Configuring Modernities:

New Negro Womanhood in the

Nation's Capital, 1890-1940

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
History in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a cadre of black women merged the ideals of the "New Woman" and the "New Negro" to configure New Negro Womanhood. For these women, the combining of these two figurations encapsulated the complexity and strivings of black women attempting to achieve racial and gender equality and authorial control of their bodies and aspirations. New Negro women challenged racial and gender inequality and exclusion from participating in contemporaneous political and cultural currents. New Negro women are meaningful in understanding how ideas about black women's political, economic, social and cultural agency challenged New Negro's ideological focus on black men and New Woman's ideological focus on white women. At the core of the New Negro woman ethos was a transformation in how black women thought about the possibility of moving into the public sphere. Black women etched out the parameters of individual and collective aspirations and desires within a modern world in which they were treated as second-class citizens.

My dissertation explores New Negro womanhood in Washington, D.C. The nation's capital functioned as a preeminent site for the realization of African American possibility. The District of Columbia also offered unique opportunities for African American political, civic, social and cultural involvement. More specifically, the city was a fruitful site for the development of African American women's leadership, entrepreneurship and creativity. I use black beauty culture, performance activism, women's suffrage activism, higher education, and black leisure spaces in Washington to

examine how black women grappled with and configured ideas about black modernity. Each of these areas provided a distinct context in which African American women in Washington transgressed boundaries of both racial and gender hierarchies and aspired to greater visibility, mobility, and legibility within the modern world. African American women in Washington embraced New Negro Womanhood as a conduit to black modernity.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to all people fighting for a more

equal and just world. Your tireless dedication to making a

difference inspire and motivate me.

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

  In 1902, Washington resident, political activist, and educator Anna Julia Cooper became principal of M Street High School, one of most prestigious secondary schools for African Americans in the United States. As principal, Cooper encouraged both her male and female students to pursue higher education. More specifically, Cooper supported the decisions of young black women to pursue careers outside of the home. Most black women afforded the privilege of elementary and secondary education did not enroll in college, although some did begin attending colleges and universities in the mid-nineteenth century. Of the black women who completed college at this time, most became teachers or chose not to pursue employment opportunities if they married. Cooper's investment in black women's higher education not only ruffled the feathers of whites in Washington, but also positioned her within a contentious debate among African Americans about black women's roles in the modern world. In what became known as the M Street Controversy, Cooper was dismissed by D.C.'s African American Board of Education in 1905. The primary reason for her dismissal was her advocacy of higher education for black women, which came under fire because she resisted an intra-racial gender hierarchy that limited the careers to which black women should aspire.

  Many within Washington's African American community in this era promoted a black gender ideology that did not recognize black women as equal participants in political and cultural projects that demanded full equality for African Americans. Like other black Washington women, Cooper navigated a treacherous terrain marked by white supremacy and both inter and intra-racial sexism. Cooper's desire to prepare women for

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the modern world also mirrored that of other black women who confronted and challenged intra- and interracial oppression. Cooper and black women in Washington with a similar investment in confronting racial and gender oppression attempted to carve out arenas for exploring new possibilities for African American women in what they perceived as an exciting, distinctly modern world.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a cadre of black women merged the ideals of the "New Woman" and the "New Negro" to create their own hybrid, New Negro Womanhood. For these women, the combination captured the complexities of their lives and the challenges they faced in achieving not just racial and gender equality, but also authorial control over their bodies, their identities, and their aspirations. New Negro women challenged racial and gender inequality and exclusion from contemporaneous political and cultural currents. Their efforts in this regard provide insight into how profoundly black women's political, economic, social, and cultural agency challenged both the New Negro's focus on black men and the New Woman's focus on white women. At the core of New Negro Womanhood was a fundamental transformation in black women's roles and a movement out of the domestic realm and into the wider array of economic, political, social, and cultural possibilities available in the public sphere. Black women etched out the parameters of individual and collective aspirations and desires within a modern world in which they were treated as second-class citizens. African American women in Washington embraced New Negro Womanhood as a conduit to black modernity.

During the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, millions of African Americans moved to cities such as New York, Chicago, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and

Washington in search of opportunities and to escape the harsh realities of southern racism.[1] The nation's capital experienced a significant influx of African American women during this period. Between 1860 and 1930, the population of black women in the District of Columbia increased by over 800 percent. The federal census of 1860 reported a total of 8,402 black women in Washington. In 1890, the federal census counted 41,581 black women in the nation's capital; by 1930, there were 69,843 black women.[2] New York and Chicago experienced similar trends in the growth of their black populations from 1890-1930. However, black migration to Washington between 1860 and 1900 had more profound demographic implications than it did in other urban areas during the late nineteenth century. By 1957, Washington became the first major city with a black majority. The Great Migration, along with related cultural currents such as Progressivism, Pan-Africanism, and New Woman and New Negro ideology created new spaces in which black women could advocate for racial and gender equality as well as personal freedom.

By the early 1900s, several black neighborhoods in Washington thrived such as Georgetown, Anacostia, Southwest, Le Droit Park, and the U Street Corridor. African

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[1] Several books discuss the impact of the Great Migration on urban centers such as Washington, Chicago, and New York. Eric Arnesen, *Black Protest and the Great Migration: A Brief History With Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003); Joe W. Trotter, Jr., ed. *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Alferdteen J. Harrison, *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991); Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1991); Carole B. Marks, *Farewell, We're Good and Gone: The Great Migration* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Robert H. Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America Since 1865* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008); James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and The Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[2] U.S. Department of Interior, Census Office, *United States Population: 1860,* Table 2, p. 588; *U.S. Census of Population: 1890*, pt. 1, Table 22; and U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United State: 1930-Population,* vol. 3, Table 2, p. 99.

Americans were not concentrated in one area of the city, but spread throughout in racial enclaves that were primarily self-sufficient and self-governing. Each community had religious institutions, black-owned businesses, and civic and social institutions that served a rapidly growing black population. Founded in 1870, the M Street High School in Washington became the preeminent black secondary school in the United States during the New Negro era. The school boasted such prominent alumni and faculty such as Sterling Brown, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Charles Hamilton Houston, Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, Carter G. Woodson, Kelly Miller, and Charles Drew.[3] A few minutes away from M Street, which was located in Northwest Washington just outside of the predominantly black Shaw neighborhood, was Howard University. Chartered by Congress on March 2, 1867, Howard emerged as the leading post-secondary institution for African Americans by the 1900s. Through these educational institutions, the political advocacy of Washington blacks combating racial discrimination and inequality, and the flourishing of local race enterprises, Washington became an intellectual, cultural, and political hotbed for African Americans.

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[3] Brown was a renowned professor. Burroughs was an educator, orator, businesswoman, religious leader, and founder of the National Training School for Women and Girls in Washington, D.C. Houston was a lawyer who served as the Dean of Howard University's Law school and as the litigation director for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He played a significant role in training future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and in dismantling Jim Crow laws. Cooper was an educator, author, and a leading scholar of U.S. history. Terrell was one of the first African American women to earn a college degree. She became both an nationally and internationally recognized civil rights and suffrage activist. Woodson was a historian, journalist, author, and founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. He also co-founded the *Journal of Negro History* and is recognized as the "Father of Black History." Miller was one of the most important figures in African American intellectual life during the first half of the twentieth century. He was an educator, administrator, essayist, author, mathematician, and sociologist. Drew was arguably the most prominent African American medical researcher and physician of the New Negro era. He became the first black surgeon to serve as an examiner on the the American Board of Surgery. The range of accomplishments of both faculty and alumni of M Street High School reflects upon the intellectual, cultural, and political landscapes of Washington.

"Configuring Modernities," builds upon recent scholarship that de-centers New York as the preeminent site of the New Negro movement.[4] Scholars such as Davarian Baldwin, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Jeffrey Ogbar have revisited the New Negro era and expanded the geographic and topical focus to uncover untold stories about African Americans and representations of African Americans. This new scholarship also underscores the connection between New Negro identities and black modernity.[5] Houston Baker first connected the concept of black modernity with the New Negro movement over twenty years ago, in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, which linked African Americans' political and cultural projects in New York to their collective investment in modernity. Scholars such as Paul Gilroy, Michael Blanchard, and Joel Dinerstein have further explored the interplay of African American experiences and

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[4] Within the past five years, a body of literature has emerged that reconsiders the New Negro movement through shifting away from making the Harlem Renaissance synonymous with the New Negro movement. Explorations of other urban spaces as well as the transnational implications of a New Negro ethos are central to this budding body of scholarship on African American experiences during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Jeffrey Ogbar, *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Arts, and Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Henry Louis Gates and Gene Jarrett, eds., *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); and, Martha Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes: Images of Race in American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[5] There are a few texts that are foundational to New Negro studies, particularly for scholars pushing for new directions and considerations in this subfield of Jim Crow studies. See Michael Blanchard, *"Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora," Public Culture*, 11, 1, (1999): 245-268; Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture Between Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). Also integral to New Negro studies are texts the broadly consider the effects of modernity in the U.S. and non-U.S. contexts. See Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987); Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1982); Jani Scandura, *Down in the Dumps: Place, Modernity, American Depression* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

modernity through asserting the existence of black and/or Afro-modernity. For Michael

Blanchard, Afro-modernity

> represents a particular understanding of modernity and modern
> subjectivity among peoples of African descent. At its broadest
> parameters, it consists of the selective incorporation of technologies,
> discourses, and institutions of the modern West within the cultural
> and political practices of African-derived peoples to create a form
> of relatively autonomous modernity distinct from its counterparts of
> Western Europe and North America.[6]

Blanchard, in particular, provides a point of departure for considering how African

American women in particular formed autonomous modernities distinct from not only

whites, but also from black men.

Black women in Washington developed technologies, discourses, and institutions

that expressed their perspectives, preferences, and desires. My focus on black women,

and more specifically, black womanhood complicates a masculinist conceptualization of

modernity. While Blanchard does not exclude women from his framing of Afro-

modernity, he does not expressly address the differences between black men and

women's experiences with modernity. "Configuring Modernities" considers how whites,

black men, white supremacy, and black manhood attempted to exclude black women

from creating and articulating an autonomous modernity. Aligning with Gilroy's

assertion that "the cultures of diaspora blacks can be profitably interpreted as expressions

of and commentaries upon ambivalences generated by modernity and their locations in

it," I conceive of New Negro Womanhood as a space in which black women struggled

against interracial and intra-racial political and cultural currents to claim a distinct voice

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[6] Blanchard 247.

and place within the modern world.[7] This struggle occurred in numerous spaces and

consequently, black women constructed multiple modernities.

In this dissertation, I focus on Washington, D.C. to consider New Negro

Womanhood. I hone in on Washington because of its substantial population of African

American women and because of the numerous institutions and organizations that existed

in Washington which were founded by and served black women. African American

women in Washington were at the forefront of re-imagining and redefining black

womanhood during the New Negro era.[8] Black womanhood was not a monolithic

experience, but a multifaceted and fluid space in which women could explore what it

meant to be "modern." African American women could move in and out of this porously

bound space as they shaped their political, social, and cultural identities.

I build upon growing body of scholarship on New Negro womanhood, which

addresses gender inequalities within African American communities.[9] New Negro

womanhood provided a space for women to explicitly critique these inequalities. As

Patricia Hill Collins explains, "African American politics have been profoundly

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[7] Gilroy 17.

[8] This idea stems from what Lori Ginzberg calls the "horizon of latent possibilities." In Ginzburg's *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), she discusses the shifting political contexts and meanings of women's reform activism. Through this discussion, she illuminates how these women re-imagined and re-configured womanhood through their benevolence-based activism. For black women in Washington, several "latent possibilities" existed for black women to redefine their roles as authorial subjects and full participants in the modern world.

[9] Although scholars of the New Negro movement often include women as historical subjects, a handful of work exists that focuses solely or almost exclusively on African American women during the New Negro era. See Erin Chapman, "Prove It On Me: New Negro Women Politics and Popular Culture," dissertation, (New Haven: Yale University 2006); Daphne Lamothe, *Inventing the New Negro: Narrative, Culture, and Ethnography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Cherene Johnson Sherrard, *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

influenced by a black gender ideology that ranks race and gender."[10] New Negro women

in Washington questioned gender conventions that privileged racial equality over gender

equality. Furthermore, these women resisted configurations of black modernity that

linked a New Negro ethos solely to black manhood. Although African American women

in Washington could not escape black gender ideology during the New Negro era, they

strategically manipulated and occasionally challenged existing gender ideologies that

emphasized feminine propriety and women's roles within the domestic sphere.

My analysis expands upon recent scholarship on black women's political, social,

and cultural activities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Politics of

respectability as the framework through which to understand black women's participation

in intellectual, cultural, social, and political strivings outside of their homes remains

central to how black women's studies scholars approach African American women's

studies.[11] A significant body of African American women's studies scholarship focuses

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[10] Collins, Patricia H., *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 217.

[11] Black respectability politics take centerstage in foundational African American's women's historical texts such as; Paula Giddings *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984); Evelyn B. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993);); Susan Lynn Smith, *Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: Black Women's Health Activism in America, 1890-1950* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load, Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999); Wanda A. Hendricks, *Gender, Race, and Politics in the Midwest: Black Club Women in Illinois* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Darlene C. Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1994); Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs*, 14, 4 (Summer 1989): 912-920; Gerda Lerner, "Early Community Work of Black Club Women," *The Journal of Negro History*, 59, 2 (Apr., 1974): 158-167; Anne Firor Scott, "Most Invisible of All: Black Women's Voluntary Associations," *The Journal of Southern History*, 56, 1 (Feb., 1990): 3-22; and Angela Davis, *Women, Race, &Class* (New York: Random House, 1981). In Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Tera Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women*

on what Darlene Clark Hine identifies as "black women's adherence to Victorian ideology, as well as their self-representation as 'super moral'" in an effort to understand how black women navigated public spaces made dangerous by the conventions of white supremacy.[12] Scholars such as Paula Giddings, Deborah Gray White, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, and Gerda Lerner echo Hine's claim that the politics of black respectability was perceived as "crucial not only to the protection and upward mobility of black women but also to the attainment of respect, justice, and opportunity for all black Americans."[13] These politics, as defined by historian Joyce Hanson, relied on "confidence in women's higher moral capacity, the power of educational advancement, Christian responsibility, and community activism."[14] While much of the historiography emphasizes the positive and productive aspects of the politics of respectability, some scholars are highly critical of their inherent class bias.[15] Additionally, scholars such as Tera Hunter, Victoria Wolcott, Angela Davis, and Glenda Gilmore centralize black respectability politics by exploring the experiences of women remaking or rejecting these politics. While I argue that politics of respectability are

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and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), Wolcott, Hunter, and Gilmore further complicate how historians understand the centrality of black respectability to African American women's lives. Wolcott focuses on black women in Detroit strategically using respectability politics. Both Hunter and Gilmore hone in on African American women in the South who not only strategically use respectability politics, but also on women who challenge the utility of these politics in challenging racial and gender hierarchies.

[12] Darlene C. Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs*, 14, 4 (Summer 1989), 915.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Joyce A. Hanson, *Mary McLeod Bethune & Black Women's Political Activism* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 22.

[15] See Gerald Horne, *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois* (New York: New York University, 2000); Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load, Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994*, and Victoria Walcott, *Remaking Respectability: African Americans in Interwar Detroit* as examples of this recurring theme.

integral to examining black women's experiences during the New Negro era, my dissertation also presents women who overtly rejected adherence to Victorian ideology, who viewed these respectability politics as elitist, and who strategically invested in black respectability politics to articulate modern political and aesthetic identities. My dissertation focuses on women who questioned the utility of respectability politics for black women attempting to become full participants in the modern world. From hair styles to careers, New Negro women demanded respect for their individual voices, aspirations, and bodies on their own terms.

"Configuring Modernities" also addresses a significant gap in the urban history of the nation's capital and more broadly, the urban, upper south. The extant scholarship on African Americans in Jim Crow Washington focuses on a few central themes: race relations, residential patterns, and specific movements and institutions. Although race relations are essential to the history of Washington during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the scholarship on this topic tends to ignore what occurred *within* the African American community. Mara Cherkasky's *Slices of the Pie: Black and White Dupont Circle from the 1920s to the 1950s*, offers an example of this tendency. By detailing how blacks and whites negotiated this one, particular neighborhood, Cherkasky provides a lens that recasts broader issues such as segregation and daily terror. Yet she is not concerned with the lives and experiences of African Americans outside of their interactions with white Washingtonians, even though her work provides tantalizing glimpses into the lives blacks led apart from whites. Constance Green's, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* and Ronald Johnson's, "Black and White Apart: The Community Center Movement in the District of Columbia, 1915-

1930," illuminate the presence of a black Washington community through a race relations framework. Both also introduce intra-communal politics during the New Negro era. From an urban historical perspective, I consider the dynamics within black communities to understand the creation of distinct black social, political, cultural, and economic spaces, and more specifically, the creation of these spaces by black women.

More recently, urban history began accounting for the fact that men and women and different races experienced the city in different ways and how racialized gender ideologies inscribe(d) urban landscapes.[16] For example, Sarah Deutsch's *Women and the City* elucidates broader themes about how women shape and reconfigure urban spaces.[17] For Deustch, the Boston functioned as a historical subject that women interacted with and transformed. Deeply entrenched, but contested hierarchies dictated what spaces women occupied and what ideologies became predominant in an urban setting. I specifically engage expressive and cultural practices as spaces in which black women in Washington perpetuated or challenged these hierarchies. These practices will be considered in conjunction with intra-racial and interracial race, gender, class, and sexual politics and ideologies to assert the significance of thinking about early twentieth century Washington as a "City for New Negro Women."[18] I extend historian Christine Stansell's argument

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[16] Edward J. Cashin and Glenn T. Eskew, eds., *Paternalism in a Southern City: Race, Religion, and Gender in Augusta, Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001); Kenneth L. Kusmer and Joe W. Trotter, eds., *African American Urban History Since World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Louis M. Kyriakoudes, *The Social Origins of the Urban South: Race, Gender, and Migration in Nashville and Middle Tennessee, 1890-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*; Kali N. Gross, *Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880-1910* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006); Joe W. Trotter, Earl Lewis, and Tera Hunter, eds., *African American Urban Experience: Perspectives from the Colonial Period to the Present* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004).

[17] Sarah Deustch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, Power in Boston, 1870-1940* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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that the city was configured by women through arguing that Jim Crow era Washington

cannot be understood without including the experiences of black women. My

dissertation contributes to African American urban historical scholarship by using gender

and culture as primary categories of analysis. In *The New African American Urban

History*, Kenneth Goings, Raymond A. Mohl, and other scholars discuss the city as a

critical lens for historicizing African American experiences and culture.[19] The

overarching argument that unites all the essays in the edited collection is that African

Americans were actively involved in shaping the cities in which they lived. At the turn

of the century, Washington became the home to many African Americans, especially

young black women seeking better educational and career opportunities. Although *The

New African American Urban History* considers the role of working-class culture in the

formation of black communities in cities, gender plays a limited role in how African

Americans experience urban landscapes.   I use race, gender, culture and consciousness to

understand New Negro womanhood in Washington and to identify how black women

generated multiple modernities.

My work also expands upon recent literature in African American women's

history, such as Christina Greene's *Our Seperate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom

Movement in Durham, North Carolina* and Kali Gross's *Colored Amazons: Crime,

Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880-1910*. These urban

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[18]Identifying Washington as a "City of Black Women," gestures toward Christine Stansell's groundbreaking urban history, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986). *City of Women* was one the first critically acclaimed urban historical books that honed in on the experiences of women in the city. I hope to extend Stansell's argument that the city was configured by women to suggest that Washington cannot be understood without centralizing the experiences of black women.

[19]Kenneth W. Goings and Raymond A. Mohl, eds., *The New African American Urban History* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1996).

histories privilege black women's stories and examine these women's relationships with their cities, their communities, their families, and their institutions and organizations. Methodologically, Greene and Gross present black women as significant historical actors that shaped urban landscapes. By engaging the lives of black women in Washington, I elucidate social and cultural dimensions of black Washington and identify D.C. as a fruitful site for the evolution of New Negro womanhood.

The unique character of Washington as a "City of New Negro Women" derived from the political, cultural, and social strivings of its constituents. I accessed the stories of New Negro women in Washington and the communities, institutions, and movements in which they invested through newspapers, correspondence, advertisements, personal writings, and other printed ephemera. Although most of the sources I use have been central to other studies of the New Negro era, Washington, and black women's activism during the Jim Crow era, they have yet to be considered in conjunction with each other. Several archives in the District of Columbia document the history of African Americans in Washington during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but are limited in their documentation of black women's social and cultural activities. Through this array of sources, but primarily newspapers and periodicals, the perspectives and activities of New Negro women become more visible.

To understand the broader institutional and organizational frameworks from which New Negro womanhood evolved, I conducted research at the National Archives for Black Women's History, the largest manuscript collection of materials pertaining to black women and their organizations. The documents of influential black women's organizations such as the National Council for Negro Women, the National Association

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of Colored Women, the Colored Women's League of Washington, D.C. and the Colored YWCAs are housed at the NABWH. Many black women in Washington were active participants and leaders in these organizations. Examining meeting agendas, meeting notes, attendance records, photographs, speeches, political platforms and agendas, mission statements, membership information documents, and newspaper clippings describing the work of the respective organizations provided insight into the political standpoints of black women in Washington. These organizations helped transform the racial climate in the United States through their campaigns for civil rights, equal opportunity, and fuller democracy.

Many of the most-well known black women's activists of the twentieth century participated in or led ground-breaking campaigns that transformed Washington's political, social, cultural, and economic landscape. Women such as Anna Julia Cooper, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Mary McLeod Bethune are just a few examples from the community of black women's activists that thrived in Washington. The papers of Cooper and Burroughs are located in the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University. Heralded as a preeminent archive of the history and culture of African Americans, the Moorland-Spingarn identifies African American women's history as one its archival strengths. I use the papers of Cooper and Burroughs in conjunction the papers of numerous other black Washington women in the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

Beyond the stories of black women Washingtonians, the materials from the Moorland-Spingarn provide insight into the role of Howard University as a defining institution of both black Washington and African America. Howard University was the

premiere institution for the higher education of blacks. Almost every prominent black intellectual, artist, activist, writer, attorney, and politician of the first-half of twentieth century has some tie to Howard University. Howard, although committed to the education of people from all racial backgrounds, groomed generations of the black elite. Using school newspapers, ephemera from school events and programs, yearbooks, speeches, guest lectures, and other school-related artifacts, I explore the specific roles Howard played for black Washingtonians, especially black women. Howard educated women such as Lucy Diggs Slowe, who became the first African American woman dean at Howard University and an outspoken advocate for creating equal opportunities for black women in higher education. Slowe's career is representative of a number of black women who because of their experiences at Howard and their subsequent exposure to the booming political and cultural scenes in black Washington dedicated their lives to "racial uplift," democracy, and racial and gender equality.

Howard University is located in the Shaw neighborhood of Washington. The university is also minutes away from the former cultural capital of Washington, D.C., the U Street Corridor. The Shaw neighborhood was comprised of blacks of varying class status. Class tensions existed, but did not detract from Shaw's importance as a social, economic, and cultural center for black Washington. A few blocks away from the center of the Shaw neighborhood was the bustling U Street Corridor. Home to black-owned nightclubs, theaters, eateries, and a host of other black cultural and social spaces, the U Street Corridor preceded Harlem as a cultural mecca for black America. Both locally lauded and nationally-acclaimed black artists entertained blacks in Washington. Desegregation catalyzed the disintegration of both Shaw and the U Street Corridor as

prospering centers of black Washington's social and cultural landscape. This gradual

transformation, however, is crucial in understanding how blacks created their own spaces

for leisure, pleasure, and creative expression at the height of Jim Crow. Black women

who participated in the black social and cultural scenes of Washington used these more

informal spaces to challenge prevailing gender ideologies, patriarchy, and subordination

perpetuated within the black Washington community. The social and cultural activities

of these black women were precursors to white mainstream and black feminist

movements in urban centers that occurred in the1960s and 1970s.

Historical inquiries into aesthetic and expressive practices and cultural spaces

required using both traditional and nontraditional historical sources. The Kipling

Research Library at the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. has a wide-ranging

collection of primary source materials about African American history in Washington.

