middle-

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29 Lassiter, Silent Majority, 1.
30 Ibid., 1, 4-5.
class black voters.\textsuperscript{31} Nixon therefore attempted to foster political support among a black Silent Majority by emphasizing economic initiatives similar to racial uplift and community control.\textsuperscript{32}

The notion of a Silent Majority of African Americans was inherently flawed, for middle-class black Americans were not like their white counterparts. African Americans who claimed middle-class status lacked the entitlements afforded to middle-class whites, and consequently, a tension emerged between blacks’ perceptions of themselves as “middle class” and the structural forces that relentlessly denied them that status.\textsuperscript{33}

Nevertheless, on July 4, 1970, a small coterie of black Republicans from Gary, Indiana, founded the National Black Silent Majority Committee (BSMC). Dogmatic in its embrace of conservatism, the group adhered to an anticommunist, antiwelfare, and anticrime agenda that identified black militancy as the source of the nation’s racial tensions.\textsuperscript{34} Mattie Coney claimed membership in the BSMC.\textsuperscript{35} For individuals like Coney, the notion of a black Silent Majority held particular sway. For one, the idea of a Silent Majority of African Americans implied that black communities were heterogeneous, that the behavior of a few “bad” individuals did not accurately reflect the behavior of the “good” majority.

As Chapter 1 revealed, the construction of a binary between seemingly “good” and “bad” African Americans was critical to the ways in which Coney articulated her


\textsuperscript{32} Rigueur, \textit{Loneliness of the Black Republican}, 166.

\textsuperscript{33} Gaines, \textit{Uplifting the Race}, 14; Rigueur, \textit{Loneliness of the Black Republican}, 166.

\textsuperscript{34} Rigueur, \textit{Loneliness of the Black Republican}, 207-209.

\textsuperscript{35} Personal check to Black Silent Majority Committee, Coney, June 1982, box 5, folder 7, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
program of racial uplift. In short, the image of the “respectable Negro” was interdependent with the image of the “bad Negro.” Coney employed the same rhetorical tactics when sketching an outline of the black Silent Majority. Recall, for example, the speech Coney gave to an audience of churchwomen in Peoria, Illinois. Coney not only reminded the audience that the black community was heterogeneous but also sketched an outline of a respectable black majority:

Most [Negroes] deplore the bad reputation that they have been given by the excess of agitators and criminal elements of our so-called race. Responsible Negroes respect life and property. They own millions of homes, automobiles, and do not cram jails.36

Here, Coney confirmed the respectability of the black majority by emphasizing its rejection of militant protest tactics and its seeming embrace of free market capitalism. As such, Coney paralleled the rhetoric of the dominant Silent Majority, which championed “law and order” and promoted the meritocratic ethos of free-market consumption. As was the case with the white Silent Majority, the media hid this image of black respectability from the American public, Coney argued. Television producers sought out radical black insurrectionists and broadcast their tactics on innumerable television programs, yet the media never reached out to a single black person with an opposing viewpoint. The voice of the black Silent Majority, she contended, was being silenced by “liberal sophisticates” in the media.37
At the same time, however, Coney emphasized her status as a “non-Negro,” someone who testified as an American, not as a member of a minority group.38 This strategy reflected Coney’s attempts to distance herself from the negative connotations attached to black militancy. In doing so, Coney posited herself as a benign figure, someone who neither rejected her blackness nor flaunted it. However, this strategy also reflected Coney’s broader attempts to appropriate the individualistic language of modern conservatism. For black conservatives like Mattie Coney, the notion of a black collective—even a conservative one—was problematic because it undermined claims of black heterogeneity. In distancing herself from a collective black identity, Coney effectively asserted her belief that the individual was self-created. That is, an individual’s identity was tied to his or her actions, beliefs, and ideas, not simply his or her racial category. A person’s race, then, was irrelevant to the maintenance of a person’s status.39

However, by transcending race and denying the existence of a black collective identity, Coney undermined her earlier claims regarding the existence of a black Silent Majority. She never reconciled this contradiction, and its existence points toward the complexity and fluidity of her conservatism. Nevertheless, there is some overlap between these two ostensibly contradictory positions. First, when describing the “good” citizens of the black Silent Majority, Coney relied on the language of colorblind individualism and merit. Coney argued that the majority of black citizens understood that

38 “‘Eisenhower Calls for a Resurgence of National Moral’ at Luncheon Here,” Reading Eagle, January 8, 1967; Coney, “It’s a State of Mind,” speech, March 27, 1969, box 3, folder 5, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
“equality has nothing to do with one’s race.” They recognized that every person was inherently different and therefore possessed a unique skill set. In other words, members of the black Silent Majority embraced the colorblind ethos of the white Silent Majority.40

Second, the black Silent Majority itself seemed to transcend race. According to Coney, the majority of African Americans identified, first and foremost, as American citizens. In an interview with the Indianapolis Star, Coney described herself as “just another flag-waving American” who wanted to contribute to her nation’s wellbeing.41 Members of the Citizens Forum understood that dividing America into parts and parcels served no purpose because they realized that “what’s good for one group is good for all.”42 Once again, Coney overtly acknowledged that blacks who joined the Citizens Forum constituted a collective, but she denied that this constituency identified as a black collective. Instead, members of the black Silent Majority linked their individual interests to the interests of American society in general. Respectable African Americans were simply Americans—“the taxpaying kind,” no less—who just happened to be black.43 Thus, Citizens Forum materials and handouts did not distinguish between a black and a white Silent Majority; instead, Coney declared that Forum members were simply members of the American Silent Majority.44

40 Coney, untitled, speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
43 Coney, “Get up off Your Apathy,” speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
44 Block club materials packet, box 6, folder 22, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
Americans, not just African Americans. “There are no boundaries based on race, creed or status,” a Forum pamphlet read.45

Nevertheless, Coney refused to let a vocal minority of “rabblrousers” upend the image of black middle-class respectability that she had crafted, and she therefore aligned herself and her organization with the principles espoused by the Silent Majority. In her speeches and writings, Coney castigated the so-called “career agitators” who blindly followed “egghead” intellectuals. These “self-appointed race leaders” shirked their individual responsibilities and devoted themselves to the principles of pleasure and moral laxity, she argued. Not surprisingly, Coney questioned protesters’ motives, often arguing that young revolutionaries enjoyed demonstrating merely for the sake of demonstrating. Many protestors could not identify what they were protesting against, she insisted.46 In one interview, Coney questioned the intentions of marchers who joined demonstrations in Chicago led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1966. Coney never met King or corresponded with him, yet she confidently proclaimed that he was amused by the droves of “hot-blooded youngsters” who flocked to join the tail end of his marches. According to Coney, these young people simply wanted “some excitement and a story”; they did not know where they were marching, much less why they were marching.47

Coney took particular aim at proponents of black power. Black power advocates maintained the wrong attitude regarding black freedom and equality, Coney insisted.

Members of the Black Panther Party promoted the principles of negative freedom, and

45 Tenth anniversary recognition banquet handout, box 85, Lugar Collection, UIMA.
46 Coney, “Citizenship,” speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS; Citizens Forum brochure, box 6, folder 12, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
47 Coney Interview, Stone, Tape 1, B.
consequently, they spewed a form of reverse racism born out of hatred, resentment, and lust.\footnote{Cong. Record, H93, 7813. (March 21, 1974) (Sen. William G. Bray).} Here, Coney echoed the positions of moderate civil rights leaders such as Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, who in 1966 wrote a scathing editorial for the *Crisis*, in which he denounced black power:

> No matter how endlessly they try to explain it, the term “black power” means anti-white power…Ideologically it dictates “up with black and down with white” in precisely the same manner that South Africa reverses that slogan. It is the reverse Mississippi, a reverse Hitler, a reverse Ku Klux Klan...We of the NAACP will have none of this. We have fought it too long...We seek… the inclusion of Negro Americans in the nation’s life, not their exclusion.\footnote{Roy Wilkins, “Whither ‘Black Power’?” *Crisis* (August-September, 1966): 354.}

Coney, like Wilkins, did not sympathize with individuals who would “rather loot and hate than work and help.”\footnote{Citizens Forum brochure, box 6, folder 12, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.} By reducing black power to a movement rooted in hatred and anger, Coney mirrored Wilkins’s sentiments and reinforced the alleged dichotomy between civil rights and black power. This dichotomy between “good” and “bad” black uplift, between “responsible freedom” and “negative freedom,” and finally, between civic nationalism and black nationalism, legitimized the efforts of organizations like the Citizens Forum in moderate whites’ minds. Indeed, organizations like the Black Panthers served as a foil, highlighting through contrast the ostensibly positive traits of Coney and the Forum.

Clubwomen were perhaps the most apt listeners and supporters of Coney’s conservative rhetoric, and thus, Coney directed much of her advice—and criticisms—toward female audiences. American women had failed, she charged. Speaking before a
group of clubwomen in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Coney lambasted American women’s inaction and demanded that they “get up off their apathy”:

For allowing crime to exist and flourish in America…I must point my finger directly at America’s women. You permit the sordid mess! When I say permit, I mean it, because I know that we have too many thousands of intelligent women that know and understand the problems—yet do not raise their voices or lift a finger to do something for America!51

According to Coney, apathetic women who permitted the spread of crime, delinquency, and protest ultimately permitted the moral ruination of the American people, and this, in turn, hastened the political ruination of the nation.

