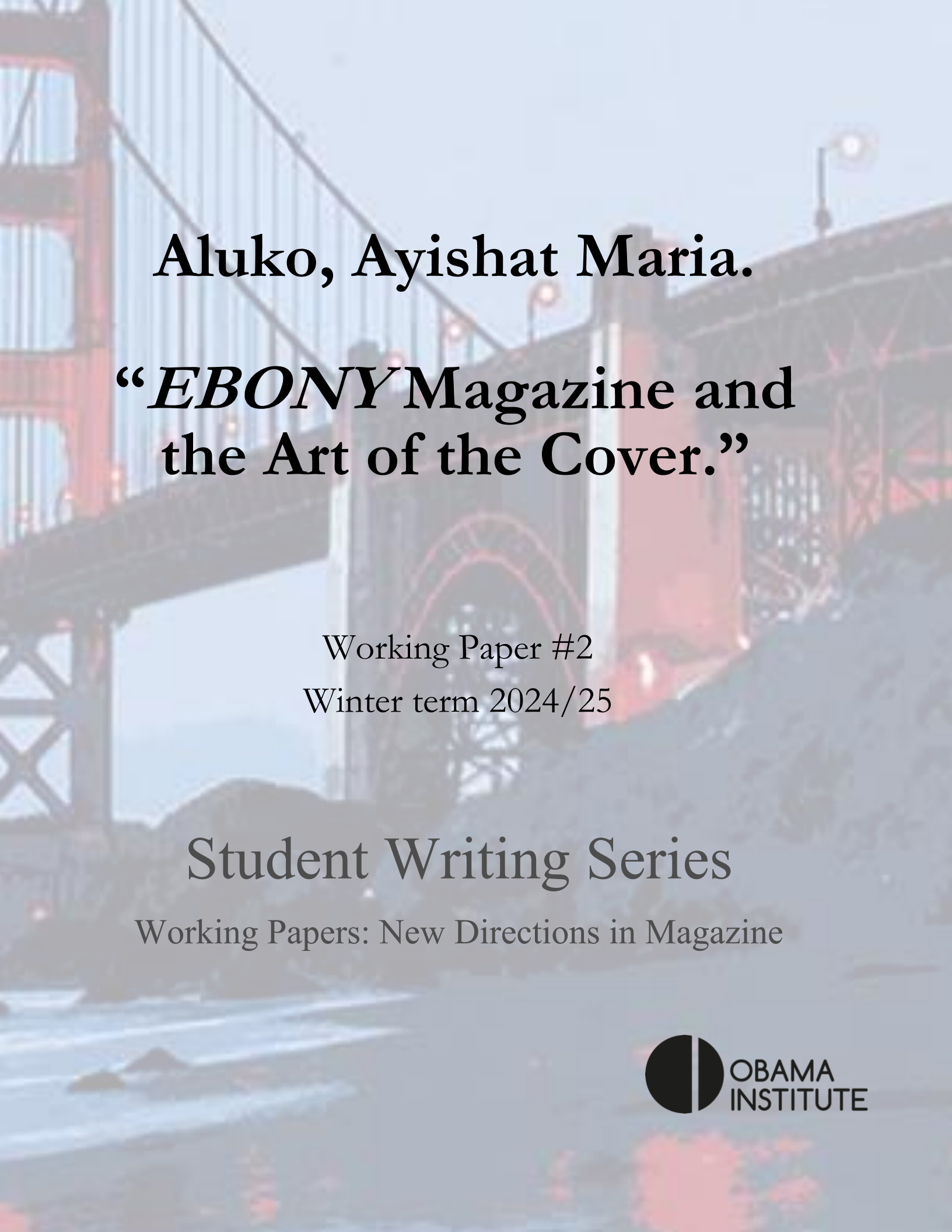




**Aluko, Ayishat Maria.**

**“*EBONY* Magazine and  
the Art of the Cover.”**

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Ayishat Maria Aluko

*EBONY* Magazine and the Art of the Cover

## Introduction

Magazines have long served not only as sources of entertainment and information but also as “affective resources” (Fazli 207) which refers to objects that resonate deeply with readers, influencing how they perceive themselves and the world around them. Especially within marginalized communities, magazines have offered vital platforms for cultural self-representation, education, and resistance. This is particularly evident in *Ebony* magazine, a pioneering publication established in 1945 by John H. Johnson. As “the most widely read black magazine in the world” (West 1), *Ebony* became an institution within Black American life, offering visibility, affirmation, and a counter-narrative to the stereotypes of Black people circulating in mainstream media. In a media landscape historically dominated by publications catering to a White middle class, *Ebony* carved out space for African Americans to see their culture, achievements, and concerns reflected on their own terms (Lee Patterson 69). While some critics have pointed to the magazine’s consumerist leanings and its primary focus on Black celebrities, *Ebony* also served as a site of historical memory, political commentary, and cultural education (West 3). The magazine documented postwar Black history revival efforts and created content specifically aimed at educating the Black community and preserving collective memory (West 93). Magazines, especially those outside the mainstream, often serve niche or marginalized communities, offering “disruptive aesthetics” (Fazli 205) that challenge dominant narratives. *Ebony*’s occasional break from glossy celebrity glamour to confront issues like Black history or racial injustice signals its importance as more than just a lifestyle publication for Black Americans. *Ebony* was, and is, “a ‘history book’ [that] has been largely overlooked” (West 2), whose pages offer insight into the ever-evolving identity of Black America.