The collection is comprised of maps, newspaper clippings, program ephemera, publicity

posters, prints, and other documents pertaining to the social and cultural life of

Washington's African American community. A particular strength of the collection is its

holdings on black women Washingtonians. Interpretive analyses of images such as

posters and advertisements/announcements about Washington's African American social

and cultural life as experienced by women elucidates how black female performers and

participants in black cultural movements altered the cultural landscape of black

Washington and African America more broadly.

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library also has rich collections for

researching the social and cultural textures of Washington during the New Negro era.

The Washingtonian Division of its archival collection houses the microfilm of the

controversial black-owned and operated newspaper, *The Washington Bee*. First published in 1882, *The Washington Bee* played a pivotal role in informing residents about upcoming events in the black Washington community and in articulating standpoints regarding white supremacist ideology, racial violence against blacks, and the hypocrisies of American democracy. Perhaps more than other black newspapers published during Jim Crow in Washington, the *Bee* interwove black social and cultural life with a distinct political agenda. This approach mirrored the balance many black Washington women struck in their daily lives regarding their political standpoints, involvement in the arts, and in their social networks and activities.

The MLK Memorial Library is home to the Oral History Collection, which contains the accounts of D.C. residents, many of them African American, discussing their experiences in Washington during the Jim Crow era. The Joseph Curtis Photo Collection of Southwest, also housed at the MLK Memorial Library is comprised of images of the African American community in Southwest Washington D.C. These images capture the integral roles black women played in this insular neighborhood community. The Black Studies Collection at this library includes organizational and political platform statements of black organizations in Washington, bulletins from churches and social organizations, magazine and journal articles published about black Washington, letters to and from black Washingtonians, newspaper clippings, programs, periodicals, and an enormous black biography collection that includes the life stories of numerous lesser-known black women who contributed to the evolution of Washington into a predominantly African American city in the urban, upper south.

Black newspapers provide a wealth of information about the political, cultural,

social, and economic goals of African Americans. Along with the *Washington Bee*, the *Washington Afro-American* and numerous other short-lived black authored periodicals were published in Washington during the latter half of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. I used the Black Press Archives, which are located at the Moorland-Spingarn as well, to explore how African Americans, but particularly black women chronicled their experiences. Newspapers, although not always providing fully accurate information offered insight into how black women experienced Washington and how they perceived their political, social, and cultural activities and the modern world.

I use higher education, black beauty culture, women's suffrage activism, performance activism, and black leisure spaces in Washington to examine how black women grappled with and configured ideas about black modernity. Each of these areas provided a distinct context in which African American women in Washington transgressed boundaries of both racial and gender hierarchies and aspired to greater visibility, mobility, and legibility. By presenting several contexts in which ideas about New Negro womanhood came to fruition, I posit New Negro womanhood as a fluid, fragmented, and multidimensional consciousness that inscribed multiple arenas of black women's lives. These arenas intersected because New Negro women assumed multiple identities. On a Saturday in Washington during the early twentieth century, a black women could have a hair appointment at a local black-owned salon, meet with other black suffragists about drafting an editorial piece for a black newspaper that connected women's enfranchisement with racial advancement, and attend a black-female authored play performed at M Street High School by students of the Department of Dramatic Arts at Howard University. Taking time to attend to one's physical appearance, co-authoring

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political agendas, and supporting a budding black women's expressive culture were acts that resonated with black women taking authorial roles in their lives. Modernity was as Michael Blanchard affirms, "a self-conscious political and cultural project."[20] Within the context of New Negro womanhood, black women claimed and configured modernity through arenas in which they could upend racial and gender hierarchies and ideologies.

In the first chapter, I introduce New Negro womanhood through the experience of women's and education activist Lucy Diggs Slowe at Howard University. As a student and as a dean at Howard, Slowe confronted a black gender ideology that propagated differing expectations for women students and faculty and staff; these expectations were indicative of an institutional culture that perceived women at Howard through a paternalistic and patriarchal lens. Slowe's accomplishments at Howard as both a student and an administrator coupled with her perspectives on gender equity in higher education made her an exemplar of New Negro womanhood. What distinguished Slowe from many of her contemporaries was that she unapologetically and explicitly challenged the status quo and sought to create an institutional space for black women students to reconsider how they could engage with the modern world. While partially biographical, the chapter uses Slowe's story to unveil how ingrained black gender ideology was in an institution lauded for its progressive politics, its nurturing of black intellectuals, and its involvement in the black cultural explosion that occurred in the early twentieth century.

The second chapter takes a slightly different approach to how African American women configured modernity through exercising authorial control during the New Negro era. Using black beauty culture in Washington, and specifically, the advertising

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[20] Blanchard 248.

discourse that emerged out of this aesthetic-based, race enterprise, I examine how black women participants in beauty culture used aesthetics to reinvent themselves and to publicly present themselves as new, urbane, and modern. Black beauty culture provides a space for considering the interplay of black womanhood, technology, consumerism, entrepreneurship, and prevailing aesthetic ideologies that embodied distinct racial, gender, and class implications. As a product of modernity as well as an enterprise and a discourse, black beauty culture was deeply entrenched in politics of appearance. These politics also influenced other aspects of New Negro women's lives and intersected with political and cultural agendas of the New Negro movement.

One of the most pressing political issues for black women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was suffrage. African American women's suffrage activism took on new forms in the first few decades of the twentieth century. For New Negro women, this shift in strategy pivoted around using the politics of appearance and of black respectability to perform a political identity that represented the black suffragist as a modern woman. In my third chapter, I trace the history of black women's suffrage activism in Washington up to the National Suffrage March of 1913. I contrast the more theatrical and eccentric approach of white suffragists during this national demonstration with black suffragists' performance of respectability through their refined, polished, and urbane styling. I explicitly connect the discourses derived from black beauty culture to how black women re-invented their political identities. Politics of appearance inscribed the political culture of New Negro suffragists.

Chapter Four and Five use the conceptual framework of "Saturday Night" to think about how black women in Washington used their time away from their jobs and their

families to engage with and construct cultural currents that revolved around black women's stories and experiences. In Chapter Four, I explore how black women playwrights in Washington created a community for black women to express their perspectives on pressing political issues and historical topics through the arts. On Saturday nights, this community of women gathered to support, critique, and interact with each other in an informal space of creativity and expressivity. Although black men participated in this community, this Saturday night gathering catered to black women seeking to find a voice in the modern world through the dramatic arts and other creative, literary outlets.

During the New Negro era, black women in Washington encountered new options to occupy their "free time." Chapter Five focuses on black blues culture in Washington and on the evolution of blues culture consciousness that reflected the ideas and experiences of working-class black women. I explore the role of blues culture, and more specifically, the lyrics of blues women in how African American women configured and participated in black modernity. The freedom to entice in personal enjoyment and fulfillment was an act of personal autonomy for black women who were shedding the vestiges of enslavement and continually grappling with racism and sexism. Working-class black women in Washington invested in a blues culture in which the lyrics articulated their experiences and pushed the boundaries of extant black gender ideology. These women were often excluded from the leisure culture of elite black women, who indulged in a society culture which celebrated the wealth, social status, and the flourishing of black arts that displayed the intellectual, aesthetic, and expressive prowess of African Americans. Class distinctions in Washington were particularly evident in

what choices black women could and did make regarding how they spent their leisure time. Society events were cost-prohibitive. Blues events were associated with a perception of blues music as a low-class and un-respectable form of black art. Black women choosing to partake in blues culture risked being further excluded from black social spaces and organizations that privileged feminine propriety and respectability. Through blues culture, African American women could carve out spaces in which they could separate themselves from their responsibilities as mothers, teachers, domestics, wives, and laundresses and explore a fuller humanity.

In Washington D.C., black women were arguably the most marginalized and isolated from dominant institutions and occupied the lowest tier in the city's gendered, racial hierarchy. The marginalization black women confronted and combated in Washington is similar to that of black women throughout the United States during the New Negro era. And yet, the distinct political, social, economic, and cultural opportunities that existed in D.C. established Washington as a unique urban landscape that facilitated the materialization of New Negro womanhood. "Configuring Modernities," examines the evolution of New Negro womanhood in the nation's capital through connecting various iterations of African American women challenging white supremacy and intra-racial sexism and patriarchy. New Negro womanhood politics manifested in the philosophical writings of women such as Lucy Diggs Slowe, who challenged gender inequality in higher education, as well as among black women purchasing blues records that expressed desires for sexual satisfaction. From these differing, but interconnected black women's spaces comes a new history of the New Negro era.

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Chapter One

Climbing the Hilltop: New Negro Womanhood at Howard University

Figure 1: Howard University circa 1880s

New Negro womanhood evolved in many institutions throughout the nation's capital. New ideas about possibilities for black women's mobility, legibility, and visibility in the black public sphere and society more broadly emerged among black women from all class backgrounds. Among black women in Washington striving for new opportunities and prospects were numerous African American women at Howard University. The Hilltop, as Howard was affectionately known by those familiar with the institution offered a space in which black women could excel in previously unimaginable ways. African American women at Howard, however, also encountered barriers and setbacks as they attempted to articulate New Negro womanhood. At Howard, like many other institutions within black communities, black men were privileged, sexism and patriarchy prevailed, and black women fought against prevailing racial and gender

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ideologies and expectations. New Negro thought, which flourished at Howard, did not always support Black women or elements of New Negro womanhood that women at Howard supported.

Many women came to Howard expecting to become servants of their communities, primarily as educators, wives and mothers. There were also those who dared to challenge the status quo and who shifted the terrain of black education to equip African American women for careers and leadership outside of traditional women's roles. In the modern world that these black women experienced, education, employment, and social and political equality signaled progress and the attainment of first-class citizenship. These women created new paths that reflected a New Negro consciousness and spoke directly to a rapidly growing community of black women seeking new possibilities. This chapter discusses both the story of a New Negro woman who catalyzed the emergence of a New Negro womanhood consciousness among African American women at Howard University during the early twentieth century and the political agenda that she and Howard women adopted to debunk intra-racial sexism and gender inequities.

The New Negro consciousness, as a racial concept, embraced education, anti-racial discrimination activism, struggles for social, political, and economic equality, and Africans American involvement in desegregated and integrated public spheres. What distinguished this consciousness from that of African American women at Howard was an emphasis on gender inequality within conceptions of the New Negro-ness. New Negro women at Howard addressed black patriarchy and sexism as obstacles to black women's full participation in both New Negro-ness and the modern world. African American women at Howard University refused to embrace a vision of the New Negro

that marginalized or excluded black women's strivings and possibilities. Moving beyond conventions of black respectability in which intra-racial sexism and patriarchy thrived, Howard women chose to articulate a New Negro standpoint that argued for equality and "Respect" for African American women and their achievements within black communities. Climbing the "Hilltop" required an added dimension for black women, the prevalence of gender inequities in the modern world.

The Hilltop: A Brief History of Howard University

Although attending college was a privilege for any person in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was far rarer for an African American, particularly a black woman. Though colleges and universities such as Harvard University and Oberlin College admitted and educated a handful of African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Howard eventually became a preeminent co-educational institution for African Americans. The number of college educated black men greatly surpassed that of black women throughout much of the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries. Yet the black women attending colleges and universities often became leaders and pioneers on their respective campuses. Nowhere is this more evident than at Howard University. Understanding the founding and core principles of Howard University provides insight into how this historically black institution became a unique site for New Negro womanhood standpoints to evolve among African American female students, faculty, and staff.

The abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia and later throughout the South resulted in a large influx of freedmen into the nation's capital. This population

surge created an educational "problem." In response, philanthropists and freedmen's aid organizations founded schools that focused primarily on elementary studies, to serve African Americans of all ages. The founding of such schools for African Americans ignited fierce opposition, rampant resistance, and even violence from white residents of the District. Their establishment also sparked debates about the expansion of educational attainment for blacks. Increasing the number of educated blacks would increase the number of people competing for a limited number of skilled labor positions available in the recently incorporated national city. Additionally, opponents of establishing schools for African Americans also warned of the potential political, cultural, and social consequences that could result from educating a substantial number of African Americans.

The efforts of proponents for educating African Americans led to the founding of Howard University. Some philanthropists and freedmen's aid workers opposed higher education, arguing that elementary schools met the existing needs of recently emancipated African Americans. They affirmed that the skills taught to blacks at elementary schools more than adequately prepared them for the jobs currently available to African Americans. Others advocated for the creation of an institution of higher learning in the Washington. This institution would extend the education received at the elementary schools and would train African Americans for leadership and for careers that were predominantly, if not exclusively, pursued by whites. During the late nineteenth centuries, only a handful of colleges and universities educated blacks and trained them for careers predominated by whites. One of the founders of Howard University noted that an institution such as this,

was demanded by the necessities of the great educational
movement which was inaugurated among the freed people at
the close of the late war. When primary, secondary and gram-
mar schools were being opened throughout the South, for the
benefit of a class hitherto wholly deprived of educational
advantages, it became evident that institutions of a higher
grade were needed for the training of the teachers and ministers
who were to labor in this field. It was with this view of supplying
this need that Howard University was founded.[21]

Before officially becoming Howard University, it was decided that this school have an

open admissions policy. The university garnered the distinction of being a pioneer in

higher education because of its lack of restrictions based on race, sex, creed, or color.

Although the first student body consisted only of five white women (each of whom were

daughters of trustees of Howard University), the groundwork was laid for a university

accessible to both the children of slave owners and the children of slaves. It would be

over forty years after the University's charter was enacted and approved by President

Andrew Johnson in 1867 that Howard would garner widespread national attention from

aspiring black youth and acquire its status as the premiere institution of higher learning

for African-Americans.

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[21] *Annual Report of the President of Howard University*, September 2, 1869.

Figure 2: The Library at Howard University (1890)

The early to mid-twentieth century was a substantial growth period for Howard University. Throughout this period, the school experienced physical expansion, a student body on the rise, increased financial investment from the federal government and private donors, and an intellectual diversification of the curriculum. The heightened prestige of the faculty, staff, and administration also contributed to the university's prominence among blacks throughout the United States. Several well-known African Americans during this era had affiliations with Howard, either as former students or as members of the faculty, staff, or administration. Zora Neal Hurston, Thurgood Marshall, Alain Locke, Carter G. Woodson, E. Franklin Frazier, Kelly Miller, Sterling Brown, Patricia Roberts Harris, and James Farmer Sr. were among those who called Howard home at some point in their exemplary careers as leaders, writers, intellectuals, activists, innovators, and pioneers. It is the story of a less famous African American woman, however, that captures the evolution of Howard into a breeding ground for New Negro thought, most notably regarding African American women. Her story embodies New

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Negro womanhood and reveals the strides black women at Howard University made toward greater equality within and outside the black community.

Lucy Diggs Slowe: The Story of a Defiant Pioneer

> "Frequently, Negro college women come from homes where conservatism in reference to women's place in the world of the most extreme sort exists…Regardless of the wish of many parents that their daughters become adjuncts of "man," modern life forces them to be individuals in much the same sense as men are individuals."[22]
> *Lucy Diggs Slowe*

Lucy Diggs Slowe was one of the most defiant educators and activists of the first half of the twentieth century. Born July 4, 1885 in Berryville, Virginia, Slowe's family was neither wealthy nor educationally privileged. Slowe was orphaned as a young child and raised by her aunt, Martha Slowe Prince in Lexington, Virginia. At the age of thirteen, the Slowe family moved to Baltimore, Maryland. After graduating second in her class from Colored High School in Baltimore, Slowe attended Howard University in Washington, D.C. on an academic scholarship. Simultaneously, she became the first female graduate of her school to enroll at Howard University and was the first student from her school, male or female to receive an academic scholarship to Howard University.

The intellectual, cultural, political, and social climate at Howard ignited her "activist spirit." Her social, cultural, and academic experiences at Howard sparked an interest in enhancing the quality and status of African American women's higher

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[22] Lucy D. Slowe, "The Higher Education of Negro Women," *Journal of Negro Education*, 2 (July 1933): 356.

education.[23] Slowe involved herself in nearly every aspect of the university from musicals to athletics. She served as the president's of the women's tennis team, sang in the University choir, and was a founding member of Alpha Kappa Alpha, a Greek letter sorority for black women. Respected and lauded by the University's faculty and administration, Slowe was selected to chaperone other Howard women on off-campus shopping trips—a responsibility was only bestowed upon select individuals whom the University deemed of sufficiently high moral character.[24] Slowe appreciated the University's praise of her "moral character" during her time as a student. But during her eventual tenure as an administrator at Howard, she changed her position and criticized "the assignment of chaperons to women students as paternalistic and demeaning."[25]

After graduating from Howard in 1908 as class valedictorian, she accepted an English teaching position at Douglass High School in Baltimore. Most black women who received college degrees and remained unmarried pursued teaching as a career. Her teaching responsibilities and commitments to her students, particularly her black women students did not deter her from furthering her education. In October 1915, she received a Master's from Columbia University's Graduate School of Arts and Science. While at Columbia, she studied at the institution's Teacher's College and became fascinated with the burgeoning field of Student Personnel. Her fascination with Student Personnel

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[23]Linda M. Perkins, "Lucy Diggs Slowe: Champion of the Self-Determination of African American Women in Higher Education," *The Journal of Negro History*, 81, 1 (Winter-Autumn, 1996): 90.

[24] During the early to mid-twentieth century, women students could not leave the campus without university-sanctioned supervision. A policy grounded in the widespread belief that the city was a dangerous place for a woman traveling alone, it restricted women's mobility and demanded that women's bodies be policed in the public sphere in a way that their male counterparts were not subjected.
[25] Perkins 90.

provided the foundation for the educational philosophies that inscribed her New Negro ethos.

　　With her degrees from Howard and Columbia, Slowe began a teaching stint at one of the three black high schools in Washington, Armstrong Manual Training School. Because of her educational background in Student Personnel, she also served as dean of girls for one academic year at Armstrong. While primarily a "matron" like position, Slowe utilized her extensive involvement with the girls of Armstrong to encourage them to consider attending college. Her successes at Armstrong were noted by the District's Board of Education, and consequently Slowe was selected to serve as one of the main organizers of first African American junior high school in the Washington area, Shaw Junior High School. In addition to organizing Shaw, which would later become one of the most well-respected and widely recognized African American educational institutions, Slowe served as the school's principal until 1922.

　　While ascending to becoming a leading figure in African American educational efforts in the Washington area, Slowe continued to develop her talents as a singer and tennis player. In 1917, she became the first African-American woman to win a national in any sport. She garnered the first women's title at the American Tennis Association's (ATA) national tournament in Baltimore. The ATA formed in 1916 and provided African Americans with the opportunity to participate on national, competitive organized tennis. Prior to the association's founding, African Americans in the urban upper South and New England competed in invitational and interstate tournaments, but could not aspire to attaining the prestige that accompanied a national title. Slowe also sang in local choirs to fulfill her interest in vocal performance. Being well-rounded was a great

importance to Slowe. She continued to emphasize the importance of expanding the accessibility of social and cultural experiences for black women throughout her life.

Her experience as a school administrator eventually led her back to her undergraduate alma mater. In 1922, Slowe was appointed the first Dean of Women at Howard University. After her appointment, Slowe studied the responsibilities, practices, and procedures of women deans at other universities, regardless of differing racial demographics. She also received support and guidance from a former professor from Columbia, Dr. Romiett Stevens. Dr. Stevens developed the first course for women deans in the U.S. Slowe's appointment as Howard's Dean of Women eventually led to her becoming president of the National Association of College Women (NACW). The NACW promoted the growth of the number of black women on college campuses and sought to support black women students, faculty, and administrators at all institutions educating African American women beyond the high school level. This support included raising the standards in colleges for black women, developing and providing resources for black women faculty and administrators, and securing scholarships and other forms of financial support for African American women. Of particular importance to NACW was the appointment of women deans at African American colleges and universities. Slowe epitomized NACW's commitment to appointing women deans. More notably, however, as the first formally trained Dean of Women students, Slowe exemplified what NACW envisioned as the ideal women's dean, an education professional, not a matron or caretaker. NACW and Slowe sought to re-fashion the role of women deans from policing black women's activities on college campuses to developing the intellectual, social, and cultural capacities of African American college women students.

The NACW gave Slowe the opportunity to theorize about education, its importance to African American women, and the gender dynamics of educational institutions.   In her early years as a dean, she affirmed that, "so far as women members of college faculties are concerned, they should have the same opportunities for advancement that male members have and should receive equal pay for equal services rendered."[26] Slowe committed herself to the experiences of black women in educational institutions because of disparities between black men and women in terms of wealth and earning potential. She was particularly concerned with the large number of college-educated black women who became teachers, though she herself had served as teacher for over a decade before becoming an administrator. Although she did not discourage black women from pursuing a career in education, she advocated the diversification of career choices and professional training.

Figure 3: Lucy Diggs Slowe

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[26] Lucy D. Slowe, *The Hilltop* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University, May 14, 1931).

For Slowe, to equip black women for the "modern world" meant exposing African American women to new disciplines such as psychology, economics, and sociology. Linda Perkins describes Slowe as "a refined professional woman who did not hesitate to confront anyone on behalf of the respect and dignity of African-American women. She focused primarily on issues of gender and the limitations that society (and the black community) placed on being female."[27] Her standpoints regarding gender equality propelled her work at Howard and led to many struggles with other black activists and Howard's administration throughout her tenure. Her career at Howard was marked by both tremendous strides and setbacks in the pursuit of gender equity at this preeminent black institution. Slowe's progressive thinking with regards to gender equality at African American colleges and university placed her at the center of an evolving New Negro womanhood ethos that privileged both racial and gender equality

Debunking Ideology, Affirming New Negro Womanhood

When Slowe became Dean of Women at Howard University in 1922, she leveraged many of her organizational affiliations to disseminate her educational philosophy and to support her efforts to achieve gender equality at her home institution. In 1923, when addressing the National Association of College Women, Slowe stated that, "if a college accepts women students and employs women faculty, it should give them the same status as it gives male students and male teachers respectively."[28] To achieve equal status with men at Howard, Slowe began asserting the necessity of a women's campus. At many universities, particularly those primarily serving African Americans,

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[27] Perkins, 101.
[28] Lucy D. Slowe, *The Hilltop* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University, May 14, 1931).

women students did not reside on-campus. Leading women authorities on student

personnel, most of whom were white women until the ascendance of Slowe, argued that,

residential housing for women functioned as sites for the development of women students

and their leadership abilities. Slowe further elaborated on this idea by emphasizing that,

"adequate housing should be made available for… women students for their physical and

social development, as well as for the training of their minds."[29] From Slowe's

perspective, the ability to coordinate activities for women students and to mold their

character and intellect required the establishment of a women's campus. In 1931,

Slowe's tireless efforts resulted in the establishment of a "female" campus, which

included three women's dormitories. Three dormitories for women comprised the

women's campus that resulted from Slowe's efforts.

Through these residence halls, Slowe and sympathetic faculty and staff cultivated

an environment in which women students engaged in cultural, social, and political

activities. Only a year after the formal founding of the "female" campus, Slowe's efforts

were being heralded by the black press. The Washington *Afro-American* published an

article entitled "Howard Women Run Themselves in New Dorms," which highlighted the

self-governance of the dormitories, the social and cultural activities led by black women

students, and the rigor of the intellectual discussions occurring in women's residences.

The women's campus was one of Slowe's greatest achievements at Howard and further

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[29] Lucy D. Slowe, *The World* (New York, April, 25, 1926).

distinguished her from African American educational activists who focused almost exclusively on the leadership development and educational achievement of black men.[30]

The development of leadership among black women was another aspect of Slowe's educational philosophy. Extant racial and gender ideologies suggested that black men should assume leadership roles in the black public sphere. In fact, many black women did not challenge this gendered hierarchy of achievement. It was widely accepted that college educated black women would become educators and/or "good" mothers and wives for black men. Politics of respectability under-girded how, black women leaders viewed educational aspirations and achievements. Recent scholarship in African American women's studies illuminates the history of black respectability politics. Within this framework of gender expectations, the role of mother and wife trumped any identity a black woman established outside of the domestic sphere. Black men were being trained to lead in the public sphere; black women were being educated, but with the expectation that either the home or the classroom become their primary domains. Existing scholarship tends to emphasize how black women used the identities of motherhood and wife to work within the public sphere.[31] Although not uncommon for black women working in black public sphere, Slowe did not adhere to this figuration of black

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[30] Most prominent black leaders in education did not discourage black women from pursuing higher education; however, the majority of the rhetoric regarding the significance of education for the black community pivoted around black men becoming race leaders, business owners, and skilled professionals. The expectations for black women greatly differed. Though black women were the backbone of elementary and secondary education in many black communities, their roles as mothers and wives ultimately trumped responsibilities and aspirations outside of the home. See Raymond Walters, *The New Negro on Campus: Black College Rebellions of the 1920* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975); Joy Ann Williamson, *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower: Black Colleges and the Black Freedom Struggle in Mississippi* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2008).