American women had lowered their standards and blindly accepted boorishness, vulgarity, and obscenities. As a result, men had lost all respect for womanhood.52 America’s women, Coney argued, suffered from a “paralysis of timidity,” and they were courting American disaster.53 The “starry-eyed men” of theory in Washington D.C. lacked the common sense and persistence of their wives and mothers. Nothing was more common than unsuccessful men with college degrees, she posited, echoing former president Calvin Coolidge. According to Coney, women had to assert their viewpoints, for they alone had the innate strength and willpower needed to correct the social ills plaguing the American nation. Women’s persistence and determination were omnipotent, and hence, women had a duty to speak out in the name of decency.54

52 Coney, “Speech to General Federation of Women’s Clubs,” speech, box 3, folder 5, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
53 Coney, “Get Up off your Apathy,” box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
54 Block club materials packet, box 6, folder 22, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
At the same time, Coney linked national wellbeing to the moral strength of the home. “Our country can only be as strong and morally right as the American home,” Coney advised.\(^55\) In many ways, Coney echoed the conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly’s assertions that the home was the “basic unit of society” and women’s single greatest achievement.\(^56\) According to Coney, being a homemaker was the most rewarding and gratifying job that a woman could hold because the health of the home determined the moral health of the nation. Lazy mothers posed a threat to national stability because they espoused a form of negative freedom that encouraged children to become “over-sexed, profane, and vulgar.”\(^57\) If mothers failed to maintain a clean home and assert authority over their children, then young people never learned the tenets of good citizenship and responsible freedom.\(^58\) The solution was simple: wives, mothers, and homemakers had to stop acting like victims and work to engender pride in their homes and communities, so their children would accept orderliness, neatness, and the “cultivation of beauty as a way of life.” This was the only legitimate way that Americans could restore stability and ensure a return of “law and order.”\(^59\) Civic responsibility, not militancy, would stem America’s current crises, Coney concluded.

Coney thus placed an inordinate amount of responsibility—and blame—upon American women, and she relied on gender essentialism both to criticize and empower

\(^{55}\) Coney, untitled, speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS; Nancy Cochran, “She’s Successful—A Dynamo,” \textit{Durham Morning Herald}, September 9, 1969.
\(^{57}\) Coney, letter to the editor, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
\(^{58}\) Coney, grant proposal, box 2, folder 23, Citizens Forum Records, IHS; Coney, “Speech to General Federation of Women’s Clubs,” speech, box 3, folder 5, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
female audience members. Heteronormative gender constructions undergirded much of her rhetoric, and Coney invoked gendered stereotypes in her calls to action. For example, in an address to an audience of clubwomen in Danville, Illinois, Coney implored women to use their gendered “talents” to effect change. Women, she reasoned, could be nuisances, but in a moment of crisis, America needed a “nuisance to nag and nag until things get done.”

Despite these criticisms, clubwomen found Coney’s message salient because it reaffirmed the middle-class standards of propriety that clubwomen historically celebrated. Not surprisingly, women’s clubs located throughout the country wrote to Coney, expressing their admiration for her and her efforts to valorize the American home. Many requested Forum materials, including the National Federation of Republican Women and the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, which awarded the Citizens Forum the title of outstanding community-action program.

Moreover, Coney’s stance on domesticity and maternalism mimicked the rhetoric circulating among conservative white women. During the postwar period, conservative white women elevated the status and importance of maternal protection and community-building. These women appointed themselves as the “moral guardians” of their communities, and they assumed the crucial task of protecting the American family and, by extension, the American nation. Liberal elites had declared war on the sanctity of the American home, they charged, and as housewives—the most humble and self-sacrificial

62 St. Louis Women’s Crusade against Crime to Coney, box 1, folder 3, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
63 How-To-Do Kits distribution lists, box 9, folder 25, Citizens Forum Records, IHS; grant to Social Services Fiscal office, 1983, box 2, folder 23, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
members of American society—they had a duty to repel this threat. In this way, maternialism became politicized, and conservative women became the determiners of American strength or weakness. As Michelle M. Nickerson argues in her book, *Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right*, conservative “women cultivated a gender consciousness that valorized the local community as the fountainhead of American democracy and worldwide preeminence.”

Coney tapped into this conservative gendered consciousness when she expounded on the sanctity of the home and linked its moral health to the health of the nation. By promoting heteronormative constructions of gender, Coney aligned herself and her organization with conservative white women, who asserted increasing authority over local affairs and, more importantly, shaped national debates about conservatism from the bottom up. In doing so, Coney gained a following of vocal, loyal allies who not only funded her organization but also endorsed it on a national scale. Indeed, Coney’s gender gave her a unique advantage in this regard, effectively allowing her to become a spokeswoman and motivator of a conservative black womanhood that fell within the realm of white middle-class respectability. As Glenda Gilmore argues in *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina*, historically, black women have claimed a distinctly female authority by becoming the black community’s ambassadors to the white power structure. During the Progressive era, black women’s skills at self-presentation along with their nonpolitical status helped them remain

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65 Nickerson, *Mothers of Conservatism*, xxi.
66 Ibid., xvi.
invisible while they worked quietly toward achieving their own political ends. In short, black women embraced white progressivism and reshaped it to serve their own political agendas.\textsuperscript{67} In much the same way, Coney embraced and reshaped the gendered consciousness of modern conservativism to meet her own personal and political ends. In her speeches to female audiences, Coney tailored the gendered rhetoric of conservative white women to highlight the ways in which the Citizens Forum helped maintain stable black households. In doing so, Coney confirmed her status as a moral guardian of the black community, declared her respectability, and most importantly, reaffirmed part of her sociopolitical agenda, namely the idealization of community control and individual action.

2.4 Conclusion: Cultivating White Alliances and Support

At the same time, Coney’s rhetoric was intended to soothe the anxieties of whites who otherwise might hinder the enforcement of legislation such as the Civil Rights Act and the Indianapolis Open Occupancy Ordinance. On the one hand, Coney’s colorblind rhetoric of individualism obfuscated the culpability of racist whites. As Chapter 1 revealed, racial uplift ideology routinely ignored the existence of structural racism and oppression; instead, uplift sanctioned individual self-help and personal initiative as the only valid solutions to social inequality and ghetto malaise. Accordingly, the burden of social change rested upon black citizens rather than whites. Not surprisingly, Coney’s solution appealed to Indianapolis’s base of white moderates, who were at once liberal

enough to condemn explicit racism but conservative enough to object to bussing schemes or integrated housing—people who likely identified as members of the Silent Majority.

Indeed, Coney actively cultivated moderate white support by projecting an image of grassroots conservatism. Upon founding the Forum, Coney conducted a massive media “saturation” campaign.\(^{68}\) She mailed packets of Forum materials to individuals who expressed interest in her campaign, and she frequented both national and local news programs. In 1967, Coney’s story appeared in *U.S. News and World Report* and *Good Housekeeping*, and she conducted interviews on the Mike Douglas Show and the Peter Jennings Show.\(^{69}\) Through media outreach, Coney reassured potential supporters that the Citizens Forum never accepted federal tax dollars. According to Coney, the Forum was a “grassroots” endeavor supported solely by the community it served.\(^{70}\) Moreover, Coney recruited private donations by emphasizing the ways in which her program restored law and order to blighted inner-city neighborhoods. For example, in a letter soliciting donations from the Arthur Jordan Foundation of Indianapolis, Coney emphasized how Forum programs fought juvenile delinquency, which allegedly threatened to upend racial progress in inner city areas. The Foundation donated a thousand dollars.\(^{71}\) A grant proposal to the city’s planning and zoning commission similarly emphasized the Forum’s crime-fighting initiatives. The proposal, which proved successful, proclaimed that the

\(^{68}\) Rationale, box 2, folder 9, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.

\(^{69}\) Current information about the Citizens Forum, box 5, folder 17, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.

\(^{70}\) Mary Knudson, “Woman Tells of Improvement,” *Evening Capital*, November 11, 1969, box 6, folder 17, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.

\(^{71}\) Letter of recognition, 1983, box 2, folder 19, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
Helping Hand program fought fear by discouraging loitering, vandalism, purse-snatching, and even rape.\textsuperscript{72}

These rhetorical tactics worked to legitimize the Forum’s self-help programs as crucial endeavors sustained by the individualist zeal of modern conservatism. Unlike other civil rights organizations, Coney maintained, the Citizens Forum recognized that the public sector was overgrown. Accordingly, the Forum identified as a voluntary organization and promised to lighten the government’s load rather than add to it. Forum members aimed to help blacks help themselves, Coney argued, echoing former president John F. Kennedy’s 1961 inaugural address. The Forum was not a welfare program; it was a program dedicated to individual, “bootstrapin’” progress.\textsuperscript{73} This rhetoric appealed to white conservatives, who celebrated Coney’s embrace of individualism. In fact, one editorialist referred to Coney as a pioneer who undertook “mission impossible” when she brazenly criticized black welfare dependency and asserted the value of hard work.\textsuperscript{74} An editorialist for the \textit{Indianapolis News} agreed, adding that the welfare state promoted increased crime, indolence, and civil irresponsibility. Coney’s approach, on the other hand, promised real, commendable change.\textsuperscript{75} Indianapolis Mayor William H. Hudnut, III, a Republican, praised the Forum for uniting the “positive thinking” people of Indianapolis with a sense of patriotic purpose and duty.\textsuperscript{76}

Everyday citizens also lavished Coney with praise. Almost immediately after announcing the incorporation of the Citizens Forum in August 1964, over a dozen

\textsuperscript{72} Grant proposal, 1978, box 2, folder 23, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
\textsuperscript{73} Coney, “Get up off Your Apathy,” speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
\textsuperscript{74} Mrs. Robert N. Bosson, letter to the editor, \textit{Indianapolis Star}, October 2, 1980.
\textsuperscript{75} “Focus on People,” editorial, \textit{Indianapolis News}, September 8, 1965.
\textsuperscript{76} William H. Hudnut, III to Citizens Forum, Inc., box 83, Hudnut Collection, UIIMA.
Indianapolis residents donated small amounts of money to the Forum and commended Coney for her organization’s “excellent and positive approach” to the nation’s social ills.77 “I am a white person, and I have grown to be against your race,” wrote a man named Dave Roney. Nevertheless, he appreciated Coney’s approach, which offered a sound alternative to rioting and protesting. Roney wrote:

I was glad you put no big front up as many would have to show how the white race is at fault…Instead of marches and riots against the standards people have grown to respect for years, your race will accomplish much more…much faster if your outline is followed. When the average colored person can be inconspicuous to his white neighbor, except for his color, then we can truthfully live as a house undivided.78

An individual named A. Siersbeck agreed, writing that Coney had “hit the nail on the head” with her proposed self-help program. Though Siersbeck insisted that he did not dislike all African Americans, “silly” demonstrations and pointless rioting left him embittered toward the city’s black population. Coney’s program offered a constructive alternative that he was willing to support.79

Others expressed appreciation using more subtle, coded language. One couple claimed to be “bursting with pride” for Coney, who offered one of the “sanest” solutions to the nation’s social unrest.80 Frank J. Viehmann, a prominent realtor in Indianapolis, agreed, adding that Coney’s program of moral, economic, and cultural uplift would help African Americans more than programs led by angry blacks and “holier than thou whites.” Coney’s program, he contended, was superior precisely because it was

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77 J. Hartt Walsh to Coney, August 8, 1964, box 1, folder 1, Citizens Forum Records, IHS. Notably, J. Hartt Walsh was the Dean of Butler University’s College of Education.
78 Dave Roney to Coney, August 7, 1964, box 1, folder 1, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
79 A. Siersbeck to Coney, August 9, 1964, box 1, folder 1, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
80 Mary and J. Marshall to Coney, August 7, 1964, box 1, folder 1, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
colorblind; unlike other civil rights agendas, the Citizens Forum offered a “program of equality.”