Sheila M. Webb notes, that covers are regularly examined to understand their role in shaping political narratives (355). They invite analysis of visual rhetoric, timing, intended audience, and emotional resonance. Therefore, in this paper, I examine how *Ebony*’s ‘standout’ covers of the 1960s, specifically those that visually and thematically departed from its more conventional, lifestyle-driven imagery, represent a vital shift in the magazine’s role as a historical and cultural force. Through close visual and contextual analysis of covers such as the issues about Frederick Douglass (Sep. 1963), the White Problem (Aug. 1965), Martin Luther King’s death (1968), and Black Jesus (1969), I explore how *Ebony* not only reflected the social upheaval of the Civil Rights era but also helped shape Black political consciousness and cultural pride. These four selected covers speak volumes. Not just in who or what they depict, but in how they deviate from the magazine’s norm, suggesting bold editorial choices during a decade of enormous tension and transformation, representing critical moments in *Ebony*’s visual and political evolution. These covers not only reflect the changing socio-political climate of the decade but actively contribute to shaping the collective identity of Black America. Although not all of these covers were officially

designated “special issues,” their deviation from normative cover aesthetics suggests intentional editorial choices aimed at capturing a particular moment or mood in Black America.

Ultimately, this paper positions *Ebony* not simply as a mirror of its time but as a force that shaped and amplified a new Black consciousness. By analyzing the visual strategies and cultural messages embedded in these striking covers, we can better understand how Black identity was imagined, negotiated, and affirmed within a media landscape that often sought to marginalize or ignore it. *Ebony* is both a product and an agent of its time. By focusing on the magazine’s outstanding 1960s covers, I aim to uncover the ways in which the magazine responded to, influenced, and reflected the hopes, fears, and aspirations of a community in motion.

### **The History of *Ebony* Magazine**

With its first issue in 1945, *Ebony* magazine quickly became a cornerstone of Black American media, documenting African American life in a media landscape largely devoid of Black voices. Johnson envisioned *Ebony* as a publication that would affirm and celebrate Black life in all its complexity. With a modest 500-dollar loan, Johnson laid the foundation for what would become the Johnson Publishing Company (Tait 1). Through several different periodicals like *Negro Digest*, *Ebony*, and *Ebony Jr.*, Johnson would eventually create one of the most successful Black-owned businesses in the United States (Glasrud, Tait 1).

*Ebony*’s early success was immediate and overwhelming, proving the desire and need for an American magazine that focused on Black lives and perspectives. The very first issue of 25,000 copies sold out instantly. With the release of the second issue, over 200,000 copies were in circulation and by 2005, *Ebony* accumulated a readership of ten million people (West 19, Green 140-41, “75 Years”). In 1960, over 600,000 copies were printed, and in the 1980s, “40% of African American adults” (Parker) read *Ebony* (West 31). At the time, this level of influence and reach was “unmatched by any other general publication” (Parker). Its readership was made up of 96% Black Americans who primarily came from a Black middle-class background (Hirsch 262). In its early years, *Ebony* drew inspiration from the white magazine *Life*, mirroring its photo-editorial style while reshaping it through a distinctly Black lens (West 19). For this, the magazine employed a powerful team of photojournalists who documented cultural symbols, everyday experiences, struggles, and triumphs within the Black communities, pioneering a kind of visual storytelling that revealed both the intimacy and grandeur of Black life (“75 Years”). While the publication initially focused on Black celebrities and uplifting stories, it gradually evolved to regularly address pressing social justice issues. From the late 1950s, it featured Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s column “Advice for Living By,” and by the 1960s, began providing in-depth coverage of the Civil Rights Movement as it unfolded across the country (Glasrud). The periodical also became known for its special issues, particularly between the 1960s and 1990s, when it released several bold, eye-catching covers that captured the fear and hopes of that time (“Ebony Magazine’s Special”). These covers reflect a shift from the magazine’s early, more conservative editorial approach, one that largely steered clear of controversial topics, to a bolder, more engaged voice during the Civil Rights era (Bryant 131).