[31] See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*; Susan Lynn Smith, *Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: Black Women's Health Activism in America, 1880-1950*; Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load, Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994.*

womanhood. African American women were lauded in their communities for their

accomplishments; however, an overarching expectation of becoming leaders of the black

community did not exist for highly educated black women. Slowe rejected the idea of

black women being groomed solely for motherhood or a singular career path at a

university where unprecedented opportunities existed for its students. Slowe, however,

defined a new identity for black women that, was not based on women's connection to

the domestic realm. This new identity challenged existing gender ideologies that

permeated black institutions and the sexism and patriarchy that pervaded black America

and the United States more broadly.

Slowe stressed the detrimental effects of differing expectations for male and

female students at Howard University. While an emphasis was placed on leadership

development for black men, black women rarely received leadership training. The lack

of opportunities for black women at Howard to develop and hone leadership skills led

Slowe to question, "have those who formulate policies of institutions of higher learning

where Negro women study surveyed our changed modern life and consciously attempted

to prepare Negro college women for intelligent participation and leadership in it?"[32] This

notion of the "modern world" or "modern life" recurred throughout Slowe's career as

education activist. For Slowe the modern world required the preparation of black women

for a life outside of the home. Black women had to assume leadership roles to succeed in

the modern world.

This idea was also supported by a handful of prominent black intellectuals,

including W. E. B. Du Bois, who often lectured at Howard. In November of 1912, Du

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[32] Lucy D. Slowe, "The Higher Education of Negro Women," 334.

Bois informed students at Howard that, "changed economic conditions" demanded a "change in the role of women," and that "women were entitled to a career the same as men."[33] Slowe's belief in the necessity of leadership among black women firmly situated her as a proponent of New Negro womanhood, because of her commitment to black women's empowerment through leadership opportunities. More specifically, as black women became more visible as leaders in their communities, Slowe believed that issues confronting black women on college campuses and in the black public sphere more broadly could acquire greater visibility and significance on political agendas of African-America. For Slowe and an increasing number of black women students at Howard University, respectability was not about temperance, primness, or feminine propriety. New Negro women at Howard were redefining respectability to encompass respect for and appreciation of black women's intellectual and leadership capacities, if given equal opportunities for development and training.

At the core of Slowe's conceptualization of leadership development were values of self-determination and direction. When Slowe became dean of women at Howard, three greek-letter sororities had been founded on Howard's campus: Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. Each of these organizations placed a priority on sisterhood, scholarship, and leadership among black women. Black women also participated in and led many other Howard clubs and associations throughout the early twentieth century. Slowe, a member and leader of several organizations as a student at Howard, recognized the hunger for leadership opportunities and intellectual, social, and cultural stimulation outside of the classroom

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[33] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Howard University Journal*, (Washington: Howard University, November 15, 1912), 1.

among African American women students. Consequently, Slowe stressed that, "whether or not Negro college women will be able to take their places as leaders in their communities depends, to a large extent, upon the opportunities offered them for exercising initiative, independence, and self-direction while in college."[34] Of particular importance to the surge of women seeking leadership roles was the issue of women's suffrage, and in particular voting rights for African American women.

By the 1910s, the women's suffrage movement was at its height in terms of organization and support from women of nearly all backgrounds. Leaders of the women's suffrage movement, which included African American women from Howard University, looked toward the presidential election of 1913 to articulate a clear and cogent declaration for women's enfranchisement. Paula Giddings asserts that, "Washington, D.C., became not only a center of Black intellectual and social development, but of feminist activity as well."[35] African American women at Howard perceived their academic and extracurricular accomplishments as vital to this historical moment in which new ideologies about women and African Americans were forming. The women's suffrage movement and the presence of feminist activism in the nation's capital ignited a passion among many Howard women between 1900 and 1920. Slowe capitalized upon this political energy when she became dean of women and continuously led and supported efforts to formalize leadership development for African American women students. Furthermore, she encouraged black women students to inform themselves of pressing political issues, locally, nationally, and internationally. The

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[34] Ibid, 335.

[35] Paula Giddings, *In Search of Sisterhood: Delta Sigma Theta and the Challenge of the Black Sorority Movement* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1988), 47.

inability to secure universal suffrage in 1920 when white women attained the right to vote

incited black women at Howard, including Slowe to continue fighting for voting rights

until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Figure 4: Women at Howard University (1920)

The zeal among black women students Slowe witnessed in the 1920s stemmed

from the emergence of new opportunities for women and from the convergence of

political and cultural currents such as a black radicalism, pan-Africanism, black and

interracial labor movements, black internationalism, American militarism and

imperialism, and jazz and early blues culture. Slowe arrived at Howard just as these

multiple currents began to shape the culture and consciousness extant on the Hilltop. By

the late nineteenth century, the leavening influences of Progressive era rhetoric promoted

the progress of blacks and black women in particular.[36] This "progressive" tone

continued into the first decade of the twentieth century, particularly with regards to the

formal education of African Americans. By the end of 1910, 4,238 blacks had received a

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[36] Giddings 40.

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bachelor of arts degree.[37] In 1910, there were 25 women in Howard's graduating class.

Though small in number, these women inspired many other women to pursue higher

education.

The founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

in 1910 and the establishment of a Howard chapter of the NAACP in the same year

coupled with lectures from African American intellectuals and leaders such as Du Bois

created an environment in which students grappled with burgeoning ideas about race and

democracy. The relatively small group of women at Howard during the 1900s and the

1910s also encountered "race women" such as Mary Church Terrell and Nannie Helen

Burroughs, who were fighting against racial injustice and discrimination while

simultaneously examining issues like women's suffrage. For "race women," women's

enfranchisement was of great importance because of black women's vulnerability. Most

black women living in the United States were economically, politically, and socially

disempowered. Black women were also subject to violence and afforded little to no legal

protection. Relying upon prevailing gender ideologies that posited women as subjects

that warranted protection, "race women" suffragettes used patriarchal notions to argue for

the right to vote. Some Howard women, however, did not adhere fully to this

understanding of the significance of universal suffrage and went beyond demanding the

right to vote as a means of protection. The issue of women's enfranchisement and

subsequently, other issues that distinctly affected the lives of black women became the

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[37] Charles S. Johnson, *The Negro College Graduate* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1938), 8.

source of a budding consciousness among Howard's female population during the first thirty years of the 1900s.

Slowe experienced the materialization of a New Negro consciousness first as a student and then as an administrator. What she came to realize more insightfully as a dean, however, was that, "the university, tolerant of radical ideas when it came to race, was way behind when it came to the social freedoms of its female students or even the rights of its women on the faculty."[38] Her experience as an undergraduate introduced her to the restrictions and gendered expectations Howard imposed upon women. As a dean, she sought to change many of the policies that limited black women's mobility and visibility on campus. She felt strongly that the advancement of African Americans, and of human progress more broadly, was contingent upon black women being adequately prepared for careers outside of the home and the classroom. At Howard, she faced strong opposition and numerous policies that attempted to maintain a racialized gender hierarchy. In fact, in 1913, the board of directors voted that, "any female teacher who thereafter married while teaching at the university would be considered as having resigned her position."[39] This policy reflected a commonly held belief that women's roles in the private sphere trumped their engagement in public spheres such as higher education and the labor force. New Negro women, such as Slowe, rejected that position, arguing that technological advances enabled women to maintain roles in both the public and private spheres. Opposition to New Negro womanhood and its fundamental principles reached its peak during the tenure of Howard's first black president, Mordecai

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[38] Giddings 43.

[39] Rayford W. Logan, *Howard University: The First Hundred Years, 1867-1967* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 170.

Johnson. His arrival in 1926, only four years after her arrival presented Slowe with her greatest challenges in her efforts to achieve gender equity on black college campuses.

The Mordecai Johnson Years: Setbacks and Challenges for New Negro Womanhood

Figure 5: President Mordecai Johnson

A graduate of the all-male Morehouse College and an ordained Southern Baptist preacher, Mordecai Johnson arrived at Howard University with a clear-cut vision for the future of the nationally-renowned institution in the nation's capital. His religious background influenced his views on education and his thoughts pertaining to "appropriate" behavior and career paths for black women. Similar to most of the leaders and followers of the black Baptist church, Johnson held very paternalistic views towards women. Furthermore, he did not affirm principles of gender equality and women's

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empowerment. Hiring many black women for the faculty at Howard was the extent of his

engagement with women's concerns about equality in education. At the time when

Johnson assumed leadership of Howard University, Slowe had made numerous efforts to

provide African American women students with unparalleled opportunities for

leadership, social and cultural exploration, and career-oriented education. Johnson

repudiated Slowe's "liberal" standpoints about women. He also detested Slowe's open

criticism of the traditional black church and the social conservatism to which many black

families adhered. Slowe publicly acknowledged that,

> Much of the religious philosophy upon which Negro women
> have been nurtured has tended toward suppressing in them
> their own powers. Many of them have been brought up on the
> antiquated philosophy of Saint Paul in reference to women's
> place in the scheme of things, and all too frequently have been
> influenced by the philosophy of patient waiting, rather than the
> philosophy of developing their talents to their fullest extent…
> Under these conditions, it is inevitable therefore, that the psycho-
> logy of most of the women who come to college is the psychology
> of accepting what is taught without much question; the psychology
> of inaction rather than that of active curiosity.[40]

Slowe's explicit critique of the traditional black church and socially conservative values

placed her at almost the opposite end of the political spectrum from Johnson on issues

concerning women. This polarization resulted in numerous confrontations and a

contentious relationship between Slowe and Johnson that lasted until her untimely death

in 1937.

Throughout his presidency, Johnson strove to rescind many of the new

opportunities Slowe established for African American women students. He affirmed the

status quo of women's primary responsibility as wives and mothers. His resistance to

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[40] Slowe, "The Higher Education of Negro Women," 357.

women developing other roles for themselves became apparent through a number of decisions he enacted during his presidency. Under Johnson, Slowe lost her position as a member of the President's Council of deans and her management role in the women's residence halls. Johnson demanded that Slowe move to Howard's campus to supervise the African American women on campus. Essentially, this shifted Slowe's role as a manager and a leader of women on campus to that of a "matron." Slowe strongly opposed this role as both demeaning and sexist. In fact, it undermined the general thrust of much of her work at Howard, which tried to dismantle policies based on the assumption that African American women required more supervision and restrictions than their male counterparts. Additionally, Slowe was sharing a house with a woman, Mary Burrill, a noted playwright. The implications of two, unrelated single women living together further aggravated Johnson as he attempted to ensure that Howard's reputation aligned with his values surrounding "appropriate" gender roles and relations.

After ten years of challenging the status quo and forcing Howard's administration to rethink its stance on African American women in higher education, Slowe was compelled to fulfill a role a Howard that directly contradicted principles of New Negro womanhood. Her new role as matron exacerbated existing tensions between Slowe and Howard's all-male leadership. In a bolder effort to diminish the spread of a New Negro womanhood ethos at Howard, in 1933, the women's program was dismantled. Women students at Howard, fellow women faculty members, and peers and colleagues of Slowe's from organizations such as the NACW protested this seemingly punitive act of the Board of Trustees. While the trustees and the administration proffered the decision as one of economic necessity, many black women and white women supporters external to Howard

firmly believed that the dismantling of the women's program signaled a devaluation of New Negro womanhood.

Slowe responded to the Board of Trustees with a ferocity and a candor that illustrated her passion for gender equality in education. She remarked, "when the trustees, in the interest of the economy, wiped out of the women's department every person except for two-… they destroyed, in one day, practically everything that I had built up over a period of eleven years."[41] Her disappointment was shared by many of the women students as well as women alumni who embraced Slowe's efforts to achieve gender equality at Howard University. The frustration many of these women expressed also stemmed from the fact that only the Dean of Women was required to live on Howard's campus. The Dean of Men was permitted to reside in his own home in Washington. The implications of necessitating supervision for female students and not male students were particularly hurtful to African American women students at Howard who interpreted these policies as a reflection on their characters. Slowe mobilized with these women through letters to the Board of Trustees and remained outspoken about the damaging effects of perpetuating gender inequality in black institutions. Many of the restrictive and oppressive policies regarding women enacted during the final years of Slowe's life continued at Howard for decades after her death. Her confrontation with gender inequity for black women students and faculty, however, extended beyond educational issues. Slowe also sought to redefine relationships between men and women in higher education in an attempt to curb the exploitation of New Negro women in collegiate and professional spheres.

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[41] Slowe, Lucy Diggs, Lucy Diggs Slowe to Howard University Board of Trustees, April 26, 1933.

Sexual Harassment and Redefining Intra-Racial Gender Relations in a New Negro Era

Because Slowe developed a well-earned reputation for ruffling more than a few feathers among her male counterparts in Howard's administration, African American female students often confided in her regarding their experiences as women on a male-dominated campus. Most Howard women viewed Slowe as an inspiration and as a tangible example of a New Negro woman. While gender equity in higher education was the primary focus of Slowe's activism, she was also concerned with the daily treatment of women on college campuses and in the black public sphere more generally. That stance is particularly evident in her handling of a complaint made by women students at Howard about a particular male professor in 1927. This complaint sparked a chain of events that highlighted the lack of power women students, faculty, and staff possessed at Howard. Despite Howard's stellar reputation as progressive and forward-thinking among African Americans across the United States, the 1927 incident revealed an underlying, but powerful narrative: if you attempt to disrupt the conventional order, severe penalties will follow. The stark contrast between Howard's racial progressivism and its adherence to traditional gender roles, expectations, and relations provided New Negro women at Howard with a seemingly insurmountable obstacle in achieving fuller equality.

Slowe received the initial complaint about Professor Clarence Harvey Mills from a parent in 1927. The letter accused Professor Mills of using "improper and sometimes vulgar language in his class room with women students present."[42] Seeking to "avoid a

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[42] Lucy D. Slowe, Memorandum on the Mills Case (Washington, D.C.: Howard University, 1927).

public controversy, Slowe arranged to speak privately with Mills about the allegations."[43]

Slowe noted that Mills responded positively to their meeting and actually thanked Slowe

for bringing it to his attention without involving the administration. The following day,

however, Slowe received a letter from Mills, which she described as "vile." This letter

accused the female student of hypocrisy, of spending time in brothels, and of pretending

to be offended by the vulgar language Mills allegedly used in the classroom. His written

reaction to the accusations attacked not just the character of his accusers, but also Slowe,

in her position as Dean. Of Slowe, Mills wrote, "you forget that you are merely the Dean

of Women and not the custodian of morals of the male teachers of Howard University."[44]

He also suggested that if Slowe had the same responsibilities as her male counterparts,

she would not be a receptacle for "ridiculous" complaints lodged against respected male

faculty members. After receiving this letter, Slowe felt compelled to share what had

transpired from the initial complaint to this point with Dudley Weldon Woodard,

professor of mathematics and Dean of the School of Liberal Arts and President Mordecai

Johnson.

Woodard and Johnson agreed that both the parent's complaint and Mills' fiery

letter to Slowe warranted serious actions. During a meeting with Mills, it was decided

that Mills would be dismissed at the end of the term, that no public discussion would

accompany the administration's decision, and that he must apologize to Dean Slowe for

his scathing remarks about her. Inevitably, however, Mills finished the entire year at

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[43]Patricia Bell-Scott, "To Keep My Self-Respect: Dean Lucy Diggs Slowe's 1927 Memorandum on the Sexual Harassment of Black Women," *NWSA Journal*, 9, 2 (Summer, 1997), 72.

[44] Mills, Clarence, Letter to Lucy Diggs Slowe (Washington, D.C.: Howard University, January 11, 1927).

Howard and was granted a leave of absence with partial salary during the next academic year. It is worth noting that during his leave of absence, Mills finished his doctoral degree at the University of Chicago and continued a career in education unmarred by his alleged behavior toward Howard women. Mills' eventual departure from Howard was more voluntary than punitive. Slowe's relationship with Howard's male administrators, particularly President Johnson, further deteriorated because of her insistence on Professor Mills's termination and her advocacy for Howard women being subjected to sexism and gender-based harassment.

The consequences Slowe endured did not deter her from remaining outspoken about a campus culture which silenced the voices of women and condoned an intra-racial gender hierarchy at both the student and faculty and staff levels. Her 1927 "Memorandum on the Mills Case" conveyed a profound sense of disappointment and frustration with Howard University and its attitudes and policies toward African American women. Although she attempted to use discretion and avoided making the complaint about Mills a "public controversy," this memorandum affirmed her commitment to ensuring that women's experiences at Howard be taken seriously. In addition to drafting one of the first known memos about the sexual harassment of African American women in the academy or any formal institution, Slowe used this memo to critique gender inequity more broadly at Howard. She explained that,

> From the this case happened down to the present, I have not had
> the cordial support of the President. When the time came to raise
> salaries, he raised mine $200 and raised other Deans with qualifications
> no better than mine in amounts ranging from $850-$1150. He,
> without, explanation, excluded [*sic*] me from his conferences with the
> Academic Deans, although prior to 1930, the Dean of Men and
> the Dean of Women had sat with the Board of Deans. He has never

> sympathetically studies the real work of the Dean of Women, and still
> seems to have a wrong conception of her function sponsored by the
> Department of the Dean of Women, and cannot have first hand
> knowledge of her work. I have tried in every way to correct this
> but can get no co-operation from the President.[45]

Slowe utilized the Mills Case and its aftermath to highlight her struggles as a Dean and the resistance she encountered in her efforts to achieve gender equity for Howard women. Sexual harassment, the university's prioritizing of black male leadership, the paternalistic and patriarchal perspectives and policies of Howard's predominantly male administration, and the lack of suitable and intellectually, culturally, and socially stimulating living conditions for women students became visible through Slowe's response to the Mills Case. The setbacks only further encouraged Slowe and African American women at Howard to continue to push for gender equity and to address women's exclusion from leadership and women's under-representation in the student population and the faculty. In the face of condescension, derision, and substantial backlash, Howard women worked toward realizing Slowe's vision and her posthumous legacy remained integral to the New Negro womanhood movement on Howard's campus and other campuses throughout the United States.

Slowe's Legacy: Moving Forward with a New Negro Consciousness

Throughout her illustrious career, Slowe did not espouse rhetoric commonly associated with "racial uplift," a position that distinguished her from notable contemporaries such as Mary Church Terrell and Nannie Helen Burroughs. Her primary focus was exposing and erasing the limitations black women confronted in pursuit of

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[45] Slowe, Memorandum of the Mills Case.

education and careers outside of the home. Additionally, religion did not play an integral role in her educational philosophy, although it played an important role in her life. Slowe openly criticized black men and women who placed any limitations on what black women could achieve and or aspire to in areas outside of the home. Slowe fought for and with black women to secure not just a place, but an equal place in American higher education. The rhetoric surrounding "race women" privileged activists who were implicitly politicized around the idea that race trumped gender. Prevailing ideas about racial uplift pivoted around the aspirations, achievements, struggles, and plight of black men. Although black women fought with and advocated for racial equality, many race women did not participate actively in struggles for gender equality, and particularly for dismantling intra-racial gender ideologies. Slowe did not affirm a hierarchy of identities. She unapologetically positioned herself as an advocate for educational equality for black women. Her politics reflected a different consciousness that specifically addressed the needs and burgeoning aspirations of black women using education as a means for greater visibility in the public sphere. The demand for diverse and unfettered opportunities for black women illuminated a New Negro womanhood sensibility that distinguished Slowe and others with similar beliefs from their "race woman" counterparts. While the politics of respectability inscribed the motivations and standpoints of leading "race women" such as Burroughs and Terrell, a new politics of mobility, visibility, and legibility guided those espousing New Negro womanhood ideologies. The "respect" that New Negro women demanded rejected any limitations on possibilities for African American women and pushed the boundaries of intra-racial gender roles and expectations.

Throughout her career as a teacher, principal, dean, and organizational leader, Slowe believed that the problems of black women affected all people. As the President of the NACW, Slowe garnered national attention because of her commitment to black women's education in all U.S. institutions. Slowe articulated how injustices against black women signaled a broader injustice to humankind. Though Slowe was not the first to connect the inequalities faced by African Americans to a broader understanding of inequality, she was among the first to associate the educational achievements of black women to a fuller realization of American democracy. The broadened "justice" lens Slowe engaged added a distinctly New Negro woman's component to her activism. Slowe embodied a commitment to eradicating racial and gender oppression and almost exclusively focused on the plight of African American women. During her tenure as a member and leader of the National Association of College Women, the organization formulated its purpose and publicly circulated it. "The organization has devoted itself to the study of living conditions for women and college students and to the raising of educational standards in colleges, with special emphasis upon the introduction into the curricula of courses to meet the needs of modern life,"she wrote.[46] "Race women" advocated for the education of black women, but did not place as great an emphasis on self-determination and career achievement for black women. Recognizing the potential for black women to become leaders in all fields of human endeavor, Slowe used her position at Howard as a dean in conjunction with her professional organizations to forward an agenda that honored black women's distinct potential. Slowe viewed Howard as an institution that could lead the way in harnessing the gifts of African American

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[46] *NAWDACS Calls to Convention*, Slowe Papers, 1930s.

women and training them for the "modern world." Her efforts, however, were not always successful and Howard was not always receptive to New Negro womanhood as it pertained to politics of mobility and visibility for African American women.

Conclusion

African American women at Howard in the early twentieth century were participants and catalysts of debates about the role of Black women in the modern world. Black women attending institutions of higher learning were equipped with skills and bodies of knowledge that, for their mothers and most of their peers, was nearly unattainable. Consequently, a realm of possibility opened to black women that desired to pursue professional aspirations. Most of the institutions of higher learning which African American women attended during the late nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth centuries prepared them for careers as teachers. Black college-educated women, nonetheless, began to branch out into other career fields. This defiance of the status quo met with substantial backlash from prominent leaders in the black community, male and female. At Howard, however, black women students had an ally in Slowe. Their talents and ambitions were nurtured by black women, who viewed higher education as a springboard to racial and gender equality. Slowe and her Howard students during the 1920s and 1930s built upon a variety of political and social movements occurring during this era and formulated a unique political agenda that heralded gender equity as a top priority. Progressive era ideals, Du Bois's idea of a "Talented Tenth," women's suffrage rhetoric, the founding of the NAACP, the founding of the National Council of Negro Woman, racial violence, black modernism, racial uplift ideology, the anti-lynching movement, and the black

education movement each informed how black Howard women shaped their political standpoints and social and cultural perspectives. A set of ideas about the future of African American women, namely New Negro Womanhood emerged from this interplay of movements, ideologies, organizations, and philosophies

At the core of New Negro womanhood is a specific understanding of the "modern world." Slowe often discussed the necessity of preparing African American women for the modern world and imparted this vision onto Howard's female population. Slowe and her students conceived of the "modern world" as a place in which both men and women strove for professional achievement and personal fulfillment. For African Americans, the path to the "modern world" significantly differed from the path for whites. Jim Crow laws, de facto segregation, employment and housing discrimination, and white supremacist ideology obstructed the passageway to the "modern world." The obliteration of racist attitudes and practices was essential to blacks accessing the promises of the "modern world." Black modernist sensibilities, therefore, included the political, economic, and social activism of African Americans attempting to achieve racial equality. Black modernity accounted for a diverse array of perspectives regarding how blacks should advocate for social and political change. The Great Migration, the urbanization of African-America, and the founding of black institutions such as schools, banks, and businesses contributed to a further diversification of African American experiences and perspectives in the United States. Resulting from this multiplicity were numerous ideologies about African America and the struggle for racial equality.