Frances G. Moder and Isabel N. Grummond from Eagle Harbor, Michigan, echoed Viehmann’s comments. The sound objectives of self-help and personal uplift were “fundamental to all people,” not just African Americans, they wrote. These letters of support mirrored the coded language later employed by President Nixon and the Silent Majority. Like Coney, the authors adopted a language of colorblind egalitarianism that reinforced the alleged dichotomy between the Forum’s “sane” push for “equality” and the seemingly “insane” and racist programs put forth by competing civil rights programs.

The media bolstered this perception. Russell Kirk, a celebrated conservative pundit, praised Coney repeatedly in his nationally syndicated newspaper column. Coney was not another “aggressive black woman” who longed for power, he wrote. Coney craved freedom, not power. The Citizens Forum was a “candle in the urban jungle,” he concluded, invoking the racist undertones of urban pathology theory.

Dr. George W. Crane agreed with Kirk’s characterizations. Crane, a pop-psychologist and author of a conservative newspaper column titled “Worry Clinic,” referred to Coney and her husband as “civic artists and sculptors in human clay.” Students who were nurtured by Coney would never “ask Uncle Sam to be [their] nursemaid,” Crane assured readers. Coney was the sole reason why the black power movement had not taken root in Indianapolis, he argued, willfully ignoring the fact that many of Indianapolis’s black residents supported

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81 Frank J. Viehmann to Coney, August 10, 1964, box 1, folder 1, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
82 Frances G. Moder and Isabel N. Grummond to Coney, August 20, 1964, box 1, folder 1, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
the Panthers. Indeed, by the late 1960s, black power leaders’ editorials appeared regularly in the *Indianapolis Recorder*, and the newspaper’s editors often championed black power.85

Coney’s rhetoric also attracted the attention and praise of city, state, and federal officials. They, too, welcomed Coney’s emphasis on individual improvement. Indiana Governor Matthew Welsh congratulated Coney on her initiatives to improve the national image of Indianapolis, while Indianapolis Mayor Richard Lugar donated ten dollars to the Citizens Forum in 1974.86 Coney’s “commonsense philosophy” and unbounded patriotism also earned the admiration of former president Dwight D. Eisenhower, who praised Coney for cultivating a “constructive relationship” with white community leaders. In a personal letter to Coney, Eisenhower expressed hope that her achievements would serve as shining examples to the nation’s social leaders.87 Lady Bird Johnson, on the other hand, praised Coney in May 1965 for her neighborhood beautification efforts. President Johnson’s Great Society, she wrote, “can only be realized if people like you dedicate their time and talent in their local communities.”88 The Keep America Beautiful organization later presented Coney with a special “Women for Beautification” award in 1968 and the Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson Award in 1979.89 Finally, President Nixon, invited Coney to apply for a position in his cabinet.90

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86 Osma Spurlock to Coney, August 19, 1964, box 1, folder 1, Citizens Forum Records, IHS; Richard Lugar, personal check, September 3, 1974, box 84, Lugar Collection, UIMA.
87 Dwight Eisenhower to Coney, September 14, 1967, box 6, folder 11, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
88 Lady Bird Johnson to Coney, May 22, 1965, box 1, folder 2, Citizens Forum Records, IHS; Marie E. McIlernery, award ceremony introduction, box 1, folder 2, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
90 Harry S. Flemming to Mattie Coney, January 3, 1969, box 1, folder 3, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
For Coney, these were reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationships that helped crystallize her sociopolitical status as a respectable race leader who deserved to be conferred middle-class entitlements and recognition. At the same time, Coney expected Republican leaders to expand the boundaries of modern conservatism to include social and economic platforms designed to alleviate ghetto malaise and increase the number of middle-class racial minorities. Thus, Coney grew disillusioned with President Gerald Ford, who appeared indifferent on issues affecting the urban black middle class. Coney wrote Ford in August 1976, imploring him to take a stance on urban decay and racial unrest. The party that put forth a “meaningful plank” in regard to these issues, she posited, would secure the middle-class black vote.91 Moreover, during the 1980 presidential campaign, Coney expressed confidence that GOP candidate Ronald Reagan was a “man of performance, not empty rhetoric.” Unlike his opponent, President Jimmy Carter, Reagan would serve the interests of black voters and effect tangible changes in black communities. With his economic reform initiatives, Reagan promised to “real progress for blacks.”92

As these two examples reveal, Coney recognized the significance of black votes, and, more importantly, she believed that the Republican Party’s platform was conducive to black civil rights. In confronting President Ford directly and unapologetically, Coney implored the president to locate a space in the Republican Party for African-American voters, in effect urging him to address blacks’ concerns in a distinctly Republican way. Coney’s vow of support for Reagan reveals similar expectations, specifically her belief

91 Coney to Gerald Ford, August 16, 1976, box 1, folder 9, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
92 News release by Reagan and Bush Committee of Indiana, October 8, 1980, box 5, folder 8, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
that Reagan and the Republican Party would address the concerns of black voters. Thus, even her unequivocal support for Reagan’s candidacy rested upon her expectation that he, more so than any other politician, would serve her needs and interests of the black community.

In this sense, Coney’s conservatism was fluid. Although she embraced many, if not all, of the tenets of mainstream conservative thought, her conservativism was flexible, adjusting to fit both the basic needs of her organization and the lived realities of blacks living in urban centers. She cultivated an image of conservatism that would appeal to moderate whites at a moment when many white Americans lost interest in pursuing black civil rights agendas. Just as liberal civil rights leaders’ political and social clout waned, Coney asserted hers. Thus, Coney effectively manipulated the media to broadcast the Forum’s agenda, legitimate her sociopolitical status, and assert her middle-class respectability. Often, this strategy entailed emphasizing black heterogeneity and promoting the gendered consciousness of white conservative women. Coney’s approach was far from perfect, though. As we have seen, respectability’s moralistic criticisms discriminated along class lines and obscured structural forms of power, discrimination, and oppression. Thus, in her criticisms of black power, women, and so-called welfare slaves, Coney mistook the effects of discrimination for its causes and tacitly confirmed racial stereotypes.

Moreover, despite Coney’s claims to the contrary, black people could never “transcend” race entirely or collectively succeed in a capitalist system that left most African Americans trapped toward the bottom of the economic pyramid. Indeed, there was a vast disconnect between federal legislation’s promises and the lived experiences of
African Americans, who struggled to translate that legislation into meaningful, grassroots change. Coney failed to grasp this disconnect, and she therefore overestimated the opportunities wrought by federal legislation and downplayed the devastating effects of discrimination in all of its varied forms. These tensions and contradictions underscore the inherent problem with black conservatism. From education to employment to law enforcement, the conservative message essentially blamed the victim for the outcomes produced by a system designed to disadvantage racial minorities. Nevertheless, as the next chapter reveals, Coney understood conservatism as a gateway to economic and social equality for black Americans.
CHAPTER 3. DEFINING AN ALTERNATIVE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

3.1 Introduction

When Diana Bailey delivered her speech on “Youth and Adult Responsibility” in 1969, she effectively outlined Mattie Coney’s stance on what, exactly, constituted black empowerment. “Real black power,” Bailey argued, was not about donning afros, killing whitey, and burning inner-city communities. “Real black power” entailed building black communities up, not tearing them down. Mattie Coney reaffirmed these sentiments in a 1971 newspaper article, but she added a gendered consciousness to Bailey’s earlier assertions. Black men, Coney insisted, had to “stop tearing themselves down.” They had to “forget about hating others, forget their religion, forget their politics, forget sex, forget color” and start worrying about individual improvement. Once black men began building themselves up, the whole world improve for African Americans, Coney concluded.

Coney’s assertions underscore the centrality of black masculinity to debates surrounding the meaning of black equality and empowerment. In some ways, Coney echoed the sentiments of her radical adversaries, who similarly linked black empowerment to African-American men’s willingness to embrace patriarchal masculinity and strength. However, Coney’s definition of black masculinity was somewhat unique, as it reflected her unwavering faith in the redeeming powers of uplift and respectability. For Coney, masculine strength, uplift, and respectability were interdependent. Thus,
when Coney demanded that black men “stop tearing themselves down” and “start building themselves up,” she implied that men should reclaim their masculinity through personal uplift.¹ Masculine strength, of course, was indicative of black male autonomy, a requisite of meaningful black equality. In other words, the acquisition of black equality hinged upon whether or not black men embraced their personal responsibilities as providers and adopted the tenets of middle-class respectability, civic obligation, and good citizenship. Once black men embraced their duties, she concluded, whites would respect blacks and treat them as social equals.²

Coney’s rhetoric in 1971 highlights the basic premise undergirding her alternative civil rights agenda: if blacks demonstrated moral strength, personal responsibility, and economic independence, then whites would be more willing to honor blacks’ claims of social equality. Both Coney and her adversaries defined social equality in terms of black autonomy, but unlike proponents of black power, Coney believed that blacks had to work within existing institutions, not dismantle them. She therefore supported the broad initiatives of the early civil rights movement, namely the NAACP’s legal campaign, SNCC’s voter registration drives, and the National Urban League’s educational endeavors. However, while Coney agreed that federal legislation and court action constructed essential legal guarantees of civil equality, she did not believe that legislation could secure social equality for blacks. Moral uprightness and personal responsibility alone could demonstrate blacks’ deservingness of whites’ recognition and respect. Accordingly, the Citizens Forum did not seek to protect or establish the political or civil

¹ Knight, “Mattie Coney Asks Neighborliness,” 1971, box 4, folder 32, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
² Ibid.
equality of black citizens; rather, the Forum sought to initiate programs directed toward the acquisition of social equality in Indianapolis.