The cultural reach of *Ebony* extends far beyond newsstands. Its presence in homes, barber shops, and beauty parlors turned the magazine into a cultural and communal artifact, affirming a collective sense of identity and belonging (Parker). It not only documented history but actively shaped it, offering a “countermemory that challenge[d] white-authored historical perspectives” (West 4-5). The broader Johnson Publishing empire, especially with *Ebony*, played a key role in fostering Black intellectual discourse and promoting African American history during the Civil Rights era (Grene II). The magazine’s historical importance lies not only in its content but in its existence. It proved that Black audiences were a viable market, attracting advertisers and affirming the economic and cultural clout of African Americans (Green 132). “*Ebony* rewrote the rules of imaginative enterprise for African Americans,” establishing what Green calls “the first black cultural conglomerate deserving of the name” (130). Though its print run ended in 2019, the relaunch in 2021 as a digital platform continued its mission to celebrate Black life and history. Through decades of photography, storytelling, representation, and education, *Ebony* created a space for Black readers to see themselves with pride and complexity—a representation that they could not find in mainstream media. It became, and still is, “a touchstone for the clearest and most informative perspective on the African American experience” (Lavette 16). Overall, *Ebony*’s legacy as a cultural artifact lies in its power to visualize—and thus validate—the complexity, beauty, and agency of Black American life.

### **The Importance of Magazine Covers**

The magazine cover is the beachfront mansion, the penthouse condo, the thousand-acre western ranch: It is the most valuable piece of real estate for any magazine. Like no other medium, magazines rely on this singular page to do two crucial things: one, send a message about the personality and voice of the magazine and two, sell issues. (377)

—Ted Spiker, “The Magazine Cover: The Craft of Identity and Impact.”

Magazine covers occupy a unique space within the landscape of media and visual culture—front pages are powerful cultural texts (Spiker 377). They are far more than mere decorative pages made to attract buyers. Covers are compelling artifacts that reflect cultural values, historical contexts, and the social climate of their times. As Mitchell et al. note, the cover is “the most influential visual and verbal element magazine editors deploy to generate strong messaging and produce profits” (599). Far from being mere marketing tools, covers are multimodal sites of communication that convey layered messages through imagery, text, and design. The front page of a magazine functions as a mirror of society’s values and ideals, as shaped and influenced through general media (Heller and Fili 8). This makes them potent tools for cultural analysis, especially during periods of significant societal change. Ted Spiker argues that the magazine cover reminds audiences of pivotal moments and “acts as a barometer for what is important in the world” (381).

Magazine covers are “very complex texts” (Held 174) that can be analyzed from diverse methodological perspectives that distill complex events, movements, or identities into a single

image. They function like a “visual history book” (Spiker 382) that captures society through visual language. The power of the cover also lies in its permanence. Unlike fleeting television or internet content, magazines are often kept, passed along, and revisited (Crisp Crawford 286). In fact, during the height of their popularity, magazine covers had a cultural reach on par with television (Heller and Fili 8-9). This way covers serve as both aesthetic and commercial tools—blending art with marketing in an editorial context (Spiker 377). Their design, language, and imagery are carefully curated to stimulate interest, feelings, and identification, making them an indispensable resource for understanding media and society.

For the Black community, and Black magazines like *Ebony*, magazine covers hold even greater cultural weight. As Parker explains, Black representation on magazine covers helped counteract a White press that rendered Black people invisible or unworthy. These covers offered dignity, visibility, and pride to a readership to whom these were long denied. Showcasing Blackness on their terms, the visual narrative of Black covers became an act of resistance and self-determination. They deserve scholarly attention because they reflect and shape the world in which they exist as multimodal texts, cultural snapshots, and emotional touchstones. Their ability to capture attention, evoke emotion, and shape public memory makes them an indispensable resource for understanding media, identity, and society. To study them is to study how identity, power, and cultural memory are negotiated one front page at a time.

### ***Ebony* in the 50s, 60s, and 70s**

Considering the fact that *Ebony* magazine has existed for 80 years and its almost uninterrupted monthly publication schedule, I had to limit the time frame in which I wanted to examine *Ebony* covers. Naturally, I began my research by turning to the magazine’s early years, starting in 1945. While issues from the 1940s proved difficult to access, the freely accessible digital archive of *Ebony* via *Google Books* offers continuous editions from November 1959 through December 2008. While looking at the different covers from the late 1950s through the 1970s, clear aesthetic and ideological shifts quickly became apparent.