What distinguished New Negro womanhood from other black modernist ideologies was not simply its primary focus on African American women. Race women

tirelessly fought for black women's issues such as health, legal protection, education, and even women's suffrage. Some race women believed in gender equality and built upon the legacy of early black women activists such as Sojourner Truth and Maria Stewart. Race women fought on behalf of black women, but did not collectively challenge prevailing racial and gender ideologies that perpetuated intra-racial sexism in black communities' most prestigious and lauded institutions. Joyce Hanson argues that, most African American women activists grounded their political standpoints in a "confidence in women's higher moral capacity, the power of educational advancement, Christian responsibility, and community activism."[47] The acceptance of these ideologies permitted race women to strategically advocate for African American women from the standpoint of black respectability. Deploying politics of respectability appeased prominent black male leaders and reaffirmed an intra-racial hierarchy in which, race trumped gender. In many ways, equal rights and opportunities for black men were synonymous with racial equality on black political agendas. The progress of black men signaled racial progress. Race women fervently fought for anti-lynching legislation that would protect black men from a form of racial violence that primarily targeted black males. Race women addressed the effects of racial violence on black women through rhetoric that highlighted black women's victimization as mothers and to a far lesser extent, as victims of sexual violence perpetrated by white males. Nevertheless, the experiences of black men with racial violence consumed the majority of resources black women committed to racial violence activism. Ultimately, race women were champions of the race because they fought for equality without prioritizing the specific plight of African American women

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[47] Joyce A. Hanson, *Mary McLeod Bethune & Black Women's Political Activism* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 22.

and without disrupting racial and gender ideologies that permitted intra-racial sexism and patriarchy to pervade black institutions and black political agendas.

The New Negro women at Howard trumpeted gender equity with a fervor and a candor that shocked and offended several prominent African American leaders, including President Mordecai Johnson. At the height of black women students' activism, Johnson arrived at Howard and attempted to debunk the substantial gains these women made toward achieving gender equity at the leading historically black university. "At Howard, as elsewhere on black college campuses, black women were subjected to strict rules and regulations regarding their behavior and movement on and off campus," he announced.[48] African American female Howard students challenged the viability of these rules and regulations and openly decried the sexism that motivated their enforcement at such a "progressive" institution. Slowe led these women in confronting the hypocrisy and the sexist attitudes and practices that inhibited the spread of New Negro womanhood ideologies and activities on and off of Howard's campus. Howard women respected and embraced race women such as Terrell and Burroughs. For black women in Washington, and across African-America, education and religion were at the core of their political, social, and cultural agendas. Many of the educated, black women activists of the late nineteenth and early to mid twentieth centuries confronted the tension of being committed to racial uplift and advocating for the imposition of certain "core values" such as feminine propriety and higher moral capacity.

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[48] Perkins 96.

Terrell vividly described the "extraordinary intellectual and political achievements of black women only two generations away from slavery."[49] Although Terrell emphasized issues such as black female empowerment and woman suffrage, she remained committed to the goal of racial equality as paramount. An educator, writer, scholar, powerful orator, and a leader, Terrell exemplified a form of black women's leadership/activism that thrived in Washington. Turning her back on the life of leisure and "ladyhood" her family's wealth secured, Terrell chose to be a leader in the anti-lynching campaign, desegregation efforts, and to a lesser extent, the movement for women's rights. Throughout the early 1900s, Burroughs established women's industrial clubs in the South. These clubs offered a range of services including, but not limited to: short-term lodging for black women, basic domestic skills training, typing, stenography, bookkeeping, and home economics.[50] In 1907, Burroughs produced official plans for the National Trade and Professional School for Women and Girls in Washington, D.C. The school opened in 1909 with Burroughs as President and under the motto, "We specialize in the wholly impossible." Focusing in on the honing of both practical and professional skills, the institution's curriculum stressed the importance being both admirable homemakers and self-sufficient "working women." Christian womanhood was an overarching theme as well. Because of the integral role both religion and education played in Burroughs life, her school privileged them as well. The motto of the National

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[49] Terrell, Mary Church, "The Progress of Colored Women," Speech, 1898.

[50] Sharon Harley, "Nannie Helen Burroughs: 'The Black Goddess of Liberty'," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 81 (1996).

Trade and Professional School is rather indicative of how Burroughs thought about the women she sought to educate.

The notion of gender equality, however, became more fully integrated into Howard women's political standpoints. Washington women activists such as Anna Julia Cooper inspired Howard women to invest in higher education as a vehicle for gender equality. The personal relationships Howard women formed with Slowe and other members of the women's campus staff resulted in a community of highly educated women interrogating the validity of racial progress movements and organizations that did not critique gender inequality and the relegation of African American women to particular career paths and the domestic sphere. Women such as Thelma Preyer Bando, who became a Dean of Women and a departmental head, cited Slowe as an influence on her life and became the New Negro woman Slowe envisioned every African American woman could be. Bando was a leader as a student at Howard and because of Slowe's efforts and the women's campus staff, she fulfilled the promise of African American possibility that New Negro womanhood offered to black women in higher education and comparable institutions.

Howard women confronted issues of sexual harassment, a paternalistic and socially conservative administration and Board of Trustees, and the national image of Howard as a progressive institution. Further distinguishing themselves from their race women contemporaries, Howard women often attended campus lectures that advocated gender equality within the black community, such as those delivered by W.E.B Du Bois. In their residences, they organized and led discussions about the inseparability of women's rights from racial progress. While religion played an important role in their

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interior lives, many Howard women did not allow the patriarchal views of the traditional black church to deter them from pursuing careers and other leadership opportunities at Howard and within the black community. Notably, New Negro women at Howard challenged the status quo of male dominance on campus through seeking leadership position in campus clubs, taking classes in all disciplines, and initiating programming that examined the accomplishments of African American men and women. President Johnson resisted the changes Howard women sought and was able to rescind many of the strides these women made in the early twentieth century. His explicit dislike of Dean Slowe, her supporters, and her agenda coupled with a burgeoning New Negro consciousness among Howard female students and faculty created a contentious space in which competing ideals for black women's public behavior intersected.

Many of the Howard women extended their struggle for gender equality and women's rights beyond their classrooms and dorm. The losses Howard women incurred on the Hilltop did not deter them from participating in political and social movements that placed women at the center of their agendas. From the early twentieth to the mid-twentieth century, African American women applied their still-evolving New Negro womanhood consciousness and their belief in African American possibility in the modern world to national movements. Johnson effectively halted much of the progress these women made during the Slowe era; but he could not suppress the New Negro ethos that developed among Howard women and that prepared them for making history as activists, professionals, intellectuals, and pioneers in numerous fields of human endeavor.

Chapter Two

Make Me Beautiful: Aesthetic Discourses of New Negro Womanhood

> The dressing of one's hair should be a matter of deep concern
> To no other race is this more important than the Negro woman.[51]

At the core of the New Negro Movement was a desire for a re-creation of self, both individually and collectively. New Negroes acted upon this desire for re-creation through reconfiguring aesthetic and cultural traditions. African Americans engaged in new practices and aesthetic discourses with an unprecedented sense of possibility for self-determination and autonomy. Through the altering, adorning, and maintenance of physical appearance, African Americans could literally reconstruct and refashion themselves and create new models of black aesthetic identity.[52] Aesthetic practices were integral to African Americans in shedding the vestiges of enslavement and for asserting their place within the modern world. More specifically, these practices were central to black women carving out new spaces in which to explore their tastes, desires, and sense of personal autonomy. African Americans women used aesthetic innovations, discourses and practices to grapple with and challenge prevailing ideas about race, gender, sexuality, class, and, labor and to claim a distinct space within black modernity.

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[51] Lynk, B.S. *A Complete Course in Hair Straightening and Beauty Culture*, Memphis, Tenn: 20th Century Art Co., 1919.

[52] Jurgen Habermas asserts that claimants of modernity refuse to take "their orientation from the models supplied by another epoch," in *The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987, 7. This assertion in relation to African Americans specifically is echoed in Michael Blanchard, *"Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora,"*; Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture Between Wars*; Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*.

Black modernity was a process of recovering and articulating a sense of self that had been previously over-determined by a national cultural imaginary that devalued black racial identities.[53] Rapidly growing mass media industries such as film, print advertisements, and radio afforded blacks a space in which to partake in that process and confront existing racial, gender, and sexual ideologies. Access to these industries was greater in cities than in small towns and rural communities. African Americans in cities also had greater access to emergent technologies associated with an evolving mass media-based consumer culture. African American women in particular participated in this urban consumer culture as a means to recover and to restyle themselves as claimants of modernity.

Within the aesthetic arena of New Negro discourse, the flourishing of differing ideas and practices signaled diversification within black communities. African Americans did not experience or create a singular modernity. Multiple modernities thrived because of the array of perspectives about being black in the modern world. The numerous iterations of New Negro identity magnified both intra- and interracial tensions and hierarchies as well. Erin Chapman affirms that New Negro cultural productions were "disseminated through the powerful arbiter of white supremacist understandings and capitalist exploitation."[54] This arbitration, however, did not fully describe how African Americans approached racial representation through cultural

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[53] In Michael Blanchard, "Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora," *Public Culture*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1999, Blanchard defines Afro-modernity as a process of redemption, retribution, recovery, and revolution. Gilroy similarly posits black modernity as a process, but firmly situates a heightened double consciousness as central to this process. I argue that this process is evident in the aesthetics and related discourses created by African Americans during the New Negro era.

[54] Erin Chapman, "Prove It On Me: New Negro Women Politics and Popular Culture," dissertation, (Yale University, 2006).

mediums. White supremacist understandings did not deter the diversification of representation of African Americans. Resistance to a monolithic, racial representation was vital to claimants of black modernity.

Through the emergence of a nationalized black consumer culture and national black publications that specifically targeted African Americans, black women took a more authorial role in the portrayal of their identities. New Negro images created by African American women circulated in the American cultural market alongside derogatory and dehumanizing images that reified racial hierarchies and damaging stereotypes. The ability to create images and the establishment of outlets in which those images could circulate provided black women with a space for self-expression. Within this space, black women had options and could use aesthetics to convey their sense of modern black womanhood. The development of a parallel aesthetic terrain controlled by and directed toward African American women also allowed black women to confront white cultural hegemony, black sexism, and the relegation of black women to the margins of national consumer cultures.

Among the culture industries that achieved prominence in black urban communities, the beauty industry emerged as a site for discussions about race, gender, skin color, class, and modernity. More specifically for African American women, ideas about New Negro womanhood predominated in this cultural space. In *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women*, Noliwe Rooks affirms the importance of beauty culture for examining the politics of African American women's bodies, of representation of those bodies, of racial ideologies, of personal freedom, creativity and

autonomy, and of social and economic mobility.[55] I extend Rooks' argument to

encompass how black women connected beauty culture to modernity.[56] From the black

women who invented products exclusively for black women, to the black women who

purchased and used these products, to those women who wrote about the physical

appearance of black women, to the women who acquired financial independence and

social mobility as a result of marketing and selling black beauty products, beauty culture

offered black women an arena in which their needs, thoughts, desires, and tastes took

center stage.

This industry was not isolated from the racism and sexism that pervaded the New

Negro era. In fact, white beauty ideals and trends within white beauty culture played

integral roles in the developmental stages of a nationalized, black beauty culture. Intra-

racial notions of beauty propagated by the black press also affected black beauty culture.

In a piece published in the *Washington Bee* in 1910, the editorial staff, led by prominent

black business and journalist Calvin Chase, echoed a popular sentiment among African

American men and women that dominated black beauty culture discourse in its earliest

stages as a national market, a cultural space, and a race enterprise. In the piece, the *Bee's*

editorial staff states:

> We say straighten your hair, ladies, beautify yourselves,
> make those aggravating reclusive, elusive, shrinking kinks long
> flowing tresses that may be coiled or curled or puffed to suit
> Dame Fashion's latest millenary creations, even if it takes an ounce of

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[55] Nowlie M. Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

[56] Davarian Baldwin makes a similar argument regarding beauty culture and New Negro women in Chicago. In this chapter, however, I use local advertisements and images from black newspapers in Washington to consider how black women explicitly connected politics of appearance to the assertion of modern black womanhood. It is the localized beauty culture that is significant for understanding how black women functioned as authorial subjects within a national, race enterprise.

straightening preparation that can be manufacture…even God,
who discriminated against our women on this hair proposition,
knows that straight hair beautifies a woman. Yes, straighten your hair
and do it at once.[57]

From the arrival of black women to United States to the early years of the national black

beauty culture, the practice of hair straightening was one of many hair styling techniques

commonly associated with white female beauty standards. It is important to note that this

standard was not only limiting for black women, but for any woman who did not have

straight hair. Notwithstanding the influence of racism and sexism and the contributions

of black men, white manufacturers of beauty products, and white cultural hegemony,

African American women created a beauty culture that situated black women's bodies

and voices at the forefront of discussions about competing visions for African American

modernity.

Black beauty culture was a business, a discourse, and a product of modernity.

This chapter will explore the connection between black women's engagement in shaping

the exchange of ideas on black beauty culture and New Negro aesthetic ideologies. There

were many facets of these connections, ranging from the positioning of black beauty

culture as a tool for dismantling stereotypes to the development of a multidimensional

consumer marketplace comprised almost solely of African American women.[58] Moving

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[57] Calvin Chase, ed., *The Washington Bee*, March 5th, 1910.

[58] Stereotypes of black women during Jim Crow ranged from that of being lascivious, savage or primitive
in appearance, lazy, unconcerned with their physical appearance, matronly in appearance, and vulgar.
Many scholars of African American women's studies discuss the prevalence of stereotypes that African
American women combated, but in Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge,
Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), she explicitly claims that
black women have been restricted because of external definitions of black womanhood expressed through
controlling images. Archetypes such as Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire affected how black women
approached self-definition. Beauty culture was a vehicle through which black women could self-define and
respond to these controlling images and stereotypes. It also important to note that African American men

from the history of the evolution of black beauty consumer culture in the late-nineteenth

century to the end of the New Negro era in the 1930s, I use physical aesthetics, visual

images, and racially-marked products to consider the relationship between New Negro

womanhood and modernity. Black beauty culture also functioned as a battleground for

ideas about the intersection of the political and social agendas of the New Negro

movement and the presentation and representation of black womanhood in the public

sphere. One of the major currents within the New Negro movement was debunking

white cultural hegemony.   The rapid growth of this multi-million dollar industry also

challenged the homogeneity that existed in American beauty culture.[59] Many New Negro

women involved in black beauty culture attempted to debunk white constructions of

feminine beauty.

This chapter builds upon scholarship that explores the importance of beauty

culture to African American women's history. Davarian Baldwin argues that "beauty

culture became an important locus for the development of a contested New Negro

womanhood."[60] This claim is echoed in throughout the growing body of literature on

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also participated in black beauty culture as consumers, sellers, and manufacturers. See Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001) for a description of black men as consumers/participants in black beauty culture. Although African American women were the primary consumers and sellers, parallel discourses existed about the appearance of black men and how their appearances contributed to or detracted from the perception of African Americans as claimants of modernity. It was black womanhood, however, that was posited as the aesthetic symbol of modernity in the New Negro era.

[59] Homogeneity in this context means that American beauty culture pivoted around aesthetic valuations and traditions derived from a white cultural imaginary. The majority of products, tools, and techniques marketed to women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries signaled a fairly monolithic and distinctively racialized perception of ideal, feminine beauty.

[60] Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration and Black Urban Life*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007, 55.

African American women's beauty culture.[61] I build upon this claim by considering how

black women began shaping an alternative discourse about black beauty aesthetics that

resisted adherence to prevailing ideals about beauty. For some black women, being

modern was about embracing unique practices and styles that derived from standards

established by and fro African American women. I focus on black women's beauty

culture in Washington to unveil how local beauty cultures embraced black women-

authored discourses about black beauty. Examining the localized beauty culture of New

Negro women in Washington allows us to reconsider the authorial role black women

played in diversifying the practices, products, and trends that propelled black beauty

culture in the early twentieth century. The local beauty culture of Washington mirrored

the local beauty of cultures of cities such as New York and Chicago. Nevertheless, I

argue that both localized and national discourses about black beauty influenced how

black women thought about styling themselves as modern black women.

The Origins of the Modern Black Beauty Industry and Its Emergence in the Nation's Capital

The origins of the modern black beauty industry predate its emergence a national,

black consumer market. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the

development of products specifically for African Americans and the rapid growth of

beauty salons and cosmetology schools in black communities. In fact, black beauty

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[61] Ingrid Banks, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Juila K. Blackwelder, *Styling Jim Crow: African American Beauty Training during Segregation* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003); Ayana Byrd D. and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*; Obiagele Lake, *Blue Veins and Kinky Hair: Naming and Color Consciousness in African America* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003); Nowlie M. Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women*.

culture predated such commercialization. Beauty practices, intra-racial and interracial

ideas about the physical appearance of black women (most notably their hair texture and

skin color), and an informal black beauty market existed since the arrival of African

women as chattel to the United States. This aesthetic subculture encompassed folk

traditions, intergenerational exchanges between black women, and the survival

techniques black women used to maintain their appearances under the harsh conditions of

enslavement.

Slave women groomed their hair for health and convenience. Braiding and head

wrapping helped workers maintain the cleanliness of their hair and kept their hair from

being damaged while laboring.[62] Another common practice among black women on

plantations was the use of handkerchiefs and scarves. Head wraps, made out of fabric

oddments, protected black women's hair from sun damage. They also could conceal

slave women's hair, when they could not attend to it properly. Although head rags were

omnipresent, black women styled their hair in a variety of ways depending upon their

access to styling tools and products. Many female slaves who worked in the homes of

white masters engaged in hair styling practices that resembled those of white slave

owners. These practices were shared among women in slave communities and often

replicated by both field and house slaves, although more prominently among house

slaves.[63]

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[62] Julia K. Blackwelder, *Styling Jim Crow: African American Beauty Training during Segregation* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 16.

[63] Deborah G. White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* and Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women From Slavery to the Present*.

Free and enslaved black women put a great deal of thought and effort into hair care. Products such as kerosene, butter, goose grease, soap, cornmeal, bacon fat, lye, potatoes, and coffee became central to the cleansing, dyeing, and straightening of African American women's hair. Tools such as butter knives, strings, and eel skins assisted enslaved women in curling, wrapping, and straightening their hair. Many of the straightening practices used by slave women were arduous and potentially dangerous, and consequently, many black women on plantations preferred other practices that did not pose the risks of chemical burns and permanent hair loss. Women who resisted hair straightening embraced other practices that resonated in both slave and free communities. Both enslaved and free black women practiced braiding and head wrapping, both of which had roots in African traditions. Enslaved and impoverished black women were more limited in their grooming choices because they did not have access to or could not afford materials. They also faced a constant struggle to attend to their physical appearance because of the lack of time they had to groom themselves as a result of their extremely demanding labor schedules.

From its inception, African American beauty culture was simultaneously syncretic, adaptive, inventive, and autonomous. African American beauty culture combined and improvised upon African traditions brought by slaves, Anglo-American beauty styles and techniques, European ideals, and Native American practices.[64]   In its

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[64] Byrd and Tharps 14, also see Charles Johnson, *Africans in America: America's Journey Through Slavery* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998) for a discussion of a distinct "black culture" that emerged during the early nineteenth century. Johnson and Smith posit that at the time of the outlawing of the North American transatlantic slave trade in 1808, a new culture that mixed African traditions and survival practices developed in the Americas existed. Because blacks brought to the Americas came from different parts of Africa, combinations of beliefs, aesthetic and expressive practices, and traditions inscribed African American culture. Appropriations of European cultural practices created a commonality among slaves

infancy, black beauty culture did not fully mimic or wholly reject the white cultural

ideals emerged in the early twentieth century. White manufacturers, which dominated the

beauty culture industry, however, relied on white cultural ideals in product development

and marketing throughout the nineteenth century. These manufacturers used prevailing

white aesthetic tastes to target African American men and women with the ability to

purchase beauty products. Not yet a fully viable industry, white producers of racially-

specific beauty products for African Americans rarely tapped into beauty practices and

techniques blacks developed during this era.

Both enslaved and free black women confronted white cultural dominance and

associated beauty norms that degraded and dehumanized black women. White

Americans and some blacks perceived the features of enslaved and free black women

were perceived as physically unattractive and as indicative of the "inherent" primal,

animalistic, and lascivious tendencies of peoples of African descent. Advertisements for

slaves and slave auctions illustrate the racist and sexist notions that shaped America's

white cultural imaginary, in which conceptions about physicality, physical features, and

the capacity for labor intersected. Slave traders focused on gender and skin color to lure

potential buyers into purchasing human merchandise. Light-skinned, black women were

marketed as a Negroes fit for domestic service within their masters' homes. Dark-

skinned black women, like black men of all hues, were typically designated as

fieldworkers. Through slave advertisements, slave traders would provide further details

about the people being sold, including their hair texture and their body types. Slave

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from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, black culture was built upon traditions, syncretism, and innovation.

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traders communicated the idea that light-skinned blacks' closer proximity to whiteness in their physical appearance rendered them comparatively more attractive to slave owners in search of slaves to work in their homes than darker-skinned blacks. Nevertheless, light-skinned blacks could not escape negative racial stereotypes. White skin and other tropes of beauty associated with Anglo-Americans' appearance such as straight hair and thin noses remained the standard for beauty in the United States. Enslaved and free black women struggled against the devaluation of their beauty, and yet, white cultural hegemony of the nineteenth century imparted lasting effects on African American beauty culture and class and color politics within the black community. [65]

Before emancipation, many African Americans associated of light skin and straight hair with greater freedom and opportunity as well as with membership in an elite class among African Americans. Because a significant number of free black women were of both European (white) and African (black) descent, their features, including their hair texture and skin color, represented freedom to enslaved and impoverished African Americans. While not accepted fully by whites, free black women often attained more social and economic freedoms than enslaved, darker-hued women. Free black women were the foremothers of the "Negro Elite" class that more prominently emerged after emancipation.

It is important to note that during the nineteenth century, black intellectual elites deemed African American hair and skin in its natural state to be not just preferable, but also representative of middle-class or elite social status within the black community. Many of the black elite in Washington, because of their mixed-race heritage had

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[65] Blackwelder 15.

straighter hair and lighter skin. For most of them, their hair and skin in its natural state was the ideal which thousands of African Americans strove to achieve. The physical appearance of the "Negro Elite" became entwined with a burgeoning African American collective ethos in which the politics of appearance intersected with African American possibility and the fashioning of a New Negro identity. According to black beauty scholars Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps, "by the time slavery was officially abolished in 1865, 'good' hair and light skin had become the official keys to membership in the Negro elite," although exceptions were made based upon educational attainment and occupation.[66]

The ideals of straight hair and light skin were foundational to how white manufacturers who dominated the black beauty industry throughout the nineteenth century created and marketed racially-specific beauty products and how African Americans consumed beauty products. From the 1830s onward, white-owned companies manufactured and sold hair-care products that claimed to straighten black women's hair. These advertisements appeared in African American periodicals and reified "straight" hair and lighter skin as both American and modern beauty ideals. Free women of color were the prime consumers of these products.[67] Hair salons and a small market for hair care and skin care products for the black elite in D.C. emerged in the 1840s and 1850s.

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[66] Byrd and Tharps 21.

[67] Prior to Emancipation, there was a population of more than 100,000 free blacks in the United States. Many of the free blacks, particularly those in Washington were the descendants of interracial encounters between African slaves and American whites (not exclusively slave owners). This "mixed race" population, though identified as African American because of their African heritage, often had lighter skin and more loosely curled hair. The skin color and hair texture of free blacks differentiated them from their darker-skinned, enslaved counterparts. These features came to signify freedom, mobility, and greater acceptance into white, dominant institutions.