Forum programs therefore emphasized the importance of self-help, respectability, civic obligation, and good citizenship, all in the hope that African Americans would disavow “negative” habits, accept their obligations as “good” citizens, and in the process, earn whites’ respect and fair treatment. This strategy formed the basis of Coney’s alternative civil rights agenda. In her rhetoric and teachings, Coney employed a language of racial uplift and civic duty to deftly craft the image of a moderate, alternative civil rights strategy that would appeal to Indianapolis’s conservative base yet promise tangible benefits to black residents. Coney’s strategy drew upon her understanding that racial uplift and self-help constituted pathways to equal citizenship, but she combined the rhetoric of uplift with the rhetoric of modern conservatism. Coney thus articulated an alternative vision of civil rights progress that linked black equality and black power to economic independence, staunch individualism, and the tenets of racial uplift, respectability, and progress.

Coney’s alternative civil rights agenda depended on a negative, reductionist imagining of black power and militancy. Coney’s civil rights agenda rested upon the logic that black power militants were slaves to the expanded welfare state. Only African Americans who were self-sufficient and economically secure enjoyed true freedom and equality, she reasoned. According to Coney, African Americans’ rejection of the “victim status” and their subsequent embrace of self-sufficiency would, in turn, result in their collective transcendence of race and racism. At the same time, Coney outlined her civil rights agenda by describing what it opposed—her program was not militant; it did not
support black power; and it did not seek to overturn or undermine American institutions. The Citizens Forum offered a more “quiet approach to civil rights,” Coney alleged, one that eschewed idealism for tangible results such as economic security, community control, and city officials’ cooperation and commitment. Thus, members of the Citizens Forum did not dwell on past injustices or devote themselves to complicated theories and ideas; instead, Forum members concerned themselves with pragmatic solutions to everyday problems plaguing urban black communities.

3.2 Mattie Coney and Moderate Civil Rights Activism

Like all black Republicans, Mattie Coney viewed modern conservatism as a legitimate solution to the lingering problem of racial inequality and a logical end to civil rights activism. As Chapter 2 revealed, Coney invariably distanced herself from the direct-action and civil disobedience protests that characterized most civil rights activism in the 1960s. Yet Coney remained committed to the broader freedom movement, and she identified with moderate civil rights initiatives. Indeed, she claimed a lifelong membership in the NAACP, and she publically endorsed its legal campaign against segregation. Coney maintained that executive directors Walter White and Roy Wilkins were “sensible and diplomatic” men who, like her, believed in and fought for the principles of fairness and equality.

Coney’s support for the NAACP’s legal campaigns eventually led her to host a “freedom barbeque” in the summer of 1964. Profits from the barbeque helped cover the

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3 Coney, “Justice with Order,” speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
4 Coney Interview, Stone, Tape 1, B.
legal defense costs that Freedom Summer volunteers incurred when they were arrested in Mississippi while registering black voters.\(^5\) Freedom Summer, of course, was most closely associated with SNCC, a militant student organization that Coney adamantly opposed in the late 1960s. Nevertheless, Freedom Summer was a voter registration campaign, and as such, Coney supported its overarching goals. Moreover, project volunteers established “freedom schools,” which introduced black Mississippians to their rights and obligations as American citizens. These, too, probably appealed to Coney, who understood citizenship training as a requisite for black social equality.

Coney also endorsed the National Urban League (NUL). In fact, Coney was instrumental in bringing the NUL to Indianapolis. In October 1964, Coney met with the League’s executive director to discuss the possibility of opening an official branch in Indianapolis. After continued correspondence and effort, the League incorporated the Indianapolis branch in December 1965 and instated Maurice E. Eastin as its president.\(^6\) Like the NUL, the Indianapolis League identified as an interracial, nonpartisan, charitable organization aimed at eliminating racial discrimination and creating better employment opportunities for African Americans. In addition, the League worked to ease racial tensions and promote understanding and cooperation between blacks and whites in Indianapolis.\(^7\) Coney identified with the League’s goals, and she even served on its original board of directors. During Coney’s tenure, the League’s educational programs emphasized black assimilation and acculturation in the hope that such behavioral changes

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\(^5\) Ibid., Tape 1, B.
\(^6\) Whitney M. Young, Jr., to Coney, October 26, 1964, box 1, folder 1, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
would help blacks function and ultimately thrive in mainstream society. Thus, much like the Citizens Forum, the NUL embraced a pragmatic, “let’s-get-things-done” approach to solving problems in black communities.  

Coney supported the NAACP and the NUL’s civil rights agendas because their approaches were practical yet seemingly effective. Coney appreciated the fact that NAACP leaders did not pander to “hippies and their flowers” or resort to “whooping and wooing” like black revolutionaries allegedly did. Indeed, the ideas espoused by Coney and the Citizens Forum were not unlike those promoted by the NAACP or the NUL. Coney identified with the NAACP’s unwavering drive for legal equality and integration, and, like Roy Wilkins, she demanded that blacks be progressive in regard to civil rights yet conservative in regard to law and order. Coney understood further these two organizations’ goals as being in line with the goals of modern black conservatism. For example, the NUL’s emphasis on assimilation and acculturation aligned with modern black conservatives’ embrace of personal responsibility and staunch individualism. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Coney embraced moderate civil rights activism in spite of her conservatism. Like Coney, the leaders the of NAACP and the NUL repudiated black militancy as dangerous and counterproductive, and like the Citizens Forum, the NAACP and the NUL focused on forging “respectable” pathways to black legal, economic, and social equality.

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9 Coney Interview, Stone, Tape 1, B.
10 Rigueur, Loneliness of the Black Republican, 117.
Nevertheless, contradictions emerged between Coney’s conservativism and her commitment to racial egalitarianism. As we have seen, Coney invariably denied the existence of a black collective and emphasized black heterogeneity. Coney undermined these claims, however, when she celebrated the primacy of black cultural heritage. For example, Coney celebrated certain aspects of African-American culture such as black history and art, and she urged African Americans to cherish their musical traditions.\(^{11}\)

The Forum even sponsored free summertime concerts that featured performances by celebrated black musicians from Indianapolis and the surrounding areas. In addition, the Forum’s annual banquet celebrations included performances by black vocalists such as Carolyn Amos Morris and Bernice Fraction, who notably starred in a 1976 rendition of William Grant Still’s *Sahdji: An African Ballet* that was sponsored by the National Association of Negro Musicians.\(^{12}\)

At the same time, Coney valued black history. Coney corresponded somewhat regularly with a black woman from New York named Mildred Orid, and the two women often conversed about African and African-American history. Orid convinced Coney to buy the first volume of *Ebony Magazine’s Pictorial History of Black America*, which revealed what a “wonderful people we were” before colonial intrusions and slavery destroyed ancient African empires.\(^{13}\) Furthermore, Coney believed that parents and educators needed to foster cultural appreciation in black homes and classrooms. Black children, Coney posited, had little regard for their own people because they lacked an

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\(^{11}\) Program proposal, July 1965, box 2, folder 9, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.


\(^{13}\) Mildred Orid to Coney, April 5, 1983, Mattie Coney Collection, Box 1, Folder 2, IHS.
appreciation of their African and African-American heritages. During her thirty-year tenure as a fourth grade teacher at an all-black elementary school, Coney reinforced the importance of learning black history, and she introduced students to the speeches and writings of prominent black leaders. Not surprisingly, Coney familiarized students with the teachings of Booker T. Washington, whose rhetoric of uplift informed much of Coney’s civil rights agenda. Yet Coney also lectured on successful black politicians and businessmen from Indiana, and she encouraged students to learn more about contemporary black leaders in their neighborhoods and communities. More surprisingly, Coney encouraged students to learn about African anticolonial resistance; she even educated students on the Zulu people’s triumph over British imperialist forces in the nineteenth century. Coney used such histories to encourage her students and show them that “there were Negroes doing many things” in the world. These histories, she argued, demonstrated that personal ambition, not skin color, determined whether one led a successful life.14

3.3 Forging Ahead with an Alternative Civil Rights Movement

Coney thus supported the goals and initiatives of the moderate civil rights movement, and she sometimes contradicted her conservative rhetoric centered on colorblind individualism. At the same time, however, conservatism undergirded Coney’s alternative civil rights agenda, which promised to deliver social equality and economic security to urban black communities. Coney argued that mainstream civil rights activists

resorted to showy marches because such tactics appealed to the naïve masses of downtrodden blacks but ultimately required little planning and effort on the part of organizers. Ideas and decisions were worthless unless put into action, though.\textsuperscript{15}

According to Coney, organizations such as the Black Panthers and SNCC never served the basic needs of the vast majority of African Americans because they were mired in the convoluted ideas put forth by white “eggheads” who were fundamentally out of touch with the black community’s wants and needs.\textsuperscript{16}

Pragmatism was the root of the Forum’s success, Coney argued. Members of the Citizens Forum understood that African Americans had to forgo idealism and embrace a more realistic civil rights strategy centered on economic development, community improvement, and individual uplift. In a letter to President Gerald Ford, Coney lamented the harmful effects of idealism on the civil rights movement. Mainstream civil rights leaders, she argued, promised African Americans freedom and empowerment but failed to uphold those promises:

Far too long have our leaders failed to exhibit the strength needed to tell the plain truth to minority groups, thus leading them down the primrose path of broken promises to have other leaders follow them with the same kind of unreal, unattainable “pie in the sky.”\textsuperscript{17}