The covers of the 1950s reflect what could be described as a colorist and whitewashed visual strategy where the emphasis on light-skinned individuals—especially women—dominates the covers and White standards appear to be the prevailing idea of beauty (Jankowski et al.). For example, the covers from February 1957, February 1958, and November 1959 feature women who appear White or racially ambiguous. Other front pages, like the ones from December 1950 and September 1958, depict married couples where the man is dark-skinned, and the woman is light-skinned or White. These editorial choices reflect not only the magazine’s early strategy of racial uplift through assimilation but also the aspirational attitude of many Black Americans in the 1950s, who often sought social acceptance within a predominantly White cultural framework (Mayo et al. 52-53). While *Ebony* did, at times, feature articles addressing political issues and the lived realities of Black Americans, the imagery on the covers during this period rarely reflected these deeper social and political concerns. Instead, they emphasized glamour, entertainment, celebrity, and

romantic themes. However, nearly every edition included a red box on the cover, listing selected topics within the issue that discussed Black-centered issues more frequently. These brief teasers occasionally hinted at more serious topics inside the magazine, offering a window into the magazine's balancing act between commercial appeal and cultural commentary.

Moving on to the 1960s, a distinct visual shift becomes noticeable which reflects the growing momentum of the Civil Rights Movement and the changing political climate within the United States (Tait 3). Compared to the 1950s depiction of love, relationships, and marriages, which mostly included Black men with either White women, light-skinned Black women, or racially ambiguous women, the 1960s show increasingly more couples where both people are phenotypically Black. Dark-skinned Black women appeared more regularly and were often depicted by themselves. In addition, Black hair and natural hairstyles emerged as a recurring theme of 1960s *Ebony* covers. For instance, the December 1962, June 1966, and January 1969 editions all feature dark-skinned Black women showcasing their natural hair. While the 1962 cover discusses the use of wigs, the ones of 1966 and 1969 solely and boldly focus on afros and what is labeled on the covers as "THE NATURAL LOOK." This shift illustrates not only an evolving standard of (Black) beauty but also a growing celebration of Blackness and resistance to dominant Eurocentric norms (Lavette 16, Tait 3-4).

By the 1970s, *Ebony*'s celebration of Blackness was no longer subtle. These covers show the permanent manifestation of the natural Black hair movement and the inclination for 'Black is Beautiful' among the African American diaspora. Covers like those of March 1970 and February 1973 show dark-skinned men and women with large afros, while the June 1979 publication features a man with an afro and a woman with beaded braids. In May 1972, the cover even shows the striking departure from conventional Black representation by showing both a man and a woman with their heads shaved, further emphasizing the expanding visual language of empowerment and self-expression. Moreover, there is an increase of large, all-Black families and an additional aspect of Africans on the cover, symbolizing the desire of Black Americans to connect with their roots and ancestry. *Ebony* had become not only a cultural barometer but also a platform for radical self-representation. As Lavette aptly writes, the revolution "was ... delivered monthly to newsstands and Black homes within the pages of *Ebony*" (16).

These three decades offer a compelling visual narrative of how *Ebony* covers changed in style, tone, and focus. The shift from assimilationist imagery to radical self-representation mirrors not only the evolving priorities of the magazine but also broader social movements and transformations within Black America. Based on this trajectory, I have selected four covers from the 1960s (the period of transition) for closer analysis that reflect key cultural, political, and aesthetic turning points.

### **Deviating from the Norm: Standout *Ebony* Covers in the 1960s**

As previously mentioned, the *Ebony* covers of the 1960s began to feature images that moved beyond aspirational middle-class depictions and gradually included more topics that mirrored the

societal shifts of that time. Themes of Black beauty, power, history, family, and cultural pride increased, especially in covers that deviated from the magazine's standard design and image choices. In her article about magazine covers, Gudrun Held writes that "on the one hand [they have] to make regular readers recognise the brand label by means of the repetition of accustomed visual elements; on the other hand, [they] constantly [have] to sign on potential customers by adroitly deploying new means in a most striking way" (174). This is why the four covers I have chosen are particularly interesting. The front pages discussed in the following sub-chapters manage to preserve label recognition for their usual audience and simultaneously stand out to attract new readers. With their departure from the standard design, they draw special attention to relevant Black issues without losing the magazine's recognition factor.

### **"The Emancipation Proclamation" (Sep. 1963)**

The first 1960s *Ebony* cover that stands out is a special issue from September 1963 marking a pivotal moment in the magazine's visual and political evolution. Dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, spanning over an unprecedented 236 pages, the issue centered Black history, pride, and resistance ("Ebony Magazine's Special," West 42). Notably, the editors of *Ebony* chose not to portray Abraham Lincoln, the proclamation's author, but Frederick Douglass, a Black abolitionist.

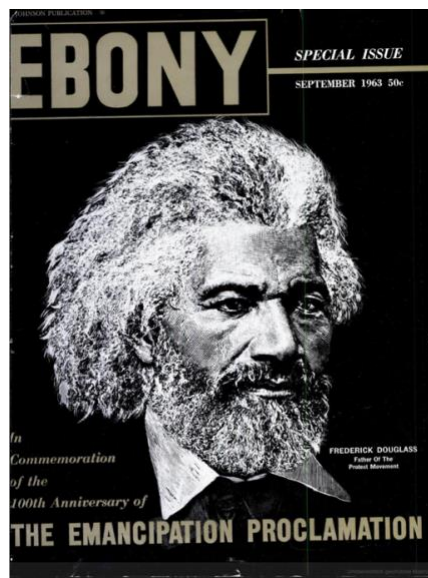


Figure 1. "The Emancipation Proclamation." *Ebony*, vol. XVII, no.11, September 1963.