Among black Washington women of all classes, skin-lightening and hair straightening techniques continued to flourish after emancipation and well into the twentieth century.[68]

These beauty practices often reflected the aspirations of some Washington women to adhere to prevailing beauty norms and to escape the vestiges of "physical blackness," which located them at the bottom of the American beauty hierarchy and connected them to their past as slaves. Attempting to escape their rural or "country" past and their labor identities, some black women migrating to Washington in the late nineteenth century mimicked the styling choices and practices of D.C.'s elite black and white women. Dark skin or tightly curled or kinky hair, which were features commonly associated with people of African descent in the United States, were not viewed as attractive or modern within certain black elite circles in Washington and within American society more broadly. During this period, beauty norms within black communities often mirrored that of beauty norms in white communities. Within this particular space in black beauty culture, African American embraced white beauty standards as urbane and modern.

This imposing and historically-rooted imaginary, however, did not fully dictate the choices that black women Washingtonians made regarding their appearance. The desire to preserve and build upon traditions that black women brought with them from Africa or that black women crafted once in the United States impelled the rise of an

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[68] It should be noted that many blacks throughout the African diaspora engage(d) in skin lightening and hair straightening. Contemporarily, these techniques are most prominent in formerly colonized countries in Africa and in the United States. The skin lightening industry has increased in recent years after a decline during the mid-to-late twentieth centuries. Many African diaspora scholars attribute the continued usage skin lightening and hair straightening products to "mental /psychological" colonialism and enslavement and white cultural hegemony. For an in-depth discussion of this historical and diasporic phenomenon, see Obiagele Lake, *Blue Veins and Kinky Hair: Naming and Color Consciousness in African America* and Ingrid Banks, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness*.

African American beauty culture. This burgeoning racialized market embraced

competing ideals of beauty, both responding to and shaping the predilections of black

women consumers in the early twentieth century. Of particular importance in this regard

was the cultural knowledge exchanged among black women about African American

beauty practices.

Enslaved and free African American women partook in an intergenerational folk

culture that fashioned its own standards and authored its own bodies of knowledge.

Older black women passed on traditions to younger generations and created an informal

economy for beauty products, using accessible ingredients such as plants. Communities

of enslaved women and of black women in cities like Washington, Baltimore, and

Philadelphia discussed and exchanged tonics, styling techniques, and other hair and skin

care practices.[69] This communal exchange became more formalized in urban centers

during the early twentieth century through the black press and increased interactions

between African American women from different regions of the United States. The

formalization of what had been informal dynamics was integral to a sense of racial

progress that both formerly enslaved and free blacks affirmed. Central to that sense of

optimism was the anticipation that markets, which formerly excluded and or devalued

African America women would open their doors to them and their ideas about black

womanhood.

Hopes for that kind of inclusion, however, quickly dissipated after Reconstruction

Black women, who confronted both racism and sexism, faced a particularly difficult

situation. As John Burrows describes the situation, Reconstruction optimism turned into

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[69] Julia Blackwelder speaks in-depth about the communal exchange of black beauty practices in *Styling Jim Crow*.

Jim Crow realism. Jim Crow realism, however, encouraged innovation. Despite scarce

resources and a finite consumer base, African Americans created products and services to

address the specific needs and desires of a New Negro community, which was largely

ignored and offensively addressed by white entrepreneurs.[70] Pioneers such as Annie

Turnbo Malone, Sarah Breedlove (more commonly known as Madame C.J. Walker), and

Majorie Stewart Joyner and thousands of black women beauticians, manufacturers, salon

owners, and saleswomen capitalized upon this distinct historical moment and transformed

a folk subculture into a race enterprise that provided the aesthetic foundation for New

Negro womanhood.

The Birth of the Black Beauty Industry in Washington

Black migrants envisioned greater opportunity and more possibilities for

themselves and their families in northern cities. What drew black women migrants to

Washington were the educational and employment opportunities as well as established

black-owned businesses that catered to African Americans. The availability of job

opportunities encouraged continuous migration of African Americans to the District of

Columbia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."[71] Opportunities did

not erase the presence of racism. The horrors of racial violence and economic oppression

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[70] John H. Burrows, *The Necessity of Myth: A History of the National Negro Business League, 1940-1945* (Auburn, Ala.: Hickory Hill Press, 1988).

[71] In Sharon Harley, "Beyond the Classroom: The Organizational Lives of Black Female Educators in the District of Columbia, 1890-1930," *The Journal of Negro Education*, 51, 3 (Summer, 1982), Harley emphasizes both employment opportunities and the "lure of the city" as driving forces for the steady migration of black women in particular to Washington during this period. Census data from 1860-1930 substantiates the claim that a large of influx black women descended upon D.C. Washington and other cities in the urban upper south offered a large number of professional and non-professional jobs for African Americans compared to those available in the southern communities from which black women migrated.

characterized urban areas, including Washington, but many African Americans viewed

the situation in northern cities as preferable to that in the South. Additionally,

industrialization and urbanization were making cities more appealing to all Americans

seeking better lives. Urbanization and the expansion of the mass communications

industry and interstate commerce at the turn of the twentieth century catalyzed

unprecedented economic growth that catered to a growing Progressive era penchant for

consumption. The burgeoning black beauty industry, which was connected to those

larger economic changes, offered black women both professional prospects and new

cultural opportunities.

Many women migrating to urban centers seeking employment brought with them

the traditions and skills they learned in their southern communities. Beauty practices and

techniques were among the skills with which black women migrants were equipped.

Prior to the institutionalization of black beauty techniques through training schools and

the establishment of national standards for manufacturers of beauty products, black

women could enter into beauty culture occupations with relative ease. Operating out of

their homes and developing a customer base through word-of-mouth, hundreds of black

women in Washington began to shape a local beauty industry that served the aesthetic,

consumptive desires of a diverse community of black women. A niche market of unique

tastes, namely those of African American women, expanded as the black population

exploded in Washington and demanded racially-specific service enterprises.[72]

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[72] Juliet Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (New York: Prenctice Hall International, 1998) discusses at length, the intersections between black entrepreneurship, Jim Crow, and racially-specific businesses. Walker explores how racial segregation catalyzed the development of black-owned businesses and race enterprises. Because of prevailing gender norms, intra-racial gender hierarchies, and the lack of educational and vocational opportunities available to

The leading black periodicals in D.C. captured this explosion in their frequent publication of advertisements for beauty products and services.[73] Advertisements for hair straightening and skin lightening products such as Black-No-More (a skin bleach/lightener), The Magic (a comb that when heated straightened hair), Nelson's Straightine (a hair straightening product), Ozono (a hair straightening product), The Chemical Wonder Company of New York Products (a line of products for both skin lightening and hair straightening), Ford's Hair Pomade (a hair straightening product), Hair Vim (a hair straightening product), Kink (a hair straightening product), Me-Lange (a hair straightening product), and Black Skin Remover (a skin bleach/lightener) frequently recurred throughout the New Negro era. In addition to these advertisements for products promoting a particular ideal of feminine beauty, during the early 1900s, an average of one to two advertisements about local black women-owned and operated beauty businesses ran in Washington's black newspapers on a daily basis. The majority of these advertisements were not for hair straightening or skin lightening products or services. Advertisements for local beauty services were not featured as prominently as the tens of thousands of advertisements for black beauty culture products and services that ran in *The Colored American* and *The Washington Bee* from 1880-1920.[74] Of the nearly one hundred different beauty manufacturers and businesses advertised in Washington's

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black women, the black beauty industry was one of the few race enterprises in which black women dominated and acquired wealth from their racialized ventures.

[73] In my research of the *Colored American* and the *Washington Bee*, every issue I examined from the time period of 1880-1920 contained three or more advertisements for beauty services. On average at least one of those advertisements marketed a local beauty culture service. Between 1900-1920, the number of advertisements about local services increased to an average of two to three.

[74] This figure reflects my extensive research in the Black Press archives. I examined every available issue of both of these newspapers to calculate an approximate number of beauty advertisements.

leading black periodicals during the New Negro era, African American women beauty culturists and businesswomen in Washington who built upon skills and traditions honed during the early and mid-nineteenth century comprised a small, but noteworthy faction of the newspapers' advertisements.

Primarily patronized by the city's nationally recognized black elite class the periodicals were also read by upwardly mobile poor and working-class blacks who became sellers, entrepreneurs, customers, and business owners.[75] Black beauty culture unfolded and evolved on the pages of newspapers and journals. In these ads, however, black women were not often authors of their content and ideology. The majority of advertisements encouraged black women to look more like their white or bi-racial female counterparts. Black beauty culture manufacturers—who included white men and women, black men, and black women—promoted skin lightening and hair straightening techniques honed within black communities during the nineteenth century. These practices became situated within a formalized national economy that grew as a result of advertisements in African American newspapers and journals. Because of the substantial population of African Americans in Washington, beauty culture manufacturers advertised

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[75] A significant amount of the scholarship on the African American experience in Washington examines the black elite class in Washington D.C.: Jacqueline Moore, *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999); Audrey K. Kerr, *The Paper Bag Principle: Class, Colorism, and Rumor in the Case of Black Washington, D.C.* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006); Nelson F. Kofie, *Race, Class, and Struggle for Neighborhood in Washington, D.C., 1860-1880* (New York: Garland, 1999); Allan J. Johnston, *Surviving Freedom: The Black Community of Washington, D.C. 1860-1880* (New York: Garland, 1993); Kathleen M. Lesko, ed., *Black Georgetown Remembered: A History of Its Black Community from the Founding of the "Town of George" in 1751 to the Present* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991); Letitia W. Brown, *Free Negroes in the District of Columbia, 1790-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Lawrence O. Graham, *Our Kind of People: Inside American's Black Upper Class* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999); William B. Gatewood, Jr., "Aristocrats of Color: South and North The Black Elite, 1880-1920," *The Journal of Southern History*, 54, 1 (Feb., 1988): 3-20.

their racially-specific products in black Washington newspapers throughout the New Negro era.

Many of the earliest advertisements in black periodicals in Washington reveal the centrality of particular practices to black beauty culture. The advertisements, however, obscured the fact that many in black urban elite communities rejected skin lightening and hair straightening in the nineteenth century. From a business standpoint, the African American elite had the ability to indulge in conspicuous consumption. Additionally, the black elite's embrace of white beauty standards and those standards' connection to social and economic mobility structured the predominating discourse of both national and local black beauty cultures. Manufacturers and sellers placed advertisements in publications that widely circulated in black middle and upper class communities and built upon the perception, already in circulation, that African American women desired straighter hair and lighter skin.

In an 1899 edition of *The Colored American*, an advertisement highlighted the predominant discourse that shaped national black beauty culture in its formative years. The ad for a "Black Skin Remover: A Wonderful Face Bleach," presents a product manufactured in Richmond, Virginia. Many of manufacturers of black beauty products remained in southern states throughout the era of the Great Migration.[76] African Americans in cities from the 1890s onward comprised a significant portion of the consumer base for black beauty products. Black publications became the vehicle through which manufacturers could reach a national audience with their products. Informal

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[76] Before the Great Migration, interstate manufacturers played a small role in black beauty culture because the primarily localized nature of the industry. Black consumers purchased and bartered for products from within their respective communities.

exchanges of beauty products and techniques among African Americans in different

regions of the United States occurred before the Great Migration, but these exchanges

became formalized as African Americans populated urban areas throughout the Upper

South, Northeast, and Midwest and as black publications with space for advertisers

circulated more widely.

The advertisement for "Black Skin Remover" champions the product's ability to

make black skin several shades whiter and mulatto skin "perfectly white." The "before"

and "after" images used in the advertisement displays a stark transformation of dark skin

to white skin. While boasting other "positive" effects such as the removal of wrinkles and

pimples, the most significant selling point of the face bleach was the equation of beauty

with whiteness. Toward the end of the advertisement, the manufacturer notes that the

product will be sent to the consumer in such a way that the contents of the package would

be known only to the consumer. Despite the popularity of skin-lightening processes

among African Americans, this small section of the advertisement suggests the potential

Figure 6: "Black Skin Remover" Advertisement (1899) backlash. It also suggests that

consumers of skin lightening products desired a transformation that appeared "natural"

and not achieved through usage of products.

Similar advertisements ran in *The Washington Bee* throughout the early twentieth

century. An advertisement for a skin bleaching product manufactured by The Chemical

Wonder Company of New York ran almost weekly for the entire first decade of the

century. The advertisement combined many of the ideas perpetuated in black beauty

discourse about African American skin and hair.[77] The seven "chemical wonders"

depicted in the advertisement promise to make African Americans more attractive

through lightening the skin and straightening the hair. Although the advertisement

targeted both African American women and men, the "benefits" for black women were

greater in number. The ad for the "seven wonders" system states that women using their

products would "occupy higher positions socially and commercially, marry better, get

along better."[78] The manufacturers of the "chemical wonders" explicitly connect their

products with black women achieving a higher or "preferred" status through their

physical appearance. This advertisement also implied that African American women did

or should value marriage and respectable social affiliations. The alleged benefits of black

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[77] Both the *Washington Bee* and the *Colored American* ran advertisements for products that perpetuated similar ideals about black feminine beauty. Black-No-More (a skin bleach/lightener), The Magic (a comb that when heated straightened hair), Nelson's Straightine (a hair straightening product), Ozono (a hair straightening product), The Chemical Wonder Company of New York Products (a line of products for both skin lightening and hair straightening), Ford's Hair Pomade (a hair straightening product), Hair Vim (a hair straightening product), Kink (a hair straightening product), Me-Lange (a hair straightening product), and Black Skin Remover (a skin bleach/lightener) are all examples of advertisements that recurred in these newspapers throughout the New Negro era. The constant theme of these advertisements was that straight hair and light skin were the ideal for black women. Most of these advertisements also presented kinky or tightly curled hair and dark skin with being undesirable.

[78] *The Washington Bee,* March 1909.

women using the Chemical Wonder Company's beauty products were relegated to the

domestic and semi-private spheres of marriage and social interactions. Another striking

part of this advertisement is its broader claim about the importance of beauty culture. The

Chemical Wonders Company claims that "white people spend millions to beautify

themselves." Immediately following this announcement, the advertisement avers

"colored people should make themselves as attractive as possible." This attractiveness,

according to the Chemical Wonders Company of New York, could be achieved through

lightening the skin and straightening the hair of African Americans. Additionally, the

"seven wonders" advertisement illuminates the parallel beauty industries that thrived as

well as racially-specific markets that similarly heralded "beautification" as a means to

social mobility and individual and collective progress. The insertion of information

about white beauty culture revealed the continuing effects of white cultural hegemony on

black beauty culture that lasted well into the early twentieth century.[79]

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[79] *The Washington Bee,* March 1909. The contents of this advertisement are similar to the content of another product for which advertisements frequently ran in the *Colored American*, Nelson's Straightine. This product guaranteed to straighten "knotty, kinky, curly hair." The manufacturers of Nelson's Straightine also connected straight hair to beautifying black women and improving the quality of life for these women as well.

ColoredSkin MadeLighter

The Chemical Wonder Company of New York manufactures seven Chemical Wonders which enable colored people to improve their appearance. These wonders cost 50 cents each. White people spend millions to beautify themselves. Colored people should make themselves attractive as possible. Colored men who use these wonders secure better situations in banks, clubs and business houses. Colored women occupy higher positions socially and commercially, marry better, get along better.

(1) Complexion Wonder Creme makes dark skin lighter colored, not with artificial white, but naturally; makes the skin itself lighter colored every time it is applied. Keeps the skin healthy, soft, fine. Makes any colored face more attractive. Improves any colored countenance like magic.

(2) Magneto-metallic comb, called Wonder Comb, can be heated before using and will straighten any hair. Will last a lifetime.

(3) Pomade, called Wonder Uncurl, uncurls kinks in hair and keeps it straight, lustrous and flexible. Wonder Uncurl heated into the scalp with a Wonder Comb will make the kinkiest head of hair look handsome.

(4) Wonder Hair Grow. Fertilizers in corn fields makes cornstalks grow, so this fertilizer rubbed into the scalp makes the hair grow longer, strengthens the scalp so it can hold the hair from falling out. It can be heated into the scalp with a Wonder Comb.

(5) Odor Wonder Powder instantly destroys perspiration odor. Thousands of men are barred from good salaries because of this unseen horror. Thousands of women are shut off from marriage and social life by this invisible barrier. People cannot detect perspiration odor on themselves. Every living being should use this powder.

(6) Odor Wonder Liquid is delightful as a toilet water; can be used with Odor Wonder Powder or separately. Surrounds the body with fragrance. A great luxury for those who can afford it.

(7) This pink variety of Complexion Wonder Creme No. 2 is called Shell-Pink. Gives lovely pink cheeks to light brown or mulatto colored faces. Light brown complexion with pink cheeks mark great personal beauty.

Information Book free. Correspondence free. Please send your address. Agents wanted everywhere. Can start business with $3.00. Delivery free. Applications for agency considered. M. B. Berger & Co., 2 Rector Street, New York City, selling agents for Chemical Wonder Company.

Board & McGuire, 14th Street, Washington, D. C.

Figure 7: The Chemical Wonder Company Advertisement (1909)

The language of these African American beauty advertisements were inextricably linked to broader discussions about disavowing the past and embracing cultural ideologies that compelled African American women to use their physical appearance as a vehicle for debunking racial and gender stereotypes.[80] Black beauty advertisers further expanded the exchange of ideas regarding the importance of appearance to racial progress through emphasizing African American women's ability to transform themselves into respectable women by adhering to dominant cultural norms. These norms dictated that black women's natural, kinky hair and darker skin symbolized unruliness, primitiveness, and a lack of intelligence and refinement. Words such as "soft," "glossy," "silky," and

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[80] See Footnote 8 for a description of the stereotypes black women confronted during the New Negro era.

"refined" were attached to straightened hair. Kinky hair, the hair texture commonly

associated with African Americans was depicted as "stubborn," "harsh," and "stiff."

From its inception, the editor of *Washington Bee*, Calvin Chase "spoke out against

racism and the internecine elitism of color-consciousness."[81] Chase personally spoke out

on the negative impact of colorism in black Washington as well in African America more

broadly. Seemingly contradictory to that position were editorials that encouraged black

women to straighten their hair as a means to asserting a modern, New Negro identity.

Advertisements for skin lighteners and hair straightening products and techniques

comprised the majority of black beauty advertisements in the *Bee*.[82] In the March 5th,

1910 edition of the *Washington Bee*, an editorial piece posited the straightening of

African American women's hair as a way to beautify these women.[83] Advertisements did

not necessarily reflect the ideology of the *Washington Bee* staff. Chase's editorial page

did unveil a perspective that at least some of this staff affirmed. Editorials coupled with

the fact that nearly all of the beauty product and styling advertisements in the *Washington

Bee* were for products that lightened skin and straightened hair reveal Chase's hypocrisy

with regards to his standpoint on colorism. The advertisements and this aforementioned

editorial overtly contradict the *Bee*'s founding principle of debunking the "elitism of

color-consciousness."

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[81] Lake 54.

[82] By 1905, the United States Post Office barred the sale through the mail of skin lighteners such as Black-No-More that had history of causing severe skin damage. A market for these products, however, remained in tact despite these legal proscriptions. Local manufacturers continued developing concoctions that promised drastic effects such as Imperial Whitener and Mme. Turner's Mystic Face Bleach.

[83] Chase (1910)

The emphasis straight hair gradually came under fire as more black women became involved in the marketing of black beauty products in 1900 and the early 1910s. African American women also became increasingly involved in the manufacturing of products and the founding of businesses targeting black women. In the early twentieth century, black women in Washington from all classes began fashioning an advertising discourse within the black beauty industry in which competing aesthetic ideals led to the development of a wide variety of products. As black women took a more direct role in marketing black beauty culture in the black press, they both embraced and challenged a mainstream beauty culture that promoted white aesthetic norms. In the process, they shaped an alternative black advertising culture premised upon standards and aesthetic expressions originating from traditions honed in black communities. Although competing beauty practices and aesthetic norms reflected emerging class struggles in Washington, hair straightening and skin lightening were not necessarily class-specific aesthetic practices."[84]

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[84] Baldwin 61.

Figure 8: Beauty Advertisements (1910)

In Washington, one of the most notable proponents of a beauty culture who did

not advocate white beauty standards was Nannie Helen Burroughs. Founder of the

National Training School for Girls and Women, Burroughs explicitly connected the

practices of skin lightening and hair straightening to white emulation. In her 1904 essay,

"Not Color But Character," Burroughs asserts that, "What every woman

who…straightens out needs, is not her appearance changed but her mind changed… If

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Negro women would use half of the time they spend on trying to get White, to get better, the race would move forward."[85]

Like Burroughs, some black women rejected the idealization of white beauty norms by criticizing the predominance of advertisements for hair straightening and skin lightening products and processes. *Half-Century Magazine*, headed by an editor-in-chief who was an African American woman, Katherine Williams ran editorials and stories from black women that mirrored Burroughs' position. A particularly scathing critique, titled "Betrayers of the Race," appeared in the February 1920 edition of the magazine.[86] Editorials such as this served as the rhetorical foundation for the anti-hair straightening and skin bleaching "movement" in cities that led to the formation of anti-hair wrapping clubs.[87] Responding to black beauty industry advertisements and a national, black discourse that identified straight hair as an African American feminine ideal, these black women's clubs gave voice to those opposing hair straightening as a means for racial advancement and cultural progress.

These clubs rallied around hair-wrapping in particular because the practice encouraged African American women to eradicate the natural kinkiness of their hair through the potentially dangerous process of wrapping the hair in heated fabric with an ample amount of oil. This method caused burns and, in many, hair damage. Many black

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[85] Nannie H. Burroughs, "Not Color But Character," 1904.

[86] Katherine Williams, "Betrayers of the Race," *Half-Century Magazine*, February 1920.

[87] In the March 3rd, 1915 edition of the *Washington Bee*, a brief mention of a Washington anti-hair wrapping club meeting is made. Noliwe M. Rooks, *Ladies Pages: African American Women's Magazines and the Culture That Made Them* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004) documents the existence of anti-hair wrapping clubs in cities such as Chicago, New York, and Washington D.C. Most of these clubs did not document their meetings, but Rooks examined black periodicals to uncover their existence.

women also used hair-wrapping on their children, because they believed that the process would result in the permanent straightening of their children's hair. The practice also had the effect of ingraining in future generations of African Americans the desirability of straight hair. Anti-hair wrapping clubs emerged in Washington and openly challenged newspapers such as *The Washington Bee* through disparaging articles connecting hair straightening to white emulation in black women authored publications such as *Half-Century Magazine*. Black women opposing the discourse forwarded by the majority of advertisements in African American newspapers used these same publications to configure an alternate, advertising discourse that trumpeted the health of African American women's skin and hair and that promoted black women as entrepreneurs, innovators, and teachers.

New Negro Women and Advertising Discourses in Washington

During the latter half of the first decade of the twentieth century, an increasing number of black women took control of the black beauty industry and its accompanying discourses. Although black women had long used beauty products, white manufacturers led the fledgling industry throughout most of the nineteenth century. Black men also participated in the local production and marketing of products for African American women, but were not recognized as leaders in what evolved into a multimillion dollar industry. Black women migrants to urban centers and metropolitan areas began to tap into their informal bodies of aesthetic knowledge and their familiarity with black beauty products and styling techniques. These women's innovations sparked the growth of a national industry that sustained divergent iterations as a New Negro aesthetic identity.

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Advertisements crafted by black women built upon the New Negro ethos of racial progress and racial pride of the early twentieth century. Early manifestation of this alternative black beauty discourse emerged in the last few years of the nineteenth century. In urban centers across the United States, New Negro women carved out an advertising subculture within black beauty culture that championed the racially distinct adornment practices, techniques, and styles of African American women. Although these practices were integral to black beauty culture prior to the 1890s, this alternative discourse became formalized through advertisements in black periodicals. In this period, black periodicals consistently ran advertisements for black beauty products from manufacturers who were not black women. But, increasingly, those ads ran alongside ads placed by African American women for their own products, techniques, and services, which constituted a competing discourse, with roots in the informal and generational exchanges among African American women emerged.