This “pie in the sky” mentality led to failure, disappointment, and enduring social unrest. Protests rarely achieved tangible victories, Coney argued, and even when protests effected legal changes, those changes did not necessarily translate into progress for African-American communities. Thus, when asked about civil rights marches and sit-ins,

\textsuperscript{15} Coney, record book, box 3, folder 3, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
\textsuperscript{16} Coney to Nancy Reagan, box 1, folder 5, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
\textsuperscript{17} Coney to Gerald Ford, July 7, 1975, box 1, folder 8, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
Coney insisted that they did not accomplish positive change but only engendered damaging white backlashes. In reference to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and SCLC’s Poor People’s Campaign, Coney maintained that the protesters were foolish ideologues, not true civil rights activists. “That didn’t help anything, having to have the police running around rounding them up like cattle,” Coney remarked, adding that the 1963 March on Washington was similarly a pointless endeavor.¹⁸

Coney argued that civil rights leaders had to abandon wishful thinking and start speaking in plain truths to African-American audiences: “What we need now is to get going on a grassroots operation. As a Negro teacher with over thirty years of experience in the inner-city schools, I have seen practical training pay off in hundreds of cases where flowery theory has failed.”¹⁹ Of course, the Citizens Forum prided itself on offering such training. The Forum eschewed “flowery theory,” instead promoting commonsense solutions to everyday problems in black communities. According to Coney, Forum members did not look to the government when problems arose in their communities; rather, they took initiative and solved the problems themselves. Thus, if trash collected in the alleyways or abandoned houses became overgrown, then the block club rallied the community and cleaned the affected areas. Coney maintained that this practical, commonsense approach helped black men and women become productive citizens because it engendered an individual sense of pride and duty in each person. By turning every black man, woman, and child into proactive and productive citizens, the Forum

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¹⁸ Coney Interview, Stone, Tape 1, B.
¹⁹ Coney, untitled, speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
allegedly improved the image of the race as a whole, which, in turn, furthered the quest
for black social equality.

Coney similarly castigated blacks who complained about the past injustices of
slavery, lynching, and Jim Crow. African Americans had to stop living in the past,
Coney argued, because no one could develop his or her potential with negativism.20 “It’s
silly for Negroes to talk about what happened to their grandparents…White people are
not responsible for what their grandfathers did,” Coney told the Indianapolis Star.21
Coney acknowledged past racial injustices, but for her, dwelling on the past did little to
effect change in the present.22 “We Negroes should quit feeling sorry for ourselves and
take advantage of our opportunities. We should get in and work and do the best we can
with what we have,” Coney maintained, once again evoking the rhetoric of Booker T.
Washington.23 Simply put, black people needed to stop making excuses about blighted
neighborhoods and work harder to raise their standards of living. Racial discrimination
neither justified nor excused blacks’ irresponsible behavior and unacceptable
appearances.24 Blacks gained new opportunities with the 1964 Civil Rights Act, she
argued, and thus, they gained newfound obligations to be better citizens and neighbors.

Speaking before a congregation at the Coppin Chapel African Methodist
Episcopal Church in Indianapolis, Coney emphasized the importance of reframing the
current discourse surrounding poverty and urban blight:

22 “One Negro Woman’s Advice to Her People,” U.S. News & World Report, March 27, 1967, box 4, folder
26, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
23 Transcribed interview, March 6, 1967, box 6, folder 3, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
24 “Amazing Mattie Coney,” box 6, folder 7, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
As long as we sit back and say the white man is dirty too, the white man is a thief too, the white man is ignorant too, we are openly expressing the elation of being able to align ourselves with the worst instead of being the kind of people who want to do the best, no matter who is bad.  

Here, Coney not only implored black residents to accept their individual responsibilities as good citizens and neighbors; she also challenged her black residents to forge an identity independent from that of the white community. In this way, Coney tied the principles of self-help and respectability to an independent black identity that could, in fact, be superior to whiteness if African Americans were willing to strive toward personal uplift.

African Americans who were unwilling to strive, however, allegedly succumbed to their own insecurities and settled for an inferior status. According to Coney, when African Americans adopted the moniker “underprivileged” and did nothing to improve themselves or their living standards, they “accepted the brainwashing that was done to us during slavery.” Poverty was simply a “state of mind,” an outgrowth of individual failings that signified a lack of confidence and respect among African Americans in general. From the perspective of Coney and the Citizens Forum, respectability seemed to connote esteem, dignity, and pride in both oneself and one’s community. Thus, African Americans who were truly proud of their race did everything in their power to contribute to the economic, cultural, and social development of themselves and their communities. This rationale undergirded Coney’s definition of black equality and informed her vision of civil rights. By defining poverty as a state of mind indicative of an individual’s

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26 Ibid.
enduring mental enslavement, Coney effectively attributed economic success and uplift to black liberation. In other words, Coney identified wealth as a marker of black power and pride.

The crux of Coney’s alternative civil rights movement centered on the acquisition of black economic independence. As we have seen, Coney legitimizd the respectability of the black Silent Majority by emphasizing its unwavering embrace of consumerism and free market enterprise. Coney did not simply associate black middle-class respectability with the tenets of free market capitalism, though; she linked market enterprise to black independence and empowerment. Most important, Coney identified social liberty as an outgrowth of the capitalist free market: “We owe the [free enterprise] system the many freedoms we enjoy, our schools, and most all of the great blessings of our American way of life.”27 Because the free market system rewarded hard work and individual initiative, it provided black people with the unique opportunity to pull themselves up and out of the mires of poverty. Nowhere else in the world could a poor black woman such as herself meet three presidents, travel abroad, and speak freely on national television, Coney reasoned. These freedoms and opportunities, she concluded, were guaranteed by America’s free market and therefore reserved solely for American citizens.28

In this way, Coney posited black power as a logical outgrowth of free market enterprise and opportunity. As a capitalist nation, the United States was rich in opportunities, and African Americans had to take advantage of those opportunities to

27 Coney, “Speech to General Federation of Women’s Clubs,” speech, box 3, folder 5, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
28 Coney Interview, Stone, Tape 1, A.
empower themselves.\textsuperscript{29} Simply put, black people had to work tirelessly in the free market system to liberate themselves from all vestiges of social and economic dependence. Economic “boot-strappin’,” she argued, was the only way African Americans could earn respect from their white counterparts and become the ultimate “masters of their material success.”\textsuperscript{30} Thus, whereas many civil rights and black power organizations understood capitalism as an exploitative system, Coney believed that access to the so-called free market provided the best chance for black economic parity and social equality.

Once again, however, Coney disregarded the ways in which structural racism limited economic opportunity and mobility for the vast majority of African Americans. Coney’s civil rights agenda essentially privileged the perspective of the black middle class over the basic needs of the broader black community, and consequently, it reinforced class-based hierarchies within the black community. Indeed, individualizing the condition of poverty worked well rhetorically for Coney. By defining poverty as a product of individual shortcomings, Coney distanced herself and the black middle class from the masses of poverty-stricken blacks living in urban ghettos, again reinforcing the notion of black heterogeneity and middle-class respectability. In doing so, Coney tacitly confirmed longstanding racial fictions about poor blacks’ alleged laziness and irresponsibility.

Coney’s alternative civil rights agenda evoked President Richard Nixon’s program of black capitalism, which similarly emphasized black pride and economic self-

\textsuperscript{29} Coney, “It’s a State of mind!,” speech, March 27, 1969, box 3, folder 5, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS; transcribed interview, box 6, folder 3, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
\textsuperscript{30} Coney, untitled, speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
help. In a 1968 radio address, Nixon declared that African Americans needed a “bridge of black success” to help poor blacks develop and expand their economic opportunities. By providing technical assistance, loan guarantees, and private funds and energies, this bridge of black capitalism would encourage black entrepreneurship, thereby building a “firm structure of [black] economic opportunity.” The federal government, of course, would assist in this endeavor, but the primary responsibility fell upon middle-class blacks who had already “overcome” any personal obstacles, achieved the American Dream, and could lead through example.\(^{31}\) Historian Leah Wright Rigueur points out that Nixon’s agenda provided an “unsophisticated and at times insulting view of black poverty,” one that reinforced a paternalistic, talented-tenth mind-set.\(^{32}\) Nevertheless, black capitalism is significant, for many African Americans, Coney included, believed that economic uplift could engender self-confidence among African Americans and thus liberate them from the lingering and demoralizing effects of oppression. Ultimately, middle-class African Americans like Coney understood economic uplift as the final step in the struggle toward black independence and social equality.

This logic rested upon the notion that all other paths toward black equality left African Americans economically dependent and weak. Accordingly, anyone who opposed black capitalism, lacked material success, or failed to uplift him or herself out of the mires of poverty was opposed to black liberation and complicit in his or her continued subjugation. Coney invoked this image repeatedly in her speeches and writings about black power, and she frequently used this logic to delegitimize black power initiatives.

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\(^{32}\) Rigueur, *Loneliness of the Black Republican*, 137, 139.
Black power supporters, she reasoned, evaded hard work in favor of government “handouts” that ultimately degraded black communities, leaving them vulnerable.  

Recall, for example, the speech Coney gave to an audience of clubwomen in St. Petersburg, Florida. In her speech, Coney chastised the class of “irresponsible welfare slaves” who, on the one hand, claimed to seek black power yet, on the other hand, expected “handouts” from a “Great White Father.” In this example, Coney evoked the image of the patriarchal white slave master to criticize and emasculate black power militants. Accordingly, black power militants were “welfare slaves, and a “Great White Father” controlled their destinies. Of course, Coney’s criticisms were somewhat ironic, given how black militants used similar language to frame the black power movement. Though militants were critical of capitalism and championed collective economic development programs grounded in a black theoretical framework, they nonetheless linked black empowerment to economic independence. Like Coney, militants believed that a sound economic base would serve as a platform from which blacks could assert political independence, cultural pride, and community control.