Designed by Herb Nipson and Norman L. Hunter, this cover departs from *Ebony*'s typical cover layout. The usual and eye-catching "EBONY" label, which is normally depicted in white bold letters on top of an orange box and serves as a recognition factor of the magazine, is nowhere to be found (fig. 1). In this issue, the label is written in solemn beige letters within a black box; a stark

contrast to the usual vibrant logo. This lets familiar readers know that this is a special issue by visual clues alone. This beige and black theme spans across the entire cover page and reflects the serious nature and importance of the topic, clearly indicating the editor's conscious decision to declare the anniversary as a special, noteworthy topic. At the center of the cover is a black-and-white illustration of Frederick Douglass (fig.1). His stern facial expression reflects the seriousness of the topic and the anniversary. Additionally, his white textured hair and beard, as well as his white shirt collar, project wisdom and intellect. Next to Douglass, the issue's focus is spelled out: "In Commemoration of the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION" (fig. 1). To his right, the abolitionist is declared the "Father Of The Protest Movement" (fig. 1), explicitly connecting his legacy and "the Proclamation's shortcomings [to] the ongoing struggle for racial equality" (West 43) of the 1960s.

This imagery is a meaningful editorial choice. Douglass was acutely aware of the visual politics of representation and the influence of images on public sentiment and historical memory. "By distributing photographs of himself posed and clothed in the manner of his own choosing, Douglass provided alternatives to racist stereotypical portrayals of African Americans" (Lindberg) during his lifetime. The illustrated portrait on this *Ebony* cover thus echoes Douglass's sentiment and shapes how he, and, by extension, Black Americans, were seen and perceived. Rather than allowing others to choose the focus of this incredibly significant anniversary, *Ebony's* editors chose to reclaim the narrative of Black people and honor a Black abolitionist over Abraham Lincoln, presenting him with dignity, intelligence, and strength. The visual symbolism reinforces this message even further. Douglass's textured, natural Black hair and full beard signify a defiant embrace of Black identity. Depicting natural Black hair on the cover of *Ebony's* first special issue also mirrors the cultural pride and beauty politics of the Natural Hair Movement that started to gain traction at the time. Douglass's stoic, commanding presence also aligns with the magazine's initial goal of challenging the era's dominant media portrayal of Black people (Rice Lamb 275). Instead of portraying a Black man as invisible or dangerous, *Ebony* gives its readers an example of a Black man who is a thinker and a leader while simultaneously honoring an important Black historical event.

While the special issue was a year in the making and could not have foreseen the events at the time of its publishing, the timing was impeccable (West 43). Published just weeks after the March on Washington and in the same month as the Birmingham church bombing, the issue reached the nation in a state of turmoil. It asked its readers to reconsider the Emancipation Proclamation not as a finished achievement, but as "unfinished business" (West 43) which still needed to be improved upon. By centering Frederick Douglass, *Ebony* offered a powerful, "distinct black 'counter-memory'" (West 45) and a positive example of Black history while validating Black resistance as a centuries-long struggle. This issue also positioned the struggle for civil rights as a continuation of a noble, historical fight and reflected a significant. The issue was met with widespread praise and helped solidify *Ebony's* role not just as a lifestyle magazine but as a vehicle for Black history (West 47, 95). This issue likely resonated deeply with Black readers, offering



inspiration and historical validation for their continued fight for equality while encapsulating a significant shift in how African Americans were represented and perceived.

### “The WHITE Problem In America” (Aug. 1965)

The next *Ebony* cover that strays from the usual design and marks a shift in the magazine’s visual and political identity is the special issue of August 1965. Released during the Watts Riot in Los Angeles that erupted over police misconduct against a Black family, this special issue marks a dramatic turn in the magazine’s political tone (Nichols, West 54). Instead of portraying Black excellence, beauty, achievement, or history, this issue turns its focus squarely onto the issue of Whiteness. By doing so, *Ebony* refuses to adhere to the long-held framing of racial inequality as a ‘Black problem’ and instead names White America(ns) as the source of systemic oppression (West 54).