An 1899 advertisement in the *Colored American* targeted black women as potential customers for skin care, not skin lightening products. This short ad championed the local hair and skincare services of Madame G.A. Finnie Mack.[88] A "Skin Specialist" based in the predominantly black U Street corridor neighborhood, Madame Mack

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[88] "Skin Specialist," *The Colored American*, February 1899.
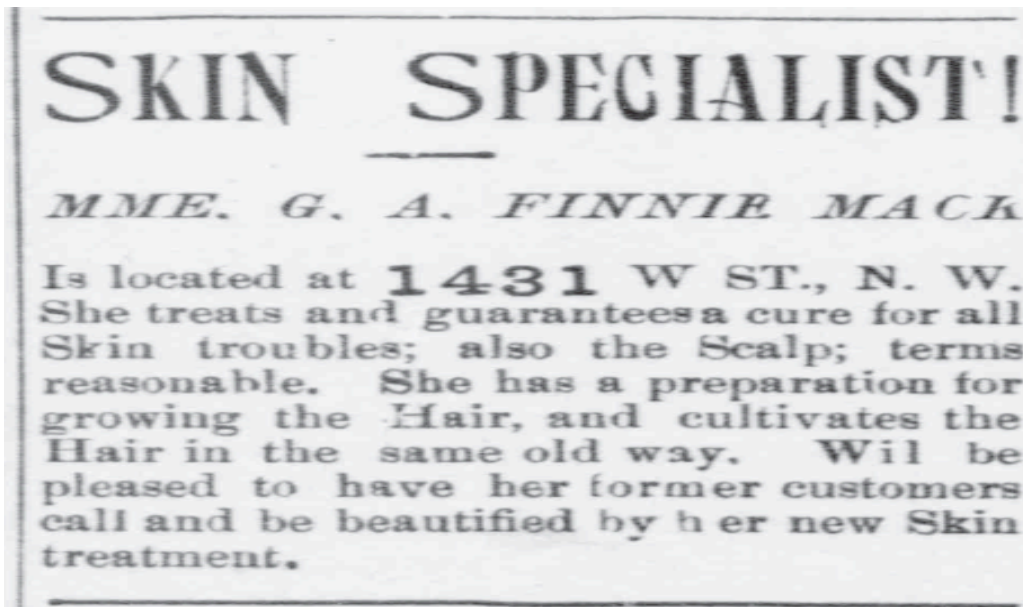
Figure 9: Madame Finnie Mack Advertisement (1910)

guaranteed to treat and cure "all Skin troubles," within reasonable terms. In this ad, black

beautification became synonymous with the health and well-being of the skin and hair.

Madame Mack did not mention hair straightening or skin lightening products, but spoke

vaguely about skin treatments that beautified and hair treatments that cultivated hair

growth. Despite many of the skin lightening and hair straightening advertisements in

black newspapers affirming that their products skin products addressed the health of

African American women's hair and skin, their primary focus was championing lighter

skin and straighter hair. Local beauty culturists such as Madame Mack placed their

advertisements for black beauty products and services in a burgeoning discourse about

black women's health and it connection to her overall appearance.[89]

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[89] As previously mentioned, these kinds of advertisements were printed far less frequently in Washington's black periodicals; nevertheless, during the early twentieth century these kinds of advertisements circulated more often. On average one to two advertisements for local beauty specialists ran in the *Washington Bee* on a daily basis.

By the 1910s, advertisements designed by African American women surfaced in local black periodicals in cities with substantial African American populations. These ads did not conform to the standard tropes of black beauty marketing that prevailed in the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century. In response to the rapidly growing population of African American women and the increasingly diverse tastes of these women, a locally-based black beauty industry evolved. In neighborhoods such as Georgetown, Anacostia, LeDroit Park, and Howard University/Shaw, African Americans could patronize black-owned salons that catered to black women. The localized expansion of the black beauty industry in Washington paralleled the growth of beauty industries throughout the United States, more specifically as it pertained to African American women. By 1920, over 10,000 black women identified their occupation as hairdresser. Advertisements for black women beauty culturists, black-owned salons, black women-manufactured products, and home-based businesses shared space in local black periodicals with established beauty products for hair straightening and skin lightening. In Washington papers such as the *Bee*, these advertisements captured the ethos of a black women's subculture within African American beauty culture.

Within the advertising sections, ads coming out of this black women's beauty subculture occupied a relatively marginal space in comparison to ads for skin lighteners and hair straightening. The March 12th, 1910 edition of the *Bee*, for instance, contained many advertisements for black beauty products. The most visible advertisements include those for Ford's Hair Pomade (a hair softening product), The Magic (a hot comb for

straightening hair), and Her-True-Line (a hair growth and straightening product).[90] Each

of the ads for these products highlight hair-straightening and softening. They used words

such as harsh, kinky, and unmanageable to describe the natural texture of African

American hair as undesirable. Advertisements for these brands ran throughout the tenure

of the leading African American newspaper in Washington. What is less noticeable on

this page of ads, however, is a small ad with no images located directly below the Ford's

Hair Pomade advertisement. The advertisement is offered as a "Notice to Ladies.[91]"

The contents of the "Notice to Ladies" advertisement unveil several of the key

facets of the New Negro aesthetic subculture that developed during the first and second

decades of the twentieth century in Washington. The first information provided in the

"Notice to Ladies" is the address, presumably the home, of the manufacturer and seller,

Mrs. A. J. Smith. Mrs. Smith resided in the Shaw neighborhood of Washington, a well-

known racial enclave for blacks in the nation's capital. Shaw residents and black

Washingtonians from other neighborhoods patronized many of the black-owned

businesses in this nationally-known African American neighborhood. Immediately

following the address, the ad offers information about what constitutes unhealthy and

undesirable hair for African American women. Kinkiness and manageability were not

among Mrs. Smith's concerns. Instead, she sought to address hair thinning, hair loss,

dryness, lifelessness, and itchy scalp. In response to these conditions, Mrs. Smith offered

a hair tonic with an assurance of giving new life to the hair, a clean scalp, and a guarantee

that her product met safety standards under the law. The ad concludes with an offer of a

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[90] "Ford's Hair Pomade," "The Magic," and "Her-Tru-Line," *The Washington Bee*, March 12th, 1910.

[91] "Notice to Ladies," *The Washington Bee*, March 12th, 1910.

free clipping and singing[92] for all patrons of her salons and her address. This simple and comparatively uncreative and non-eye catching ad, nevertheless, indicated a transformation in how black women in Washington marketed and consumed products and services offered by the African American beauty industry. Black women began using the knowledge and skills they honed in their communities prior to their migration to cities to create a formalized space within black beauty culture. This space did not champion beauty practices that heralded light skin and straight hair as preferable for black women.

Figure 10: Notice to Ladies Advertisement (1910)

The launching of a local industry based upon salons (both inside and outside of the home) and black beauty product manufacturers and suppliers provided an alternative

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[92] Singing was a process used by black women beauty culturists to stimulate hair growth.

space for black women to participate in consumer culture and to "provide a beauty regime for African American women that would allow them to fashion and meet their own ideals as well as create opportunities for themselves."[93] Thousands of black women in Washington entered into the local beauty industry as producers and consumers without investing in white cultural hegemony within the black beauty culture. Shifting the focus from "white emulation" or becoming more "urban" and "modern," advertisements such as Mrs. Smith's and the spread of black-women owned salons that emphasized the importance of healthy and styled black hair, African American women in Washington configured a space in the New Negro movement that emphasized aesthetic values defined by, for and about black women.

The black press in Washington also highlighted the emergence of black women as entrepreneurs and business owners. Salons owned by black women and products created by black women garnered space in the pages of the *Bee* and the *Colored American*. Of particular note, black beauty schools received considerable ad space in Washington's black publications. The June 4th, 1910 edition of the *Bee* featured a comparatively large advertisement for Southern Beauty Culture School.[94] This ad served as a notice of relocation, a declaration of its commitment to "colored young women" and a heralding of their national reputation and impact as evident through their alumni. Located near the U Street Corridor neighborhood, the Southern Beauty Culture School sought to educate African American women in Washington in a range of black beauty practices and to prepare these women for opening their own salons, developing new products, and

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[93] Rooks 47.

[94] "Southern Beauty Culture School," *The Washington Bee*, June 4th, 1910.

inventing new techniques for styling and attending to African American women's hair. The only emboldened portions of the advertisement are the name of the school and of the president, Mrs. Lucie R. Pollard. The significance of a black woman being president of such a business was not lost on African American women in Washington. Mrs. Pollard and others who founded and presided over black beauty businesses in D.C. were lauded by many New Negro women as symbols of progress and the promise of greater possibility for African American women in cities. Mrs. Pollard's advertisement does not discuss hair straightening or skin lightening, but it implicitly addressed the connection between her business and a New Negro agenda, with its offer to train black women to participate in the modern world as businesswomen and consumers of beauty. Her school represented yet another vision of New Negro womanhood and the means by which it could be attained. After black women began marketing their services, products, and businesses, discussions about black beauty culture shifted to encapsulate new trends in black beauty culture advertising.

Figure 11: Southern Beauty Culture School Advertisement (1910)

Beauty culture provoked contentious discussions throughout the 1920s. Prominent African American intellectuals, activists, artists, and writers such as W.E.B Du Bois, Alain Locke, Mary Church Terrell, Zora Neal Hurston, and Marcus Garvey debated the meaning of hair straightening and skin lightening and what role these practices played. Well-known figures in the national African American community and in local black communities recognized the importance of the politics of appearance in the political and social struggles of the decade, which included: Pan-Africanism, Garveyism, Intergrationism, Black Separatism, and Black Cultural Nationalism. Several of these New Negro movements decried the use of hair straighteners and skin lighteners as self-hatred and under-developed racial consciousness.

In the face of political and social movements that framed hair straightening and skin lightening as attempts at white emulation, Black women throughout the U.S. continued to straighten their hair in an effort to articulate a modern sense of self as consumers, not simply as emulators or perpetuators of a white, feminine ideal. Some women used hair straightening processes to achieve styles honed within black women communities.[95] The straightening of hair often led to the temporary lengthening of the hair. This lengthening allowed black women to delve into an array of styles that became popularized through the circulation of images in the black press. Arguably, the most photographed black women in African American periodicals during the early twentieth century had neatly coiffed "up-dos." Whether tightly pulled back into a bun or loosely

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[95] Rooks argues a similar point in *Hair Matters* by suggesting we examine black women's hair styles to understand the aesthetic choices of black women with regards to familiar practices such as hair straightening. Rooks provides a point of departure for exploring the new meanings black women attached to hair straightening outside of white emulation and aspirations for social and economic mobility. Similar to how people contemporarily consume images of "celebrities" and well-known figures, black women in Washington often modeled their hair styles after prominent African American women.

swept up into a multi-textured pin-up, black women photographed in the black press had

hair styles that drew attention to the women's faces. Black women engaged in a variety

of up-dos that were made attainable by lengthening the hair using straightening

processes. Many of these up-dos were specific to black beauty culture and did not

parallel styling choices in dominant beauty culture. For black women in D.C. seeking to

style themselves according to the latest trends, hair straightening was one of several

options available to achieve styles popularized through local and national black media

outlets.

In Washington, well-known and oft photographed women such as Mary Church

Terrell and Fannie Barrier Williams provided templates for ideal black beauty. Images of

these women circulated in papers such as the *Bee* and *The Colored American* throughout

much of the early twentieth century. Williams and Terrell were situated as "political

celebrities" in black communities throughout the U.S., particularly among African

American women. Many black women aspired to imitate and riff upon the hairstyles of

these prominent figures identified as New Negro women. Washington's black female

population was intimately familiar with Terrell and Williams because of their respective

connections to D.C. and Washington-specific political, social, and economic movements.

Even prominent Washington women such as Nannie Helen Burroughs were

photographed with hairstyles that for many black women could not be achieved without

temporarily lengthening the hair. Images of Burroughs and other well-known black

women associated with her Washington school display the pervasiveness of "up-dos"

among black women during this era as well. Despite her adamant stance against black

women's investment in hair straightening practices, photographs of Burroughs in black

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newspapers in Washington offered black women a hairstyle that for some would require straightening the hair. Although not necessarily contradicting her position on hair straightening, it is worth noting that Burroughs and her NTS associates chose hairstyles that resonated with African American hair styling trends that often relied upon hair straightening to successfully achieve.

Figure 12: Mary Church Terrell (1909)

Figure 13: Fannie Barrier Williams (1909)

MISS NANNIE H. BURROUGHS.
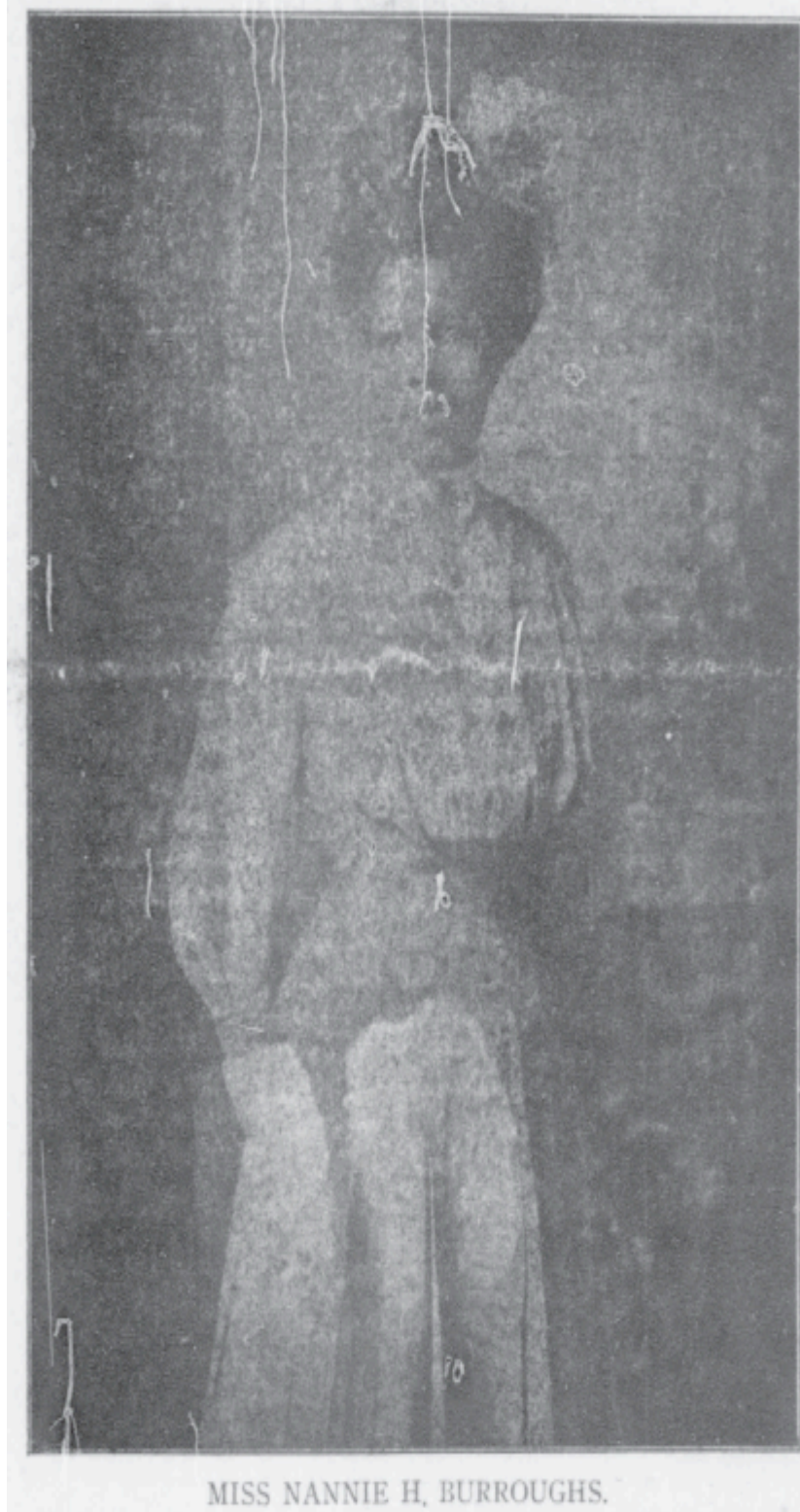
Figure 14: Nannie Helen Burroughs (1909)

Figure 15: M.M. Kimball (1909)

Figure 16: E.E. Whitfield (1909)

Despite arguments about being modern consumers and the reality that hair

straightening provided some black women with racially-specific styling options, the

movement against hair straightening gained considerable traction in numerous black

urban communities. Many New Negro leaders supported the anti-hair wrapping

movement and other efforts to discourage both hair straightening and skin lightening.

Advertisements for skin lightening products and processes continued to flourish

throughout the New Negro era, and yet, a rapidly growing number of African Americans

opposed skin lightening and the usage of these products declined throughout the early to

mid twentieth century.[96] Although the anti-wrapping sentiment became more prominent

during the 1920s, it was black women in cities such as Washington who pioneered

divergent discourses that focused on black women's beauty that both engaged and

rejected hair straightening techniques and practices. The health and styling of African

American women's hair became primary foci in localized black beauty industries during

the New Negro era.

Conclusion

The New Negro experience in Washington black beauty culture was not

monolithic. African American women embraced a wide array of perspectives on the

appropriate means and ends for presenting and representing themselves. Examining the

black beauty industry in Washington during the late nineteenth and early twentieth

century reveals ideas about racial pride, racial separatism, assimilation, integration, and

intra-racial gender, class, and color politics that propelled the New Negro movement.

The bodies and representations of the bodies of black women in Washington and other

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[96] Contemporarily, skin lightening products and processes targeted at people of color comprise a multibillion dollar industry. Though not as popular among blacks in United States as they were during the early twentieth century, African Americans are among the consumers who continue to support this industry. People in India, countries in West Africa such as Ghana, and Brazil are among the primary consumers of skin lightening products in the twenty-first century.

urban centers were a terrain in which the socio-cultural dynamics and competing notions of a New Negro ethos were magnified. What makes the black beauty culture during this era particularly significant, however, was its far-reaching implications and effects for black women's culture, and more broadly, American culture.

Through beauty culture, African American women both upended and accepted white constructions of feminine beauty, created a multimillion dollar industry in which women were the majority of proprietors and consumers, and situated themselves at the center of a public discourse of political, economic, social, and cultural significance. Many communities of women, including African American women embraced beauty culture as means to political, social, economic, and cultural freedom. Additionally, beauty culture provided a space in which black women could connect with other black women through the experience of "fashioning self." Many black women in Washington entered into the beauty industry with the hope of transforming themselves and the collective image of African Americans. Imagining new ways of living in the urban, modern world, New Negro Washington women refused to let their bodies and images of their bodies be controlled by a white cultural imaginary, intra-racial gender and class politics, and an increasingly service-based urban economy that ignored the predilections of African American women.

Black women manufacturers, intellectuals, sellers, advertisers, and consumers configured an arena for self-determination. Although myths, stereotypes, and derogatory images of black women continued to circulate during the early twentieth century, New Negro women found ways to challenge beliefs and products that degraded black womanhood. Politics of respectability, Black Victorian femininity, "New Woman"

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ideology, race enterprise, popular culture and ideas about individual and collective subjectivity and autonomy intersected in New Negro women's beauty culture. In Washington, like other major cities with substantial African American populations, black beauty culture functioned as one of the few domains in which contestation and transformation prospered. Some African American women in Washington used the hairstyles of well-recognized black women as inspiration for their styling preferences. Increasingly, black beauty culture discourse became less overtly reliant upon the preferences and ideals articulated by dominant beauty culture. New Negro women could not fully usurp dominant culture's images of black women, but created alternative aesthetic discourses for New Negro women to partake in that reflected racially and culturally specific penchants and ideals.

Black women also used black beauty culture to configure a politics of appearance that played an integral role in their political identities. Fashioning oneself as modern gave black women a new way to make claims about their rights within the context of a modern world. Their hair styles, fashion, and other aesthetic choices became indicative of their status as modern agitators. The styles and fashions of past decades were critiqued in the black press as anti-modern. Consequently, black women political activists used their appearance to articulate a political identity that resonated with a New Negro women's political agenda. In the next chapter, I consider how black women engaged politics of appearance in New Negro suffragists political culture through examining the history of African American women's suffrage activism in Washington and the strategic usage of "ladyhood" by black suffragists. Black beauty culture was essential to New

Negro women embodying "ladyhood" and to demanding the support of black men in their efforts for universal suffrage.

Chapter Three

Performing and Politicizing "Ladyhood": Black Washington Women and New Negro Suffrage Activism

> There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights,
> but not a word about the colored women; and if colored men
> get their rights, and not colored women get theirs, there will be
> a bad times about it. So I am keeping the thing going while
> things are stirring; because if we wait til it is still, it
> will take a great while to get it going again.[97]

Women's rights activist and racial equality advocate Sojourner Truth made this

affirmation of her commitment to suffrage for black women in 1870. Her words also

addressed many of the core issues on black women suffragists' agendas during the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period, African American women

activists viewed the vote as integral to their political goals. The "stir" to which Truth

referred was that of the contentious debate during the Reconstruction period about the

Fifteenth Amendment. This amendment enfranchised African American men, but did not

extend suffrage to women of any race. Alliances between black and white suffragists

changed substantially at this moment. Schisms along racial and gender lines created a

context in which a new, but continually evolving black women's political culture

emerged.[98]

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[97] Sojourner Truth, 1870.

[98] Several historians offer definitions of "women's political culture." My definition combines elements of these definitions, while emphasizing the importance of aesthetics and performance to black women's political activity. Historians such as Ruth Bogin, Kathryn K. Sklar, Jean Fagan Yellin, and Paula Baker

Many white women expressed explicitly racist sentiments about black men being enfranchised before white women. White leaders in the abolitionist-feminist movement such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony left the American Equal Rights Association in response to the association's endorsement of a suffrage amendment that enfranchised only black men.[99] Some black male suffragists used sexist language to defend universal male suffrage as opposed to the more expansive notion of universal suffrage they advocated before Emancipation. The racist and sexist rhetoric of opposing factions situated black women in a complicated space, torn between elimination of racial restrictions on the vote and the affirmation of all women's exclusion from it.

Even outspoken political activists such as Truth found it difficult navigate this polarized, political terrain. As the contours of the new political landscape became more visible, Truth and several women from the abolitionist-feminist community attempted to sketch out a productive space within a contentious and increasingly volatile political climate.[100] Black women suffragists such as Frances Watkins Harper advocated

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define women's political culture as women's "organized political activity" and as Carol Faulkner in *Women's Radical Reconstruction: The Freedmen's Aid Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) argues, the values associated with women's participation in the public domain as well as their actual behavior. See Bogin and Yellin, "Introduction," and Sklar, " 'Women Who Speak for an Entire Nation',: American and British women at the World Anti-Slavery Convention, 1840," in Yellin and Van Horne, *Abolitionist Sisterhood* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) and Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," in Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz, eds., *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[99] The American Equal Rights Association was founded in 1866 by abolitionists-feminists. The association simultaneously fought for rights for both women and African Americans. Prior to schism that occurred as a result of the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, the AERA served as a viable, political vehicle for interracial cooperation and for addressing both racial and gender inequities.

[100] For a discussion of Truth's political shift toward "neutrality" in the aftermath of the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, see Nell Irvin Painter's, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996). Carol Faulkner, *Women's Radical Reconstruction* and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920* discuss the transforming of the political climate

acceptance of black men's enfranchisement. As Darlene Clark Hine explains, many

African American women "were outraged that women- of any race- should 'stand in the

way' of obtaining the vote for black men."[101] This perspective cannot be reduced to the

simplistic argument that race trumped gender for black women political activists; it also

indicates a strategic intra-racial alliance based on the belief that black men could better

represent black women's political interests than white women. In most cases, these

women also continued fighting for universal suffrage and for black women's political

power in a more general sense.[102] Several African American women suffragists made

difficult choices during this period that imparted lasting effects on their roles and voices

within the national suffrage movement.[103]

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for abolitionist-feminists as well as how black women in particular navigated an increasingly divided suffrage activist community during and Post-Reconstruction.

[101] Darlene C. Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 157.

[102] Within the post-Reconstruction political climate, black women suffragists had to rethink how to approach the struggle for universal suffrage. An additional challenge surfaced on African American women's suffragists' agendas as Jim Crow laws and other state-authored policies and regulations re-disenfranchised black men across the nation in the late nineteenth century. With both black men and black women disenfranchised once again, black women re-casted their efforts for achieving racial and gender equality within the public, political sphere. See Kate Masur, "Reconstructing the Nation's Capital: The Politics of Race and Citizenship in the District of Columbia, 1862-1878," dissertation, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2001); Nancy Bercaw, *Race, Rights, and the Politics of Household in the Delta, 1861-1875* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), thoroughly discuss tensions of race and gender during the Reconstruction era and how black women navigated a rapidly changing political climate. These tensions also inscribed the political activities and political voices of black women in both the upper and Deep South.