As we have seen, Coney bolstered her image among moderate and conservative whites by using black power as foil. Not surprisingly, then, Coney vehemently denied that there were any similarities between her “quiet” agenda and militants’ more radical agendas. Indeed, Coney’s rhetoric about welfare slaves elucidates how Coney employed gendered rhetoric to undermine black power’s legitimacy and simultaneously bolster her

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33 Knight, “Mattie Coney Asks Neighborliness,” 1971, box 4, folder 32, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
34 “Civic Leader Speaks to Anti-Crime Group,” St. Petersburg Independent, February 7, 1972, box 4, folder 30, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
program’s image. For example, one popular “Mattieism” urged African-American men to “get down off the white man’s lap and walk like a man.”36 Here, Coney not only evoked the image of a white master and his childlike slave; she also implicitly referenced the systemic emasculation of black men done through slavery, lynching, and Jim Crow. Government “handouts” were simply another way white society emasculated black men, she argued. A black man who accepted welfare assistance willingly let someone else—namely a taxpaying white man—take care of his family. A black man who refused to “walk like a man” could neither demand respect as an equal nor accurately refer to himself as man. As Coney informed one audience, “One must take pride in a job well done if he wants to look at himself in the mirror and say, ‘I AM A MAN.’”37 Black men who accepted “handouts” lacked such pride, and thus, they could never identify honestly as fathers and providers.

Men who worked diligently in the free market system could, in fact, identify as fathers and providers. Coney’s speech seemed to evoke the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike. On February 12, 1968, thirteen hundred sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, went on strike to protest unfair wages and unsafe working conditions after two garbage collectors, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were crushed to death by a malfunctioning truck. Emblazoned with signs reading “I AM A MAN,” the sanitation workers—most of whom were black—asserted their personhood and masculinity by rebuking capitalist competition and rejecting the status of “menial” laborers.38 Coney

36 Citizens Forum brochure, box 84, Lugar Collection, UIMA.
37 Coney, untitled, speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
inverted this logic and implied the opposite in her speech. In tying black masculinity to work and “pride in a job well done,” Coney constructed a heteronormative masculinity that was inextricably tied to one’s ability to profit within the capitalist, free market system. Accordingly, anyone who rejected free market capitalism undermined his claims to manhood and bound himself to a “Great White Father.” Conversely, a black man who accepted free market enterprise—and, by extension, Coney’s alternative civil rights agenda—asserted his masculinity and declared his freedom.

Thus, Coney constructed an oppositional binary between her civil right agenda, which promised economic freedom and social equality, and the “flowery” idealism of competing agendas, which allegedly resulted in welfare dependency and enduring black oppression. Separatists, she argued, could not articulate a positive plan of action but instead expounded “negative suggestions” that excused weakness and therefore undermined black empowerment.39 Coney expanded her rationale in a speech given before members of the Freedoms Foundation Auxiliary in Indianapolis. In it, Coney claimed that African Americans who “mortgaged their willingness to work…for a quick trip to quick handouts” not only sacrificed their personal ambition but also undermined the black community’s quest for self-reliance and independence.40 A black man who willingly accepted welfare assistance lacked ambition and was seemingly content with the status quo, Coney insisted; he succumbed to his apathy and reconciled himself to a life of dependency. Individual apathy, Coney concluded, posed the biggest challenge to the success of the civil rights movement because it was anathema to the notion of civic

progress. Simply put, apathetic individuals rarely assumed their obligations as good citizens, and consequently, civil rights initiatives failed.\footnote{Citizens Forum brochure, box 84, Lugar Collection, UIMA.}

Coney’s solution was simple: black people needed to be independent. African Americans had to stop “sulking” and focus their ambitions, she argued, for “as long as people give to us, they have a right to control us.”\footnote{Transcribed interview, box 6, folder 3, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.} Once again, Coney created an oppositional binary that pitted individuals who wanted freedom against individuals who idly accepted their own subjugation. According to Coney, African Americans who adopted the Forum’s program of economic self-help took control of their destinies and forged their own pathways to black independence and equality. “Instead of waiting for something to happen, we’ve got to get up and do something for ourselves,” Coney told\footnote{“One Negro Woman’s Advice,”\textit{U.S. News & World Report}, March 27, 1967, box 4, folder 26, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.} \textit{U.S. News and World Report}.\footnote{Pohlmann, “Black Conservatives and Class Relations,” 197.} Coney maintained that black people could “have it all” if each individual worked toward being a better neighbor and a good citizen. Yet again, Coney failed to grasp how collectively, African Americans could never “have it all” in a competitive, corporate capitalist system designed to privilege whiteness and disadvantage minorities. Indeed, despite Coney’s claims to the contrary, cutting welfare benefits to poor blacks and reducing the role of the federal government in the economy likely would enhance white domination, not end it.\footnote{Pohlmann, “Black Conservatives and Class Relations,” 197.}
3.4 Conclusion: Empowerment through Cooperation

Nevertheless, Coney insisted upon the primacy of individual uplift. Yet taking responsibility for one’s personal uplift did not entail rejecting the help of sympathetic whites. Just like Coney proposed working within the free market to garner black economic power, she proposed working within existing political structures and harnessing the power of white allies to effect changes in urban black communities. Black people could not institute real change without the help and support of the white majority, Coney reasoned. Forced change would simply engender a reactionary movement led by racist whites.45

Moreover, Coney echoed the sentiments of economist Andrew Brimmer, the first black member of the Federal Reserve System’s Board of Governors. Brimmer believed that the black sub-economy was too feeble to withstand the “dangerous nonsense” of black separatism. Brimmer maintained that it was imperative for blacks “get inside” the corporate structure, so they could learn how to accrue wealth and exercise genuine economic power.46 Coney agreed, adding that black communities were poorer, less established, and more vulnerable than white communities. According to Coney, African-American communities’ very survival depended on individual residents’ willingness to be diplomatic and meld to the dominant society’s norms and expectations. Coney thus castigated “obnoxious” young fomenters who allegedly antagonized white people for no apparent reason. These individuals failed to realize that African Americans could not achieve long-term results without the help of “sincere, fair-minded white people.”47

46 Van Deburg, New Day in Babylon, 119-120.
Civil disobedience and lawlessness not only threatened to repel potential white allies, though; civil unrest also jeopardized blacks’ best defense against racial discrimination: the law. Coney alleged that the black power movement threatened to replace law and order with chaos and anarchy. In preaching and practicing defiance of the law, minority agitators advocated the erosion and destruction of the only structure that could ever assure them due process and equal protection.\textsuperscript{48} If this continued to happen, she reasoned, African Americans would “wake up and find that our freedom is gone.” Laws were fundamental and vital guarantors of black political and civil equality, Coney reasoned; when black people treated laws like platitudes rather than binding legislation, they unwittingly legitimized the lawless actions of racist whites.\textsuperscript{49}

Thus, agitators who disavowed the law imperiled the continued progress of the black freedom struggle and undermined blacks’ claims to political and civil equality. Coney’s logic was flawed, of course, as racist whites often defied civil rights laws by threatening economic reprisals or violence. Moreover, enactment did not constitute enforcement; federal legislation certainly provided vital guarantees of black political and civil equality, but federal laws had to be enforced at the grassroots level. As massive resistance in the wake of the Brown decision revealed, white supremacists steadfastly thwarted federal civil rights legislation with little fear of the legal consequences. Coney undoubtedly grasped this disconnect, given the Citizens Forum’s original mission. But disavowing black civil disobedience worked well for Coney, who became a champion of the hallowed conservative quest for “law and order.”

\textsuperscript{48} Coney, “Justice with Order,” speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
\textsuperscript{49} \textit{National Geographic}, March 1969, box 6, folder 1, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
Not surprisingly, then, Coney encouraged Indianapolis’s black residents to participate in political processes and work with local government officials and institutions. For example, the Citizens Forum tried to cultivate a positive relationship between Indianapolis’s black citizens and the city’s white politicians and leaders. Prior to elections, Forum members registered voters, and programs like the Helping Hand initiative included programs dedicated to teaching children and their parents how to use voting machines correctly. In addition, the Helping Hand program encouraged youngsters to petition state representatives and congressmen on issues affecting the black community.  

On the other hand, monthly meetings and events such as the 1976 Dogwood Tree Caravan—a spring-time celebration that boasted a televised parade led by police motorcade—including “Meet Your Candidates” sessions, which introduced Forum members to politicians running for office and more importantly, gave voters a chance to ask pertinent questions.  

Monthly meetings at the Citizens Forum also provided vital information sessions. Most of these sessions pertained to issues directly affecting Indianapolis’s black community. For example, one of the first Forum meetings included a panel discussion on increasing high school graduation rates in black communities. The “Help Get Your Child Ready for Life Now” session featured panelists who once contemplated dropping out of high school, but graduated and subsequently landed well-paying jobs. The Forum also provided guidance and resources for recent high school graduates and job-seekers. One  

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50 Coney, handout on citizenship training strategies, box 11, folder 10, Citizens Forum Records, IHS; Coney, “Responsibility of the Underprivileged,” speech, box 3, folder 6, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.  
Forum meeting entitled “Youth Betterment” featured five panel discussions that aimed to help young employees meet workplace expectations. A panel titled “Preparation for Employment” introduced jobseekers to hiring practices while a subsequent panel promised to provide insights on the effects of automation on workplace activities and pay scales.\textsuperscript{53} Sometimes, local plant operators spoke at meetings about summer internship opportunities for black youths. For example, in 1968, a representative from the Indianapolis-based pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly spoke about summer internship opportunities for high school students who someday hoped to work at the plant.\textsuperscript{54} The Forum also sponsored regular job fairs for black residents; indeed, one fair boasted more than one hundred company booths.\textsuperscript{55}

Other meetings introduced black residents to their rights as laborers and consumers. Earnest Davis, a compliance officer in the wage and hour division of the U.S. Department of Labor, spoke to Citizens Forum members about fair employment practices. His talk on workers’ rights under the Fair Labor Standards Act concluded with a question and answer segment, so workers could pose questions about their personal employment situations.\textsuperscript{56} Another meeting included an information session for potential homebuyers. In January 1970, local real-estate broker William Brennan, Jr., advised Forum members on the “dos and don’ts” of home buying. Brennan offered tips on how to locate homes in neighborhoods that would not depreciate in value, and he also provided an overview of available lending resources.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{53} “Youth Betterment’ is Theme of Citizens Forum Meet Sun.,” \textit{Indianapolis Recorder}, February 27, 1965.
\textsuperscript{54} “Club Speaker,” \textit{Indianapolis Recorder}, April 27, 1968.
\textsuperscript{55} “Job Fair Shows We’re a ‘City on the Move,’” \textit{Indianapolis Recorder}, September 24, 1966.
\textsuperscript{56} “Citizens Forum November Guest Speaker Named,” \textit{Indianapolis Recorder}, November 1, 1969.
\textsuperscript{57} “Local Broker to be Speaker for the Forum,” \textit{Indianapolis Recorder}, January 3, 1970.
These various information sessions and panel discussions functioned as forums where black residents could learn and inquire about their rights and opportunities as workers and consumers. At the same time, these programs reflected Coney’s belief in the liberating promises of free market enterprise. By providing job training and employment assistance, Forum meetings theoretically prepared black workers for success in the free market. More importantly, though, Forum meetings established vital links between the Indianapolis’s black community and its white political and social institutions. As a result, black residents gained a more intimate knowledge of these institutions and their functions. Black attendees left meetings with a deeper understanding of how best to engage these institutions regarding the political, social, and economic issues directly affecting black communities.