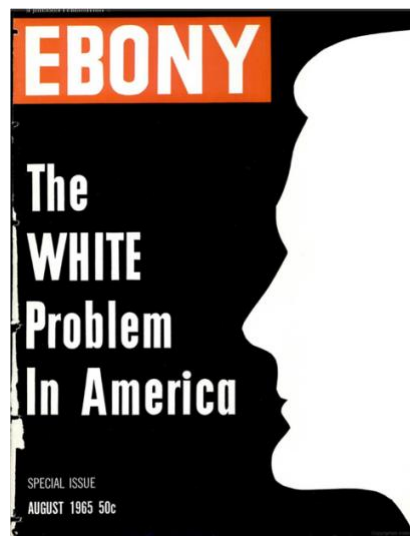


Figure 2. “The WHITE Problem In America.” *Ebony*, vol.XX, no. 10, August 1965.

Designed by Herbert Temple, a graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the cover of the August 1965 issue is minimalist yet highly confrontational and direct (fig. 2). While the usual white *Ebony* label within an orange box is visible in the upper left corner, the rest of the cover is solely in black and white. The white silhouette of a person’s profile occupies the right edge which stands in contrast to the black background. Apart from the text on the left side of the cover that serves as the issue’s title, there are no additional images. Just white, bold text reading: “The WHITE Problem In America” (fig. 2). The choice to emphasize “WHITE” counters the racist language often found in mainstream White media that labeled Blackness as something negative and framed racial unrest in America as a ‘negro problem.’ Instead, *Ebony* spotlighted Whiteness and put it under a microscope. In the publisher’s statement of the issue, John H. Johnson explicitly names what he believes to be the root issue of Black people in America: “The unthinking white man—

Mr. Charlie, Whitey, The Man—the unthinking white man who is the symbol to Negroes of all those whites who have ‘stood in the doorways’ to keep the Negro back” (27). He goes on to say that the solution to this issue “lies in a more thorough study of the man who created the problem” (27). With this cover, *Ebony* magazine challenged its readers to look at racial issues in America from a different perspective.

The shifted focus of this issue on White people is further reinforced by the absence of any Black imagery. Unlike previous and standard issues, which centered Black bodies, style, and lives, this cover does not depict Black people. The white silhouette has European facial features, namely small lips, and a Western nose, as well as hair that would suggest the silhouette represents a White man (fig. 2). This omission of Blackness on the cover of a Black magazine is in itself a notable factor and powerful statement that, in this case, underlines the desire to highlight the problem with Whiteness addressed within the periodical. As Caroline Goesser notes, images serve as “semiotic signs that carr[y] clearly coded cultural meanings for their viewers” (viii). In this instance, the visual conveys that Blackness should be in the background when looking for the root of the problem while the burden of explanation (and solution) lies with Whiteness.

This issue is, apart from its official status as a special issue, significant because it is a very bold departure from Johnson’s and *Ebony*’s typically moderate stance. For years, *Ebony*’s engagement with political messaging had been cautious, balancing civil rights coverage within the issue with stories of Black success and middle-class lifestyles that usually graced the cover (Hirsch 267). Starting in 1963, the magazine shifted its coverage following the lead of its readership—many of whom, as Hirsch states, were middle-class Black Americans who became increasingly frustrated with the slow pace of racial progress (292). The August 1965 cover reflects this growing militancy and discontent of the Black community at the time, offering what West calls “a power reader for the riots” (56). Though the timing of the Watts Riot and the release of the issue was unplanned, their thematic overlap was striking and resonated with many Black Americans (West 55). As visible in the reader’s letters printed in the following issue, the response was overwhelmingly positive, praising the issue’s daring tone and honesty (West 56). By naming Whiteness as the problem, this cover refocuses the national conversation on race, advancing a critique that aligned with the broader ideological shift throughout the civil rights movement.

Ultimately, *Ebony*’s August 1965 release stands as a pivotal moment in *Ebony*’s and America’s history. It is an example of how design, rhetoric, and timing can converge to create a long-lasting cultural artifact. Through its bold minimalism and radical message, the cover captures the frustration of the era and simultaneously aided activists at the time, underlining *Ebony*’s role as a platform not only for Black popular culture but for Black history and political engagement (West 95).

### **“‘I’ve Been To The Mountaintop’” (May 1968)**

The *Ebony* cover of May 1968 features Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and was published shortly after his assassination. Serving as a commemorative piece, this issue, though not entirely dedicated to

the minister, includes two separate articles dedicated to King that showcase his life and achievements.

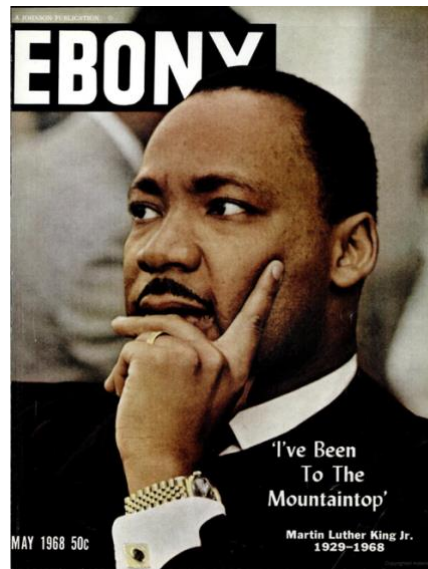


Figure 3. “‘I’ve Been To The Mountaintop.’” *Ebony*, vol. XXIII, no. 7, May 1968.