[103] Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920*; Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848-1869* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); Louise M. Newman, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*; Glenda E. Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina*; James E. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964); Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The*

In this chapter, I examine how New Negro women in Washington advocated the

full enfranchisement of black women. The nation's capital played a particularly integral

role in the national movement, while also serving as battleground for localized efforts for

enfranchisement. Thousands of black women in Washington participated in suffrage

organizations and clubs and protest activities. The road to passing a constitutional

amendment that, secured right to vote literally and figuratively ended in Washington. I

build upon Kate Masur's arguments about race, gender, and citizenship in the nation's

capital during Reconstruction. Masur maintains that black women valued the vote as a

vehicle through which they could claim a space within public debates on their own terms,

in contrast to other scholars, notably Elsa Barkley Brown, who emphasize that many

freedwomen tended to view the enfranchisement of black men as a means of achieving

communal goals.[104] I consider how black Washington women during the New Negro era

viewed their enfranchisement as essential to their participation in the modern world.

Combating racist "New Women" and sexist "New Negro" men, New Negro women

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Political Culture of Reconstruction (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994*; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present.*

[104] In Elsa Barkley Brown's, "To Catch the Vision of Freedom: Reconstructing Southern Black Women's Political History, 1865-1880," in African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965, Brown posits that the concept of family and community bound African Americans together in the post-slavery world, and not the pursuit of full personhood or citizenship as defined by the Constitution. The notion of "shared responsibility" for communities and families extended to how these women viewed the enfranchisement of black men. Enfranchising black men enfranchised the families and communities from which these black men came. Furthermore, the notion of freedom that thrived among these particular communities of African American women was that of a "collective freedom." Brown argues that, "Their sense of community, related to the collective character of their notion of freedom, had foundation in their understanding that freedom is a reality, would accrue to each of them individually only when it was acquired by all of them collectively. It was this very sense of community rather than citizenship, of peoplehood rather than personhood, that was the basis for their activities." (86-7).

created political agendas and developed performative strategies to address their status as second-class citizens.

Existing scholarship on black women's participation in the women's suffrage movement emphasizes the complexity of the relationships between black women suffragists and white women suffragists.[105] Much of the scholarship also addresses the issue of suffrage from an intra-racial perspective and details how black male political activists supported or fought against women's suffrage. Scholarship of black women's post-Reconstruction activism also details black women's engagement with the politics of respectability. Black women in Washington strategically invested in these politics for a New Negro womanhood vision of that demanded respect for black women as political actors and full citizens.[106] Similar to Lucy Diggs Slowe's belief that black women should be intellectually and culturally prepared for the "modern world," New Negro suffragists explicitly connected their political activism to being in the "modern world."

Several factors influenced the development of a new black women's political culture: the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, which affected interracial and intra-racial cooperation in the suffrage movement, the disenfranchisement of black men through state-authored legislation, the formation and re-energizing of local black women's organizations, and the configuration of political agendas that encompassed aestheticized

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[105] Ann G. Gordon, Bettye Collier Thomas, John H. Bracey, Arlene V. Avakian, and Joyce A. Berkman, eds., *African American Women and the Vote 1837-1965* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Terborg-Penn's *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920*; Gerda Lerner *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997); Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994*; Marjorie S. Wheeler. *One Woman, One Vote: Rediscovering the Women's Suffrage Movement* (Troutdale, OR: NewSage Press, 1995); Lisa G. Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race: Black Women and Electoral Politics in Illinois, 1877-1932*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

[106] See Footnote 11 in my Introduction for a discussion of scholarship on black respectability politics.

approaches to African American women's suffrage activism. The combination of these

factors sparked a new wave of suffrage activism among African American women.[107]

The interplay between black women's political aspirations and New Negro womanhood

aesthetic discourses was foundational to New Negro women's political activism.

African American Suffrage and Suffrage Activism in the United States

As early as 1670, the North American colonies denied free black men of the right to

vote.[108] Enslaved blacks could not vote in any colony or state. Formal legal restrictions,

however, do not tell the whole story. But free black men voted in nearly every colony

and state during the mid-to late eighteenth century.[109] After the American Revolution,

state constitutions in Delaware, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania,

Massachusetts, and Maryland protected the voting rights of black men.[110] In some cities,

such as Baltimore, black voting in some elections outnumbered white voting.[111]

Philadelphia attorney and legal historian, John Hancock, acknowledged that both black

and white male voters in numerous states ratified the proposed American Constitution.

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[107] *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965* loosely periodizes African American women's suffrage activism. Two of the periods framed by the editors of this collection and in the extant scholarship on black women's suffrage activism are 1870-1896 and 1896-1935. These years are central to my temporal conceptualization of the New Negro era.

[108] Free black men, even as property owners could not exercise the right to vote. In the existing U.S. colonies, property was the preeminent qualification for suffrage. Because a small, but gradually growing population of free blacks emerged, colony governments developed laws that overtly denied black men the vote, irrespective of their status as property owners.

[109] *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393, 573 (1856) Curtis, Justice Benjamin R. (dissenting)

[110] Prior to the formation of the United States as a nation, the vote was not connected to citizenship or subjects; therefore, it was not expected that all subjects would vote. Furthermore, it was not expected, in the newly formed republic that all citizens would vote.

[111] John Hancock, *Essays on the Elective Franchise; or, Who Has the Right to Vote?* (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Son, 1865), 23.

The number of eligible black voters, increased when states such as Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Vermont abolished slavery in the post-Revolutionary War era.[112] Free blacks in these early states also had the right to hold office.[113]

By 1820, the period of post-Revolutionary abolition ended and even those areas that abolished slavery began to restrict the rights of free blacks. White women and property-less white men were denied many legal rights, including the right to vote. Whiteness, however, guaranteed greater legal protections. Although abolition became the leading political cause among free blacks during first half of the nineteenth century, many African American political activists embraced a broader political agenda that included universal suffrage. The political agendas of free blacks of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries conveyed both the immorality of slavery and political aspirations for equality.[114]

Historian Leon Litwack explains that demands for suffrage were often encompassed in the rhetoric of black abolitionists and that suffrage was thought of broadly and not in gender-specific ways.[115] In the city of Washington and the Territory

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[112] Great Britain prohibited the abolition of slavery in the colonies before the American Revolution. After the colonies emerged victorious in this war, several of the newly independent states in the North ended slavery.

[113]Pennsylvania Constitution, 1776; Massachusetts Constitution, 1780; "Declaration of Rights," New Hampshire Constitution, 1784.

[114] Not all black abolitionists affirmed the importance of suffrage for African Americans. Black separatists, who did not desire inclusion in the nation, viewed suffrage within the United States as irrelevant. Instead, they advocated the necessity of a separate nation that would secure equality and sovereignty for African Americans. Consequently, a single political agenda did not exist among blacks. This diversity of viewpoints debunks any perceived notion of a monolithic black experience or a singular black political consciousness that propelled African American activism during the early-to-mid nineteenth centuries.

[115] Leon E. Litwack, "The Emancipation of the Negro Abolitionist," in African-American Activism Before the Civil War, ed. Patrick Rael (New York: Routledge, 2008).

of Columbia, many free blacks participated in local and national efforts for abolition and universal suffrage.[116] This small, but powerful community employed gender-neutral suffrage rhetoric in their struggles for political equality in the early nineteenth century. Free blacks in Washington and the Territory of Columbia fighting for equal suffrage during this era produced a political landscape in which racial equality was defined more broadly.[117]

The fight for universal suffrage among African Americans in Washington during this period was largely led by religious institutions. As some of the few black institutions extant, early black churches became central to African American political activism in Washington. The Mount Zion United Methodist Church and the African Church were cornerstones in this political effort.[118] Congregants adamantly opposed slavery and advocated for universal suffrage and other rights from the pulpit and the pews.[119] Women were among the leaders in these fledgling congregations. As early as 1814, the leadership and congregants of the Mount Zion Methodist Church aligned themselves with progressive political agendas and attempted to address the religious, educational, and social needs of Washington's enslaved and free black communities.

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[116] Washington was founded on July 16, 1790. The City of Washington originally functioned as a separate municipality within the Territory of Columbia. In 1871, Congress merged Washington and the Territory of Columbia into a single entity known as Washington, D.C.

[117] The 1800 Census reports that the total population of Georgetown at 5,120. This included 1,449 black slaves and 227 free blacks. The population of enslaved blacks increased until the abolition of slavery in Washington and Georgetown in 1862. The free black population grew more gradually, but encountered a notable surge immediately following the Civil War.

[118] Daniel A. Payne, *A History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Pres, 2001).

[119] Letitia W. Brown's *Free Negroes in the District of Columbia, 1790-1846* briefly discusses the role of black churches in Washington in struggles for equality. These churches represented economic and cultural strongholds for blacks in late-eighteenth century and early nineteenth century Washington residents.

The first Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women took place on May 9, 1837. This interracial gathering of women developed a far-reaching, progressive agenda: redefining women's roles both inside and outside of the domestic sphere, to abolishing slavery, and to ending racial discrimination in non-slave holding states. The resolution they drafted stated,

> That this convention do firmly believe that the existence
> of an unnatural prejudice against our colored population,
> is one of the chief pillars of American slavery- therefore,
> that the more we mingle with our oppressed brethren and
> sisters, the more are we convinced of the sinfulness of that
> anti-Christian prejudice which is crushing them to the earth
> in our nominally Free States.[120]

The women at this convention denounced both slavery and racial inequality in non-slaveholding states. This denouncement was similar to that made by congregants and leaders of Mount Zion Methodist Church in Washington. While local institutions such as Mount Zion provided the foundation for local, universal suffrage activism, this convention initiated a national, interracial suffrage movement.

The abolition of slavery and the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment marked a turning point in suffrage activism. In many states, particularly those in the South, black women did not or could not participate in formalized political organizations or activities. Their status as both blacks and women limited their access to the public sphere. After Reconstruction, African American women activists had to contend with restrictions on women's presence in public arenas, restrictions that dealt with African American women even more harshly than white women. But the legacy of outspoken women who dared to

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[120] Dorothy Sterling, ed., *Turning the World Upside Down: The Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, Held in New York City, May 9-12, 1837* (New York: Coalition of Publishers for Employment, 1987), 12.

challenge racism and sexism provided inspiration for African American women suffragists.[121] Black women built upon this tradition of using the public arena and established networks and organizations to advance their own goals and their sense of themselves as free women of color. The multidimensional terrain of African American women's political activism during this period was particularly visible in Washington. In this increasingly urban setting, African American women debated the parameters and meaning of citizenship, freedom, and equality for African Americans. Black suffragists—both men and women—from Washington joined organizations and attended meetings and conventions that sought to re-enfranchise black men and to enfranchise women. Some black women in Washington supported the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment and heralded its passage as a sign of progress toward greater racial equality. The "victory" of black male suffrage, however, was short-lived in Washington.

During the 1870s, as Kate Masur's work shows, Washington underwent significant political changes that altered how and who controlled the nation's capital.[122] In 1871, Washington became governed by a Governor and Council appointed by the

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[121] Among the most notable of these Antebellum era women was Maria Stewart. Stewart used the public arena, a historically gender-specific space to attack slavery and racial and gender inequality. Willi Coleman identifies Stewart as the first American born woman to lecture publicly on political issues. Commencing in 1831, Stewart gave numerous speeches and lectures. Arguably as a result of scathing attacks from both men and women because of her usage of the public sphere, Stewart withdrew from the public arena. In her final public speech, she espoused ideals associated with "respectable" womanhood. Steeped in rhetoric of feminine propriety and submissiveness, Stewart "abandoned" her radical vision of racial and gender equality in an effort to reclaim her status as a "true woman." Despite her brief tenure as a radical activist, she pioneered a politicized, rhetorical style that influenced well-known African Americans orators such as Sojourner Truth, Frances Harper, Henry Highland Garnet, and Frederick Douglass. Her legacy as an activist committed to eradicating both racial and gender oppression was instrumental to African American women activists who advocated for both racial and gender equality.

[122] Kate Masur, "Reconstructiong the Nation's Capital: The Politics of Race and Citizenship in the District of Columbia, 1862-1878."

president and a popularly elected House of Delegates.[123] Within this new territorial

government, African Americans held fewer seats in the elected, legislative body. In the

first incarnation of this new governing structure, President Ulysses S. Grant appointed

three black men to the Council. By 1873 however, financial mismanagement, deepening

economic depression, and political corruption led Congress to reorganize Washington's

government. Whites from both the Democratic and Republican parties sought to explain

economic and political hardships in Washington and, identified black suffrage and

appointed black Council members as the problem. In 1874, Congress disenfranchised all

Washingtonians. While whites lost control of the local government, the

disenfranchisement of black Washingtonians had more far-reaching consequences.[124]

From both local and national perspectives, the political terrain upon which black

women were acting required new alliances and strategies to address their dis-

enfranchisement.   Early twentieth century black women confronted multiple forms of

oppression.[125] In Washington, however, the context for suffrage activism greatly differed

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[123] Allan Johnston, *Surviving Freedom: The Black Community in Washington, D.C., 1860-1880* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1993), 216.

[124] Kate Masur makes a similar argument in her dissertation, "Reconstructiong the Nation's Capital: The Politics of Race and Citizenship in the District of Columbia, 1862-1878."

[125] In Kate Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides: Black Nationalism, Feminism and Integration in the United States, 1896-1935* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), Dosset illuminates the multiple jeopardy that early twentieth century black women confronted.   Dossett's framing black women's activism and experiences builds upon the Deborah King's essay, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of Black Feminist Ideology," *Signs*, 14, 2 (Autumn, 1988): 42-72. The black feminist foundation for using "jeopardy" as a way to theorize about black women's lived experiences and political activism is Frances Beale's essay "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," in Toni Cade Bambara's, ed. *The Black Woman Anthology* (New York: New American Library, 1970). Prior to the circulation of "Double Jeopardy," black women activists articulated how black women confronted multiple forms of oppression; nevertheless, the usage of "jeopardy" as a black feminist theoretical framework derives from Beal's groundbreaking essay.

from suffrage activism in other cities and states. African American women suffragists in

Washington had to combat the disenfranchisement of all Washingtonians, efforts to

circumvent the Fifteenth Amendment by local and state governments outside of

Washington, and staunch opposition to women's suffrage. Black women suffragists in

Washington vehemently fought for enfranchising D.C. residents, in addition to fighting

for women's suffrage and protecting black male suffrage. Black women in Washington

had the additional obstacle of local disenfranchisement. Consequently, black women's

suffrage activism in Washington paralleled and diverged from the national African

American and women's suffrage movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries. All Washingtonians, regardless of race or gender were disenfranchised and

that changed the political calculus. Local efforts for enfranchisement extended beyond

any particular group; African American women political activists concerned themselves

with the struggle for suffrage for Washingtonians at the local level and for African

Americans at the national level.

The influx of thousands of blacks to Washington during the Civil War and

Reconstruction also altered the political terrain for African Americans in the nation's

capital, particularly for black women.[126] Greater access to educational institutions was

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[126]Allan Johnston's *Surviving Freedom: The Black Community in Washington, D.C., 1860-1880* explores
the effects of Civil War and Reconstruction era black migrations to Washington. Johnston, however, does
not focus on the gender-specific ramifications of African American migrations to Washington during this
era. Though acknowledging differences between the access black men and women had to property, his
portrait of Washington primarily illuminates that struggles of black men, which becomes conflated with the
struggles of black Washingtonians. He emphasizes the social and economic impact of black migrants to
D.C. during the Civil War and the immediate postwar years. Johnston concludes that, "the overall impact of
the wartime migration on the black community of Washington was negative." (174) Using social statistics
such as occupations and housing, he illuminates the failures of efforts to improve the social and economic
conditions of African Americans. He does not, however, account for the organizational growth and
development that occurs within black communities in Washington that re-energizes a culture of political
activism.

one of the most significant changes for blacks. The establishment of schools increased

the number of literate, black Washingtonians, which fueled the circulation of black

newspapers, political propaganda, and other activist ephemera. The circulation of such

material also connected local struggles to an imagined, national racial community striving

for greater equality. This connection informed black Washington women's activism in

national suffrage movements. African American suffragists in Washington mobilized

around a political goal that would not provide them with the right to vote because

universal suffrage would not secure the right to vote for residents of the nation's capital.

The vote was subordinated within a broader vision of full inclusion within the body

politic. Black women in Washington based their activism in their unique circumstance of

disenfranchisement.

New Negro Women's Suffrage Activism: Washington and Beyond

African American women, in particular, capitalized on emerging Progressive era ideals

and the invention of new strategies for racial progress within African American

communities. They founded organizations that attended to basic needs of African

Americans as well as social issues such as temperance, the maintenance of the black

family, and black female respectability.[127] The majority of black newspapers focused on

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[127] See Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, *History of the Club Movement Among Colored Women of the United States of America: Historical Records of Conventions of 1895-1896 of the Colored Women of America*, Wanda A. Hendricks, *Gender, Race, and Politics in the Midwest: Black Club Women in Illinois* (1998), Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994*, Darlene C. Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History*, Evelyn B. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church*, Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, Anne Knupfer, *The Chicago Black Renaissance and Women's Activism*, Michelle Rief, "Thinking Locally, Acting Globally: The International Agenda of African American Clubwomen," Gerda Lerner, "Early Community Work of Black Club Women," Anne F. Scott, "Most Invisible of All: Black

activism around issues such as lynching, economic disparities, and African American suffrage that were led by black men and supported by black women.[128] Black women used their gender-specific organizations to promote African American political struggles for racial equality, to articulate new ideas about the future of African American women's political identities, and to situate advocacy for gender equality within a still-forming and multifaceted political consciousness.

African American women configured an intra-racial, gender-specific political culture that strategically employed an array tactics that included but was not limited to the politics of respectability, self-determination, and racial uplift. Cynthia Neverdon-Morton argues that "even though black women living in different communities realized that there were some needs unique to their areas, they also understood that certain needs were common to all communities where African Americans lived."[129] The connection between the local, national, and in some activist circles, international political struggles of peoples of African descent informed African American women's political culture.

Women's Voluntary Associations," and Lynda F. Dickson, "Toward a Broader Angle of Vision in Uncovering Women's History: Black Women's Clubs Revisited."

[128] This framing of African American political activism does not exclude black women from being identified as leaders in African American struggles for racial equality. One of the most well-known, African American anti-lynching activists was Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Wells-Barnett garnered international notoriety for involvement with and leadership in this anti-racial violence movement. Her political activism in many arenas, which included co-founding the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), however was often overshadowed by that of her male activist counterparts. Exceptional in many ways because of her ability to move within public, political arenas, numerous black women took leadership roles in political movements like Wells-Barnett. The widespread, intra-racial expectation for black women's involvement in social and political movements for racial equality, nevertheless, was not leadership. Mary Church Terrell is another notable exception with regards to her notoriety for her political activism.

[129] Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, "Advancement of the Race through African American Women's Organizations in the South, 1895-1925," in *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965*, 121.

Nearly all black women believed that they should have the right to vote.[130] Black women political leaders rallied around this widely held sentiment. In Washington, African American women participated in suffrage organizations and in discourse regarding the significance of enfranchising both black men and women despite their local predicament which deprived them of suffrage for distinct reasons. The specific needs of African Americans in Washington did not preclude black women from actively engaging in a political movement that would not improve their unique status as a triply disenfranchised community. Black women in Washington fought for suffrage on three fronts: as blacks, as women, and as Washingtonians.

The triple burden placed on black suffragists of Washington did not deter them from contributing to and leading a new wave of African American women's political activism. By 1900, Washington was a hotbed for suffrage activism. In the nation's capital, African American women joined numerous organizations that supported racial uplift as well as the explicit political needs of black women. Suffrage was among the top priorities for newly formed local and national black political organizations. Black women in Washington re-fashioned their strategies of suffrage activism by aligning their personal and public appearances with the politics of respectability.

African American women seeking to involve themselves in the national women's suffrage movement primarily joined two organizations, the National Woman Suffrage Association and the American Woman Suffrage Association. Major differences between

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[130] In Paula Giddings *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, Giddings explicitly states that "one would be hard pressed to find any Black woman who did not advocate getting the vote." (120) Although not all black women were suffragists, Giddings argues that most black women believed that they should have the right to vote.

these two organizations dated back to the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. The National Woman Suffrage Association fought for both women and black men to be enfranchised. Those who joined the American Woman Suffrage Association had temporarily halted their activism for women's suffrage and focused on black men's suffrage during Reconstruction. After the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, illusions of unity and solidarity among suffragists dissipated. The reality of racism, sexism, and fragile interracial and inter-gender coalitions continued to influence the dynamics, strategies, and inner-workings of local and national suffrage organizations.

All roads to a constitutional amendment for women's or universal suffrage led to Washington. Cognizant of this, black women suffragists in Washington perceived their role in the voting rights movement as particularly significant. African American women in the District made the most of residing in one of the most cosmopolitan southern cities. They lived in a city with a more progressive politics regarding race and gender than other cities and towns to the south. Washington also had an established black community that provided financial resources and extensive networks for black women to build on as they forged new paths in African American political activism. The localized efforts of black Washington women worked in conjunction with national organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women, the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, and the national suffrage organizations. Additionally, prominent educational institutions in Washington such as M Street High School and Howard University produced an educated, politically savvy community of black women who recognized the importance of the politics of appearance for political efficacy. Although not limited to this elite group of women, black women's suffrage activists in Washington invested in "political

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celebrities." How these women were styled in the images of them that circulated in black periodicals affected how receptive African Americans were to their political messages. For black women political activists, their appearances often determined their political cache and effectiveness.

Washington was the site of the most significant women's and African American suffrage meetings, conventions, and protests in the 1890s and the first few decades of the twentieth century. Consequently, black Washington women became central figures within the suffrage movement. Skepticism, optimism, and disillusionment informed black women's political behavior as they entered into the public arena through both traditional and nontraditional political activities. Hope for fuller citizenship co-existed with ambivalence about participating in a women's movement that historically and continuously relegated black women to the margins.[131]

Black women's refusal to remain on the political periphery was particularly evident in Washington. Their political activism took center stage in African American political discourse in the local black press. Both the *Colored American* and the *Washington Bee* supported universal suffrage.[132] These newspapers participated in the elevation of black women activists in Washington to "political celebrities." On February 17[t], 1900, *The Colored American* ran a front-page story titled "Woman's Case in Equity." In the article, which was paired with a line drawing of Mary Church Terrell, the editorial staff proclaims that,

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[131] In Dossett's *Bridging Race Divides*, she explores black women's ambivalence toward the suffrage. This ambivalence, however, was one of many competing sentiments that flourished among black women.

[132] Some opinion pieces appearing in these publications did not support women's suffrage. The editorial staff of the *Bee* and the *Colored American*, however, primarily published articles that advocated for universal suffrage, particularly as it pertained to African Americans.

> Woman suffrage, once a subject for ridicule, has ceased to
> be a joke. It is one of the grave problems of the hour. The
> wonderful advancement of the feminine sex in business, in
> the professions, in the industries, and in the world of finance,
> is giving her an importance in the affairs of life which the
> sensible man must recognize, and subscribe to a change of
> laws and customs to accord with the higher conditions that
> have come about in consequence of woman's broadening
> influence.[133]

Noting the progress women had made in inserting themselves into spheres from which they were historically excluded, the *Colored American* called upon "sensible" men to respond to the increased presence and political necessity of women in the public sphere. Furthermore, the article detailed how black women were transforming political, cultural, and economic spheres. The article's primary focus was speech Terrell delivered at a meeting of National American Woman Suffrage Association.[134] The sub-heading of the article, "Gracefully and Forcefully Presented by Mary Church Terrell Before the Brainiest of Equal Suffragists in America- The Premier Representative of our Womanhood Makes the Hit of the Convention," conveyed a profound sense of pride in Terrell, specifically in her ability to engage with a group of women identified as among the "brainiest" in America. By 1900, Terrell was a political activist of national repute. Widely recognized by both blacks and whites as a spokeswoman for African American and women's rights, black Washington suffragists interacted and exchanged ideas with Terrell on a regular basis. Terrell was uniquely positioned and privileged to articulate a

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[133] *The Washington Bee*, Saturday, February 17, 1900.