The Forum’s affiliated block clubs functioned similarly. As Chapter 1 revealed, the Forum operated primarily as a liaison between city officials and individual block club leaders. Block clubs, on the other hand, provided vital links between local government officials, Forum leaders, and the grassroots citizenry. Thus, Coney encouraged club members to act independently and proactively in their communities, but she also asked club leaders to emphasize basic Forum platforms such as economic development and lawfulness. Under Coney’s guidance, affiliated block clubs distributed weekly bulletins that related “commonsense versions” of city ordinances and sanitation codes, and they forwarded the Forum’s newsletters and bulletins to neighborhood residents. Club members also served as the unofficial “watch dogs” of their communities. Members
reported suspicious activity to law enforcement officers, and they also alerted city agencies about possible code violations in their communities.58

City officials were cognizant of the fact that Coney and the Citizens Forum backed block club leaders’ petitions, and thus, block club leaders generally received immediate responses from police patrolmen and city officials.59 Coney maintained contacts with every city department and head of local government, and she never hesitated to prod the city mayor when a public official or agency “failed to act responsibly.”60 If block club members encountered resistance from city officials, Coney pursued the issue with the culprits’ superiors. For instance, when a police officer ignored a Helping Hand volunteer’s call for assistance in November 1969, Coney promptly notified Mayor Richard Lugar, who then obliged the Chief of Police to apologize to Coney and the afflicted volunteers. In the letter, Chief Churchill promised the department’s full cooperation in the future, and he assured Coney that a city police officer would respond to future Helping Hand calls in less than four minutes.61

Because Coney actively cultivated such strong ties with the city’s political elite, club members’ petitions and complaints usually resulted in immediate and tangible changes. For example, in 1978, the Brightwood-Parker-Wheeler block club successfully lobbied the city to install a more efficient street drainage system in its neighborhood. The next year, club president Juanita Smith lodged several written complaints with the city

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58 History of the Citizens Forum, July 12, 1983, box 5, folder 17, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
59 Ibid.
60 Coney, “Speech to General Federation of Women’s Clubs,” speech, box 3, folder 5, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
61 Lugar to Coney, November 7, 1969, box 84, Lugar Collection, UIMA; Winston Churchill to Coney, November 24, 1969, box 84, Lugar Collection, UIMA.
inspector. In one letter, Smith castigated the inaction of local officials, who did little to remedy the problems in her neighborhood. Smith wrote, “Without cooperation of [higher authorities], we cannot expect our neighborhoods to be clean, and without cleanliness, the purpose of the…project is defeated before it starts.” Shortly thereafter, the city demolished three abandoned houses in Smith’s neighborhood.62 Thus, block club members capitalized on the Forum’s close relationship with city officials to effect change and express displeasure with city officials’ inaction.

At the same time, block club members forged their own relationships with city officials. Most block club meetings included educational sessions led by local police officers, fire chiefs, judges, health inspectors, and city councilmen. Some sessions introduced black residents to city services and government institutions while other sessions provided training programs such as CPR instruction.63 Once again, Indianapolis residents used these opportunities to criticize state and local officials. For example, when members of the Brightwood Action Block Club voiced concerns about city officials’ inaction in their neighborhood, club leaders employed the Citizens Forum resources to organize a meeting with key city officials. At the meeting, club members demanded to know how their tax dollars were being spent and whether their community received any form of government community service. Club members even asked city officials to redirect their community’s tax dollars to the block club’s account, so community leaders

62 Brightwood-Parker-Wheeler Block Club Records, box 7, folder 4, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
63 Block club packet, box 2, folder 9, Citizens Forum Records, IHS; Friendly Neighbor Block Club February 1980 agenda, box 7, folder 28, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
could initiate self-help programs, remove abandoned houses, collect garbage, and control weeds.\textsuperscript{64}

As these stories reveal, Coney’s strategy of working with existing institutions and structures provided certain benefits to African Americans living in Indianapolis. Most important, block clubs provided outlets for black residents to express their concerns regarding the effectiveness of city governance. Citizens like Juanita Smith successfully challenged government officials to be more responsive to the black community’s demands, and because of these challenges, black homes and neighborhoods benefited. Forum initiatives like the Beautification program, the Dogwood Tree Caravan, and the De-RAT-ication contest not only beautified Indianapolis neighborhoods but also improved the overall health of city neighborhoods. For instance, when the annual beautification program was initiated in 1966, local residents removed more than 42,000 tons of trash and debris from streets, alleyways, and vacant lots in Indianapolis’s black neighborhoods. The next year, Citizens Forum volunteers hauled away more than 180,000 tons of refuse.\textsuperscript{65}

As a result of Forum programs, neighborhood crime and delinquency dropped; abandoned and decrepit homes were demolished; disease-carrying rodents were eliminated; neighborhoods were beautified; residents learned about their rights as employees and consumers; recent graduates benefited from community job fairs and worker training programs; and residents were trained in vital skills such as CPR. Moreover, the Forum’s political initiatives, namely voter registration and education,

\textsuperscript{64} Brightwood Action Block Club Records, box 7, folder 3, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
\textsuperscript{65} History of the Citizens Forum, July 13, 1983, box 5, folder 17, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
introduced black citizens to political processes that directly affected their families and communities. In learning how to engage community leaders and politicians, black residents gained the skills necessary to challenge politicians on issues like residential integration, bussing, and fair employment practices. In this way, Coney’s alternative vision of civil rights progress—working within existing systems to attain economic and social equality—succeeded where other civil rights initiatives failed. Through the Citizens Forum, Coney offered hope to black communities that had been mired in poverty and despair.

Coney’s alternative civil rights agenda was far from perfect, though. Her agenda was classist, privileging the perspective of the black middle-class over the needs of the broader black community. Indeed, middle-class African Americans profited most from Coney’s rhetorical tactics, which placed the black middle class within the realm of respectability. In championing economic self-sufficiency as the ultimate marker of black equality, Coney effectively asserted black middle-class professionals’ status as whites’ equals, but in doing so, she undermined poverty-stricken blacks’ similar claims to equality. Lower-class blacks certainly benefited from voter education, job training, and neighborhood beautification initiatives, but Coney’s economic agenda did not mitigate the harsh lived realities of poor black Americans subsiding in urban ghettos. Instead, Coney essentially blamed blacks for their own victimization, and she downplayed the pervasive and devastating effects of white racism, which eliminated any real possibility of racial transcendence.

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66 See, for example, “Community Group Seeks Ways of ‘Stabilizing’ Integration,” Indianapolis Recorder, October 21, 1967.
Not surprisingly, then, African Americans resisted some, if not all, of Coney’s messages. Opponents referred derogatorily to Coney as “Aunt Jemima” and assigned her the label of “Oreo,” someone who was black on the outside yet white on the inside. Many critics resented the fact that Coney seemed to broadcast the black community’s faults to white elites. Others believed that Coney’s rhetoric was self-deprecating, that she internalized white racism. For example, a man named Jerry Vaughn castigated Coney after reading about her in a 1967 article published by U.S. News & World Report:

I can come to only one conclusion: She wrote this story which pinching her nose and sucking her lips in. Her story seems to be the relationship of someone on the outside looking in rather than inside looking around. She can’t see why Negroes want to keep their own ways, their jive, their culture. She doesn’t seem to notice the beauty in her own race. She seems to feel that the only way to become “decent folk” is to break free of the Negroisms and go over to the white philosophies on life.

Such criticisms multiplied as Coney’s message spread throughout the United States, and Coney even feared for her safety at times. After black militants paraded through the Citizens Forum office unannounced one evening in 1971, Coney’s husband, Elmo, began traveling with her to all speaking events.

Yet such criticisms were somewhat ironic because Coney and her opponents championed many of the same principles and values. As we have seen, Coney celebrated black history, culture, and art. Forum banquets featured black artists, and as a teacher, Coney introduced black history lessons into her curricula. According to Coney, African and African-American history empowered black youths by instilling in them a sense of

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67 “The Amazing Mattie Coney,” box 6, folder 8, Citizens Forum Records, IHS.
cultural self-worth and regard. In many ways, black power advocates espoused these very same ideas. As a cultural movement, black power celebrated black history, culture, and literary and performing arts. In fact, one prominent historian argues that the black power movement’s enduring legacy was cultural, not political.70

Coney’s alternative civil rights agenda overlapped with the black power movement in other ways, too. Most important, Coney’s program of self-help and community uplift mirrored the programs put forth by black power advocates who identified as pluralists. Pluralists defined black power in terms of community control, and they therefore sought to assert control over the economic, educational, and political institutions within black communities.71 Pluralists disavowed American capitalism as an exploitative system, but, like Coney, they favored a self-help agenda and sought black collective uplift. For example, A.D. Ford, a black power leader in Indianapolis, encouraged blacks to declare their independence from white supremacy and take control of their communities through self-help. Instead of waiting for the city to act, black residents should “maintain a goal of cleaning-up and painting-up” their own communities. Reverend William Stanley Byrdsong, another black power leader in Indianapolis, agreed, adding that black power derived from economic strength and independence.72

As these two examples reveal, Coney’s alternative civil rights movement overlapped with pluralist black power initiatives, despite her claims to the contrary. Coney combined elements of racial uplift and respectability with elements of modern

70 Van Deburg, New Day in Babylon, Introduction.
71 Ibid., 112-113.
conservative ideology to articulate an alternative, “quiet” civil rights agenda that eschewed idealism and promised genuine, tangible achievements for black communities. In doing so, however, she replicated the efforts of her supposed enemies. Like A.D. Ford and William Byrdsong, Coney championed the prospect of individual, self-directed achievement, and she identified economic autonomy as the ultimate form of black power. Moreover, Coney provided concrete solutions to everyday problems in black communities. Black homes, neighborhoods, and communities were beautified and rejuvenated under Coney’s leadership, and Forum meetings provided outlets where individuals could vent their frustrations with city officials’ inaction and demand change.