The first notable aspect of the cover is the absence of the orange-white *Ebony* label in the left upper corner. While there is an *Ebony* label, it is in white bold letters against a black background (fig. 3). Though this is not officially marked as a special issue this deviation from design alone proves that this is not a regular issue. Through the cover’s design choices, any reader familiar with the magazine can immediately tell so from a distance. Additionally, the *Ebony* label is usually on top of the cover image. However, in this instance, the head of the portrait is partially in front of the label, hinting at the importance of the person. The actual cover photograph is a portrait of King in which his left hand rests against his cheek, his eyes cast to the side under his furrowed brows as if in deep thought, presenting him as a man of intellect (fig. 3). His gold wedding ring is clearly visible, and so are his gold watch and his gold cufflinks. These accented accessories not only represent wealth, something that *Ebony* readers aspired to, but they also highlight King’s position as a dedicated husband. The look is completed by a white shirt and a dark suit jacket, once again indicating wealth as well as style (fig. 3). The background is out of focus, ensuring that the viewers’ gaze gravitates toward the minister. The text on the cover reads: “‘I’ve Been To The Mountaintop’” (fig.3). Below that King’s full name with his date of birth and death can be found. The quote on the cover refers to words from King’s final speech delivered the day before his assassination and underlines the act of remembrance this cover showcases.

The photograph, though seemingly simple and straightforward, is full of nuance. As Ghaniabadi explains, portrait photography, even in its simplicity, often conceals “hidden signs, [as well as] ambiguous and deep concepts” (24) that require a closer look. The uncomplicated, rather plain, cover allows King’s expression and the biblical reference to be at the forefront, evoking a

legacy of leadership and sacrifice. The decision to use an unembellished, close-up image reflects *Ebony's* stance toward King in his life and death. Unlike mainstream media, where King was often reduced to being a dreamer or a threat, *Ebony* depicted him in a non-sensationalized manner: grounded, thoughtful, complex, and inspiring. This visual restraint functions as an intentional strategy and makes the image simple, yet powerful. The magazine frames King as both martyr and prophet, capturing what Spiker calls the commemorative power of magazine covers which “serve a different purpose than other media, not only in content but also in the power of the cover image” (383). Through commemorative pieces, the media is able to focus on the positive aspects of the person’s life which in turn influences the perception of readers and the legacy left behind (Spiker 383). The image operates as “critical memory” (West 114), a mode of remembrance that counteracts erasure or oversimplification. It asks viewers and readers to remember King not as a mere symbol of unity between Black and White people, but as a complex political thinker and spiritual leader. Furthermore, King’s depiction exemplifies *Ebony's* influence as a visual medium. As Hudson and Lance note, photography includes a particular “bias and point of view” (419) and is therefore never neutral. The editorial decision to highlight and honor King in this way communicates *Ebony's* loyalty and support for the minister which can be seen throughout the magazine’s history (West 116).

Visually and editorially, this cover fits into the magazine’s function of what Crisp Crawford describes as “a potent combination of celebrity and exceptionalism that allows its content to influence readers and society in a unique and powerful way” (285). The close-up of his face allows for what researchers describe as “parasocial interaction” (Crisp Crawford 288) wherein audiences feel a personal connection with the figure and are more likely to adopt their views and values. In this way, the issue of May 1968 is not only mourning King, it is also reinforcing his role as a moral compass for *Ebony's* readership.

Ultimately, this cover frames King as a man of intellect while also reminding viewers of the cost of leadership and the power of memory. Though it is a commemorative issue, it does not exploit grief; rather, it honors it. The choice to use a photograph that conveys serenity rather than despair communicates a sense of quiet resilience—it is a refusal to sensationalize the Black Death and instead dignify Black life. The cover insists that mourning and meaning can coexist and that the loss of Black life, when treated with care and respect, can become a powerful site of cultural and political legacy.

### **“The Quest for a Black Christ” (Mar. 1969)**

Another striking image can be found on the cover of the March 1969 issue: Jesus Christ depicted as a Black man. The cover reproduced a close-up of DeVon Cunningham’s mural, painted in 1968 on the apse of the St. Cecilia Church in Detroit. Commissioned by Father Raymond Ellis after the 1967 riots, the mural was intended to serve as a spiritual and visual refuge for the community (Berquist et al. 793, “The Black”). The image at the church quickly became a “hotly contested icon” (Berquist et al. 793) that sparked a heated debate and eventually inspired the *Ebony* cover.

With the cover, *Ebony* placed a local religious artwork from Detroit into the national spotlight, using magazine media to elevate the theological and racial questions hidden in the mural.

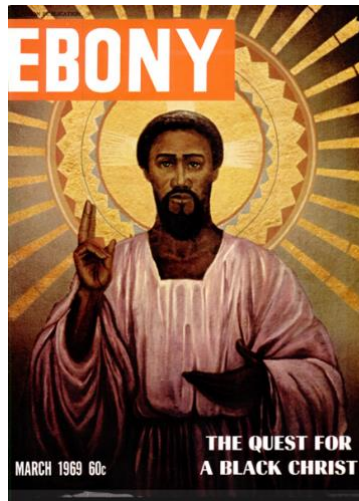


Figure 4. “The Quest for a Black Christ.” *Ebony*, vol. XXIV, no. 5, March 1969.

This issue follows the usual layout of *Ebony* covers in the 1960s. In the upper left corner, the orange-white label can be found; in the lower right corner, the text reads: “The Quest for a black Christ” (fig. 4). Structurally, the portrait of Black Jesus adheres closely to traditional (White) Christian iconography, namely Pantocrator image. However, it radically reimagines its racial content at the same time. Jesus is depicted with dark skin, a short afro, and a full beard (fig. 4). He wears a flowing purple robe that resembles the attire of a minister. His expression is neutral, and the light reflected in his eyes is reminiscent of the solemn gaze found in White Christ Pantocrator images. Behind him is the image of a radiant sun that resembles a halo. The figure’s right hand is raised in the traditional blessing gesture, and his left hand is held in front of his torso, mimicking the familiar Pantocrator image in which Jesus holds a book or a scroll (“Pantocrator”).

The choice to reproduce this particular image reflects *Ebony*’s growing editorial commitment to Black representation and cultural visibility. As Lavette states, the Black-owned magazine “was the only publication bold enough to place Black Jesus on its cover” (16). By doing so, *Ebony* reframed ancient religious forms through the lens of Black identity for its audience. Goesser describes similar visual strategies used by Harlem Renaissance artists, who inserted Black figures into biblical narratives in order to “challenge tradition” (220) and “racially prejudiced religious beliefs” (209). Cunningham’s mural, and its replication on this cover, act in the same way, confronting viewers with a daring reinterpretation. While some saw the image as empowering, others viewed it as scandalous. Cunningham’s original mural reportedly provoked such strong emotions that his home was “firebombed” (Aguilar). Yet, this was a period when Black communities “became more intentional about decolonizing their spaces and increasingly eschewed Eurocentric representations of Jesus the Christ” (Avery). The rise of Black Liberation Theology emphasized a Christ who stood with the oppressed and who, like Black Americans, suffered under

the weight of injustice (Avery). By using the traditional structure of Christ Pantocrator, an image that has largely remained unchanged for over 1,000 years, the cover maintains visual continuity and tradition while radically redefining its racial meaning (“Pantocrator”). This visual familiarity makes the transformation even more powerful: it asserts that a Black Christ is not a novelty but a legitimate and faithful expression of divinity, offering Black Americans an alternative interpretation and connection to religion. As Sinks states, non-hegemonic religious iconography like this can “help dismantle the structures of both implicit White privilege and explicit White supremacy” (4).

Ultimately, the March 1969 cover amplifies Black representation in religious imagery and therefore Blackness in religious spaces overall. By placing a dark-skinned Jesus on the cover, *Ebony* helped redefine the boundaries of who could be seen as holy, powerful, and worthy for a large number of Black Americans. Today, the depiction of Black Jesus, specifically in Black Christian households is no longer a novelty (Avery).

## Conclusion

To conclude, through its strategic use of covers, *Ebony* magazine not only reflected the change in Black life and sentiment in America at the time, but also helped shape cultural narratives around race, identity, and representation. As explored in each of the analyzed covers, *Ebony* used iconography to construct a dignified, complex, and empowering vision of Blackness that countered the dominant, White-oriented imagery of other media. These covers did not merely document history, they interpreted and influenced it, drawing from different aspects of life to place Black figures at the center of Black American cultural consciousness. Through the above analysis, it becomes apparent how *Ebony* used visual rhetoric to reframe Black identity through the lens of power, history, religion, and celebrity. The magazine made deliberate editorial and aesthetic choices that challenged what and who was seen as beautiful, intellectual, heroic, and holy in American life. These portrayals tapped into deeper cultural and political currents and served as powerful visual texts that deserve more scholarly attention. Further research could expand this analysis by comparing *Ebony*’s visual strategies to those of other Black publications or by closely examining audience reception to the covers through readers’ letters found in the early pages of each *Ebony* issue. To analyze how readers and subscribers saw themselves reflected, challenged, or impacted by these covers. In addition, further research could include a comparison of how or whether (or not) White magazines at the time depicted the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, the assassination of King, and religious figures and compare them to *Ebony*.

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