These similarities do not belie the ideological and philosophical divisions that separated black conservatism from black militancy. Most notably, Coney located the nexus of black inequality within the black community itself, and she mistook the effects of structural oppression for its causes. Furthermore, Coney’s uncompromising belief in the promises and opportunities of free market capitalism distinguished her from other civil rights and black power activists. Thus, whereas black power organizations and many civil rights activists believed that capitalism had failed African Americans, Coney identified economic uplift through free market enterprise as the final, logical conclusion to the ongoing civil rights movement. Ultimately, this misplaced logic reflected the class concerns shaping Citizens Forum policy as well as the practical limitations of that policy. In short, the Forum worked within existing institutions to effect changes in black communities, yet this strategy did little to mitigate the systematic oppression that prevented the vast majority of African-American citizens from achieving economic independence and social equality.
Nonetheless, the similarities between Coney’s alternative movement and black power constituted more than mere ironies. Most important, the similarities reveal the various points of convergence between black radicalism and conservatism. Political and social ideas of civil rights conservatism and radicalism were fluid, and as Coney’s story reveals, African-American activists expressed these ideas in confounding, and at time contradictory, ways. Ultimately, though, the convergence between radicalism and conservatism evidenced by Coney’s life suggests that all blacks—whether conservative, radical, or moderate—struggled endlessly to define an autonomous black identity and self-consciousness in the face of oppression.
CONCLUSION

In the wake of George Zimmerman’s acquittal of the murder of a seventeen-year-old, unarmed black boy named Trayvon Martin, conservative pundit and Fox News anchor Bill O’Reilly offered advice to America’s grieving black communities. According to O’Reilly, Zimmerman targeted Martin not because he was black but because his dark, hooded sweatshirt made him look like a “gangster.” O’Reilly then turned toward the problems plaguing the black community. Young blacks, he alleged, gravitated toward “street culture, drugs, hustling, and gangs” because the black family had disintegrated. Nobody forced black youths to worship violence, he concluded; it was a personal decision. Many white liberals and black community leaders dismissed O’Reilly’s comments as racist and ignorant, but CNN’s Don Lemon, a black news anchor, surprisingly agreed with O’Reilly’s statements.

“But in my estimation,” Lemon chimed, “[O’Reilly] doesn’t go far enough.” Lemon proceeded to outline five simple solutions to “fix” the black community. First, he implored black youths to pull up their sagging pants, which glorified prison culture. Lemon then criticized blacks who employed the racial epithet “nigger” to denigrate and diminish their fellow black citizens. Third, Lemon urged black residents to take pride in their communities, to “start small” by acting respectfully and picking up trash in black neighborhoods. “I’ve lived in several predominantly white neighborhoods… and I’ve
rarely, if ever, witnessed white people littering,” he informed black viewers. Fourth, Lemon heralded the centrality of education to black uplift, and he urged black youths to speak politely using “proper English.” At the same time, he implored black high school students to graduate and pursue university degrees, so they could enjoy economic security as adults. Finally, Lemon castigated unwed black mothers and irresponsible black fathers, whose self-deprecating behaviors put their children on an “express train to prison.”

Lemon’s advice indicates how Booker T. Washington’s bootstrap metaphor continues to be accepted and applied as a useful framework for understanding the lived realities of contemporary black Americans. In many ways, Lemon’s five-point plan of attack is a modified version of the ten-point plan that Mattie Coney outlined in the summer of 1964 when she founded the Citizens Forum. Like Coney, Lemon linked black respectability to achievement and equality, and more importantly, he blamed enduring racial violence on the behavior of African Americans who failed to subscribe to white norms and expectations. Lemon’s impulse to blame blacks for their own victimization in the wake of Trayvon Martin’s death reveals how uplift and respectability politics persist in political discourses surrounding race and racism in the United States today. Indeed, Lemon’s remarks demonstrate how little black conservative rhetoric has changed since the mid-1960s, when Coney first posited her platform of black uplift.

When Mattie Rice Coney founded the Citizens Forum in 1964, she attempted to use uplift and respectability politics to assert a positive black identity and consciousness.

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originating as a “better neighborhood program” dedicated to securing the passage of an
open housing ordinance in indianapolis, the citizens forum morphed into a nationally
recognized self-help organization committed to the moral, social, and economic uplift of
black families and communities. like a previous generation of black conservative
leaders, coney believed that improving the image of the race would convince reluctant
whites to recognize black people’s humanity and honor their claims of equal citizenship.
At the same time, however, coney employed the individualistic rhetoric of the modern
conservative movement to legitimize her sociopolitical status as a respectable race leader
and to secure funds and recognition for her program. she then used those resources to
help black residents in her community through programs that provided job training, voter
registration, citizenship education, and neighborhood beautification, among other things.
Moreover, as the forum grew, coney cultivated alliances with white leaders at the
national and local levels. forum members benefited from these alliances, as they used
coney’s power and prestige to challenge government officials’ inaction on issues
affecting the city’s black community.

mattie coney resigned as executive director of the citizens forum on october 13,
1980, citing the harmful effects of inadequate pay and overwork on her health.2 less
than four years later, in september 1984, the citizens forum disbanded. financial woes
plagued the forum in the wake of coney’s departure, in part because the organization
was unable to secure the same level of local and national recognition in the 1980s that it
enjoyed in the 1960s and 1970s. coney’s ailing health made it impossible for her to

2 coney, letter of resignation, october 13, 1980, citizens forum papers, box 2, folder 3, IHS.
maintain the rigorous campaigning schedule that once secured vital support from the white community, and Coney’s replacement, Phyllis West, lamented that the Forum suffered the effects of burnout, which crippled the vitality of the organization. Moreover, the city government adopted many of the Forum’s headlining programs, such as the heavy trash pickup and the De-RAT-ication campaigns. Together, these factors diluted the strength of the Forum, leaving it crippled and irrelevant. Efforts to revive the Citizens Forum proved unsuccessful, and after twenty years of service, the Forum officially closed its doors in October 1984. Mattie Coney passed away four years later at the age of seventy-nine.

The history of Mattie Coney’s life and activism sheds light on blacks’ struggles to effect meaningful change at the grassroots level after 1965, when many white Americans’ interest in civil rights waned. Coney’s history illuminates the compelling battle over what, exactly, black equality meant and how it should be attained. Though Coney supported the moderate civil rights movement, she recognized the limits of civil disobedience and feared the social repercussions of black nationalism. For Coney, uplift, respectability, and individual improvement constituted legitimate, alternative pathways to black empowerment and independence. She therefore tried to work within the burgeoning conservative movement, not against it. Using black power as a foil, Coney effectively tapped into whites’ growing fears of black radicalism, asserted her respectability, and articulated a “quiet,” alternative civil rights movement that appealed to moderate whites yet offered benefits to blighted black communities.

5 Funeral service program, box 4, folder 2, Mattie Coney Collection, IHS.
Certainly, we must be critical of Coney’s efforts, which were classist, contradictory, and, more often than not, overly simplistic. Like her predecessors in the National Association of Colored Women and the black Baptist women’s convention movement, Coney blamed blacks for their own victimization, and she ignored the broad, reaching effects of systemic oppression in all of its varied forms. Moreover, by identifying deficiencies in black culture and behavior as the causes of enduring social inequality, Coney obscured the devastating effects of white racism and ignored the pervasiveness of *de facto* discrimination. As a result, Coney’s alternative civil rights movement was somewhat simplistic. On the one hand, the notion of a black middle class or a black Silent Majority was problematic, for blacks who claimed middle-class status lacked the entitlements that whiteness undoubtedly afforded. On the other hand, Coney overestimated the opportunities wrought by civil rights legislation, and she failed to recognize the limits of free market capitalism, which left racial minorities trapped toward the bottom of the economic pyramid. Despite Coney’s invariable claims to the contrary, blacks could never transcend race simply by working hard. Put simply, American institutions were designed to disadvantage racial minorities.

Nevertheless, Coney believed that the problems and obstacles facing African-American communities after 1965 could be mitigated by blacks themselves through individual uplift and self-help. As Don Lemon’s comments in 2013 reveal, these ideas still resonate among black conservatives today. Black conservatives continue to use respectability politics to assert their own moral uprightness, distance themselves from the ostensibly morally corrupt black masses, and claim middle-class entitlements. Lemon’s comments in the wake of Trayvon Martin’s death reveal how the ideas and criticisms put
forth by Mattie Coney more than fifty years ago inform contemporary debates regarding black respectability and the meaning of black equality. Indeed, the same concerns voiced by Coney in 1964 regarding black juvenile delinquency and respectability manifested themselves in the aftermath of Trayvon Martin’s death, as Lemon and countless other members of the American Right focused on blacks’ alleged cultural and behavioral deficiencies rather than the violence perpetuated by a racist society. Lemon’s judgments are a continuation of the same conservative legacy that Coney embraced in 1964. Black conservatives today assume the same stance that Mattie Coney took more than fifty years ago, as they continue to express faith in the ability of respectability politics and individual uplift to mitigate the obstacles facing black communities.
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