[134] This was not Terrell's first time addressing the NAWSA. Invited by suffragist and NAWSA leader Susan B. Anthony, Terrell delivered "The Progress and Problems of Colored Women," to NAWSA in 1898. What distinguishes the speeches Terrell delivered was her emphasis on black women's experiences in the earlier speech. "The Progress and Problems of Colored Women" specifically tackled the racial and gender oppression black women confronted.

black women's political agenda that was informed significantly by African American's women's political discourse and activism in the nation's capital.

Terrell delivered "The Justice of Woman Suffrage," a keynote address for the February 1900 meeting of the NAWSA. The *Colored American* described her speech as "a masterpiece of argument, scholarly and logically put and was delivered with that ease and grace of bearing, that ineffable charm and magnetism of manner and dignity and force that are characteristic of all Mrs. Terrell does or says."[135] The glowing review Terrell received from the *Colored American* mirrored the respect and admiration black women Washingtonians held for the founder and president of the NACW. Before presenting Terrell's own words to black Washington, the newspaper's editorial staff concluded that "by Mrs. Terrell's appearance at this convention both the cause of women in general and the Negro in particular has been incalculably benefited."[136] Unlike her prior speech to the NAWSA in 1898, in which she addressed the plight of black women, "The Justice of Woman Suffrage," positioned Terrell as a women's activist who spoke for all women, equally and publicly affirming the importance of gender as well as racial equality.

"The Justice of Woman Suffrage" is a foundational speech for New Negro women involved in the struggle for voting rights. Excerpts from her speech accompanied the *Colored American* story about Terrell and circulated among black suffragists in Washington. Terrell's words resonated with black women in Washington who were conversing with Terrell and developing and re-fashioning their political rhetoric to more

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[135] Ibid.

[136] Ibid.

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accurately articulate the necessity of suffrage for black women locally, nationally, and

internationally. In her speech, Terrell explained that,

> The founders of this republic called heaven and earth to
> witness that it would be a government for the people and
> by the people; and yet the elective franchise is withheld
> from one half of the citizens, many of whom are intelligent,
> cultured, and virtuous, while it is unstintingly bestowed
> upon the other, some of whom are illiterate, debauched,
> and vicious, because the word 'people' by an unparalleled
> exhibition of lexicographical acrobats, has been turned and
> twisted to mean all who are shrewd and wise enough to bare
> themselves born boys instead of girls, or who took the trouble
> to be born white instead of black. The argument that it is
> unnatural to vote is as old as the rock ribbed hills… Nothing
> should be more unnatural than that a good woman should
> shirk her duty to the State, if it were possible for her to dis-
> charge it.[137]

Terrell touched on many significant points—including the founding principles of the

U.S., the denial of suffrage to intelligent and virtuous citizens, and the conflation of

personhood with manhood—that were commonly held within the Washington and

contested by national black suffragist movements. Foremothers of New Negro women's

suffrage activism pointed to the founding principles of the United States to legitimate

universal suffrage. Positioning universal suffrage in this way aligned it with broader

political trends that called upon individuals to serve the interests of the state through

personal and collective responsibility.

What is most striking about Terrell's speech is her emphasis on class as the basis

for her characterization of suffrage as both a right and a privilege that should be extended

to blacks and women. Her statement aligns with a political agenda influenced by politics

of black respectability. In her emphasis on illiteracy and debauchery, Terrell gestured

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[137] Terrell, Mary C. "The Justice of Woman Suffrage," 1900.

toward widely-held perceptions about low-income communities. "The Justice of Woman Suffrage" suggests that individuals of "questionable" moral character should not be enfranchised. By implication, "respectable" individuals should have the vote. Terrell's support for respectability in defining the suffrage, the body politic, and political culture was not unique among black Washingtonians. Washington's black newspapers contributed to political discourses that demonized poor people, regardless of race. Some African American suffragists in Washington, including Slowe and Anna Julia Cooper, supported a suffrage in which poor people were included. Leading publications, however, primarily focused on black women suffragists who adhered to a burgeoning politics of respectability that emerged out of the black clubwomen's movement.

In the "Woman's Case in Equity," *The Colored American* staff made a clear distinction between suffragists of the past and the modern suffragist. Placing the image of Terrell on the front page of the paper confirmed the arrival of this modern activist, in which connected women's appearance and style was tied to the content of their politics. *The Colored American* claimed that,

> There is nothing about the woman suffragist today to remind one of the agitator of a quarter century ago. The mannishly attired, short skirted, short-haired woman, who, for so many years, was the butt of the satirist and the cartoonist, has been shoved off the board and in her place stands the cultured, womanly woman of the twentieth century. In her dress she keeps pace with fashion.[138]

The description connects the masculine physical appearance of the "agitator of a quarter century ago" with her political efficacy and viability. According to the newspaper, the self-presentation of earlier activists marginalized them. Even the reference to short skirts

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[138] *The Colored American*, Saturday, February 17, 1900

suggested a lack of feminine propriety and a childish demeanor. Women wore long skirts; young boys and girls wore short skirts. Perceived as masculine, these women could not garner respect for their political activism. The *Colored American's* article, "Woman's Case in Equity," articulated that the perception of suffragists as women falling outside of the parameters of respectability distinguished the earlier movement from the current one. The paper's coverage of Terrell provided a modern example of the ideal, black suffragist. Terrell's sketch portrays a fully-covered woman with long-hair that has been pinned up into a neatly, coiffed bun. The only visible skin in the image of Terrell is her face and the very top of her neck. The newspaper's conception of a "woman suffragist of today" also exemplified a particular vision of femininity that fit the politics of respectability.

The connection between effective political activism and feminine fashion reveals how prevailing racial, sexual, and gender ideologies influenced New Negro women's political culture. The heightened visibility of black women's bodies in the public arena sparked discussions about the significance of black women's physical appearance to social and political movements for equality. Although some black women rejected self-fashioning as a means to claim political legitimacy, the overwhelming majority of African American women chose to affirm the connection between a fashionable appearance and respectability in the struggle for civil and political equality. Black women could not escape myths about their hypersexuality, depravity, and impropriety, and therefore, fashioned and performed an exaggerated form of respectability while engaging in political activism. While black suffragists embraced respectability as one of many political tools, white suffragists in the early 1900s began rethinking their strategies

and how to reclaim the national spotlight for their political agenda through more stylized and theatrical political demonstrations. Both black and white suffragists recognized the importance of performance and aesthetics to women's political activism, but how this recognition affected their political acts differed.

The Suffrage Parade of 1913 in Washington highlighted the differences, tensions, and points of divergence for black and white women suffragists in the modern suffrage movement. African American women used this historic event to bring national attention to a burgeoning New Negro women's political culture that would not be silenced by white suffragists or anti-suffragists. The white women organizers of the march also had a distinct political agenda that reflected a "New Woman" ethos and an emerging political culture. The clash of these racialized, political cultures had a history dating back several decades, but was reignited in the planning stages of the parade. This convergence of political cultures exposed the fragility and fluidity of coalitions across the lines of race and sex that had shaped the national suffrage movement from its inception.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, National American Woman Suffrage Association began exploring new political strategies. Despite progress at the state level, there was little movement toward a constitutional amendment. Since 1869, members of NAWSA had been traveling to the nation's capital each year to petition for federal protection of women's suffrage. While largely symbolic, this annual political performance also reflected growing support for the movement. Each year, the number of signatories grew. The act also solidified a potential political base primarily comprised of women. Some African American suffragists took part in this process, despite reservations about the commitment of NAWSA to a fully universal conception of

suffrage that applied to women as well as blacks. Prior to the Suffrage Parade of 1913,

NAWSA had collected millions of signatures for their petitions. A glimmer of hope in the

struggle for women's voting rights appeared in 1912 with Theodore Roosevelt's

Progressive Party, which pledged to secure equal suffrage for men and women.

Roosevelt, however, lost the election to Woodrow Wilson, prompting renewed fervor and

dedication to achieving national recognition of women's suffrage.

To garner greater attention for the suffrage cause, leaders at the 1912 NAWSA

annual convention in Philadelphia decided to plan a suffrage parade on the evening prior

to Wilson's presidential inauguration in March, 1913. NAWSA and suffrage leadership

selected Alice Paul to organize a parade of such a scale that it would attract significant

press coverage.[139] During the planning stages, Paul and her organizing committee

imagined a political spectacle in which costumes, floats, banners, dynamic speakers, and

ornate programs would convey the importance of women's suffrage and the political

power of suffragists and suffrage supporters. This vision became a reality. The parade

proved to be a historically significant event made suffragists visible to the national body

politic.

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[139] Alice Paul was one of the most prominent figures in women's suffrage movement of the early twentieth
century. Before the age of 30, she organized the March 1913 Suffrage Parade, participated in the militant
branch of the British suffrage movement, endured a hunger strike and being forcibly fed, and had been
arrested and imprisoned. Many historians situate Paul within a radical feminist tradition. See Katherine H.
Adams and Michael L. Keene, *Alice Paul and the American Suffrage Campaign* (Urbana: University of
Illinois Press, 2008); Christine A. Lunardini, *From Equal Suffrage to Equal Rights: Alice Paul and the
National Woman's Party, 1910-1928* (New York: New York University Press, 1986); Doris Stevens and
Carol O'Hare, *Jailed For Freedom: American Women Win the Vote* (Troutdale, OR: NewSage Press,
1995); Eleanor Clift, *Founding Sisters and the Nineteenth Amendment* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons,
2003); Inez H. Irwin, *Story of Alice Paul and the National Women's Party* (Fairfax, Va.: Denlinger's
Publishers, Ltd., 1977). Paul's relationship to black suffragists and equal rights for African Americans,
however, complicates how to historicize Paul's activism. Differing accounts of her attitudes and behaviors
toward black suffragists prior to, during, and after the March 1913 Suffrage Parade exist.

NAWSA discussed the role of African American women prior to the event.

Fearing the opposition of white, southern suffragists, white members of NAWSA sought

to limit the participation of black women.[140] Paul's position regarding black women

remains unclear. In her personal recollections, Paul explained that she reached a

compromise with Terrell and the National Association of Colored Women in which black

women suffragists would march in the rear of the procession in a separate section. Other

accounts of the planning stages of the March 1913 parade indicate that NAWSA

reorganized the procession to integrate black women in either their state or occupational

delegations, in response to substantial backlash from African Americans. From actual

images taken at the parade, however, it appears that Paul's recollection is more accurate,

because black women are largely invisible in photographs taken of state and occupational

delegations. The official order of the parade procession was detailed in the "Suffrage

March Line." The first section of the procession was occupied by women from countries

that enfranchised women. Following the international section were the "Pioneers" of the

women's suffrage movement.[141] The occupational and state delegations marched behind

the "Pioneers." The final group on the "Suffrage March Line" was male suffragists.

According to this document, floats and bands brought up the rear of the parade.

Delegations of black suffragists, men and women, were absent from the processional

order and did not appear on NAWSA's depiction of the Suffrage March Line. The

invisibility of black suffragists on this representation of the March 1913 Suffrage Parade

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[140] African American women were among those who sent money to NAWSA to finance the parade.
[141] Pioneers were suffragists who had participated in decades of suffrage activism. The "Pioneers" section was a whites-only delegation. Despite NAWSA's acknowledgement of black women's participation in the suffrage movement for several decades, black women "pioneers" were excluded from marching in this revered delegation of "activist" women.

processional spoke volumes about the relationship between black and white suffragists

and the NAWSA vision of suffrage, which excluded African American women.
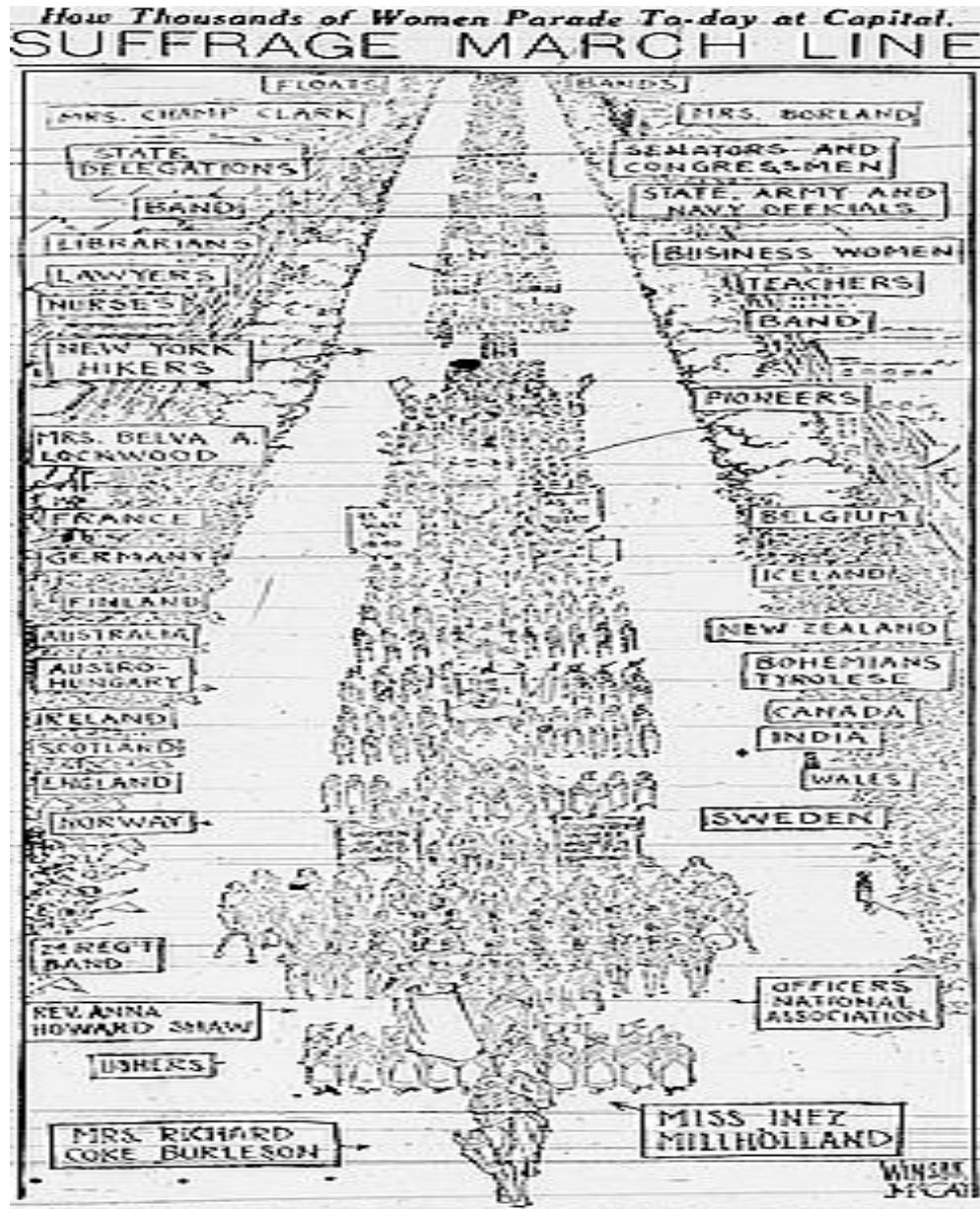

Figure 17: Suffrage Parade, Order of Processional (March 3rd, 1913)

Despite attempts to limit the visibility of African American women at the parade,

a few black women suffragists marched with state and occupational delegations. Ida B.

Wells-Barnett, a strong proponent of universal suffrage and founder of the Alpha Suffrage Club of Chicago, vehemently protested segregation in the parade.[142] In defiance, Wells joined the Illinois Delegation during the march, literally inserting herself and, by extension, black women into white suffragists' political culture. While not obviously visible in the images, other black women participated in the parade or looked on as spectators. Many were from Washington, because they could attend easily, without a substantial financial investment. A cross-section of black women attended the March and articulated a New Negro women's political standpoint that pivoted around a politicized aesthetics that was exemplified by Terrell in the previous decade. Contrasting with the spectacle-like political performances of white suffragists at the parade, black women performed political respectability.

The experience of the founding members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated at the March 1913 parade exemplify how black Washington suffragists negotiated the political terrain created by NAWSA for the parade.[143] Only two months after their founding at Howard, with the guidance of Terrell, the sorority's founders agreed that participating in the parade would be their first public act. They collectively affirmed that black women needed the right to vote for protection, equality, and advancement. Twenty-two women along with Terrell marched under a Delta Sigma Theta Sorority banner. Dressed in attire similar to that in the sketch of Terrell in the *Colored American* in February 1900, this group of black women, as well as other African

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[142] Founded in 1913 by Wells, the Alpha Suffrage Club of Chicago worked exclusively for woman's suffrage. Through the NAACP, which Wells co-founded, she continued to advocate for enfranchising African Americans.

[143] Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated was founded at Howard University on January 13, 1913 by twenty-two Howard women.

American women marchers presented images of modern suffragists, who mobilized around respectable femininity to garner respect for their emerging New Negro political identities. Subjected to racism from opponents of woman's suffrage and from parade organizers and participants, black Washington suffragists strategically articulated a black female presence that countered damaging racial and gender ideologies.

Terrell, members of Delta Sigma Theta, and smaller, unidentified "delegations" of black marchers from Washington were forced to assemble in a racially segregated area.[144] After assembling, these women marched toward the rear of the procession and encountered hostility from both spectators and fellow parade participants. Their relegation to the periphery of parade caused Terrell to re-evaluate her involvement with NAWSA. Several years after the parade, she stated that "if Paul and other white suffragists could get the Anthony Amendment without enfranchising African American women, they would do so."[145] This question circulated among most black suffragists, but particularly among the black Washington women who participated in the March 1913 parade. Their experiences with the white women's suffrage movement at this event further distanced African American women's political activism from that of their white women counterparts. White women could transgress the boundaries of feminine propriety and public "respectability" in their political culture without contributing to racialized discourses of inherent inferiority. Black women structured a political culture that simultaneously encompassed their engagement with racial uplift and advancement. White women could not escape gender ideologies that privileged particular notions of

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[144] The "unidentified" black women marchers from Washington did not carry a banner, but were identifiable by their physical appearance as outliers to a predominantly white parade.

[145] Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920.*

appropriate political behavior for women. Their racial identity, however, allowed them to create exclusionary boundaries for political activism.

Notwithstanding the racism black women in Washington endured during their involvement in the parade of March 1913 and in subsequent interracial protests and organizations, Washington's African American suffragists continued to fight for suffrage on their own, independently from the white women's suffrage movement. They also fought against racism within the white women's suffrage movement. Looking back the parade, participant and Delta Sigma Theta founder Florence Toms noted that, "We marched that day in order that women might come into their own, because we believed that women not only needed an education, but they needed a broader horizon in which thy may use that education. And the right to vote would give them that privilege."[146] Toms' reflection on the event captured a widely held sentiment that propelled New Negro women's suffrage activism before, during, and after the March parade. Racism and sexism strengthened black women's political culture.

Conclusion

Based upon their particular experiences with prevailing racial and gender ideologies as well as existing political and cultural currents, black women developed a distinct political culture. Working within the parameters of a black women's culture of respectability, these women strategically invested in a politics of appearance that connected to their public political behavior. What distinguished these New Negro women suffragists from black clubwomen of the late nineteenth and early twentieth

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[146] Florence Toms, "The Founders' Greeting," *The Delta* (May 1963), 18.

centuries were their political motivations. These women, while concerned with the social

conditions African Americans confronted, also wanted to have their own voice, as

African American women, within the national body politic. With greater access to mass

media outlets such as newspapers and other periodicals, New Negro suffragists

capitalized upon a long-standing strategy in black women's activism to situate

themselves as modern activists. Noting the utility of the politics of respectability as they

pertained to personal aesthetics, New Negro women suffragists used aesthetic tropes of

respectable femininity to insert themselves into political activism. Although their white

women counterparts engaged in theatrics and other forms of pageantry to make

themselves more visible in the national, political arena, black women performed

respectability to attain greater visibility.

Existing stereotypes about black women positioned their bodies, their expressive

practices, and styling choices within the realm of spectacle. Whereas white women

moved more toward the usage of spectacle in the early twentieth century, African

American women political activists chose to perform ladyhood to claim a distinct space

within the twentieth century women's suffrage movement.[147] White women suffragists,

particularly those inspired by New Woman cultural currents, embraced the usage of

spectacle and theatrics to visualize a burgeoning political consciousness that began to

think of ladyhood as restrictive and oppressive. The March 3, 1913 Suffrage March in

[147] Many scholars discuss ladyhood and its meanings and implications during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See Linda K. Herber and Jane S. De Hart, eds., *Women's America: Refocusing the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Ida B. Wells and Jacqueline Jones Royster's, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900* (Boston; New York: Bedford Books, 1997); Paula Giddings', *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, Glenda E. Gilmore's, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*; Christine Stansell's, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1780-1860*; Jacqueline Jones', *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and Family From Slavery to the Present*.

Washington represented a departure from ladyhood and a rejection feminine propriety.[148]

Conversely, black women lacked access to the protected status of ladyhood and its accompanying privileges. Ladyhood had racially specific meanings. For many white women, ladyhood signaled the policing of their bodies and the relegation of their bodies to private and semi-private spheres. African American women suffragists from Howard University in 1913, however, claimed ladyhood. These women did not have white or male privilege and historically, were excluded from ladyhood. The performance and articulation of female decorum served a similar purpose to that of white women suffragists rejecting that protected/regulated/policed status.

The political articulations of black women such as those from the founding members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority who participated in the Suffrage Parade also garnered the support of leading African American political outlets. African American male editors of the premier newspapers of Washington trumpeted the arrival of a modern black political woman and presented this political ideal as a "splendid representation" of African American progress. In Washington, the African American media placed Terrell at the center of New Negro Washington's political culture. Her words, fashion, and hair styles co-existed as integral components to her success as a black woman political activist. In Terrell, black women in Washington had a prototype for a modern "political" woman. Even as women such as Slowe and Cooper challenged the class underpinnings of the political rhetoric of Terrell, they recognized the importance of performing

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[148] Christine Stansell, in *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* thoroughly discusses how white women mobilized around rejecting "bourgeoise female decorum" using dress and manner. This new era of suffrage activism tapped into this legacy of women decidedly existing outside of ladyhood.

ladyhood both as a liberatory act and as a strategy for distinguishing themselves from their New Woman counterparts and for solidifying alliances with New Negro men.

Whereas the black press honed in on "respectable" black political women as representatives of this new era of political activism, white press outlets such as *The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune* and *The Washington Herald* reported on the pageantry and spectacular political performances of white women suffragists during large-scale protests such as the Suffrage Parade. The March 4, 1913 edition of *The New York Times* described this parade as "one of the most impressively beautiful spectacles staged in this country." *The Washington Herald*, although also reporting on injured marchers, spoke of the use of pageantry and spectacle as well. The white press viewed the theatrics of white women suffragists as attempts to reinvigorate a fledgling national movement. White presses acknowledged a distinct shift in the strategies of white women suffragists. Similar to the black press's coverage of women's suffrage activism of the early twentieth century, white newspapers proclaimed a new era in women's political activism.

This new era of women's political behavior became evident through the fashion, styling, and politics of appearance women suffragists adopted. Both black and white women created political cultures in which aesthetics and representational politics were integral. For New Negro women in Washington, however, the ability to present themselves as cultured and respectable through their fashion and hair style choices. Politicizing respectability had a brief history in African American women's activism prior to the New Negro era. The demand for respect for women's broadened influence in the public sphere propelled black women's usage of politics of respectability during the New Negro era. Black clubwomen used these politics to counter prevailing racialized

gender stereotypes of black women**;** New Negro women employed these politics to more fully embed themselves in contemporaneous political movements. Performing "ladyhood" offered an aesthetic path to becoming visible and viable within New Negro political culture. As "splendid" representations of themselves, New Negro women in Washington both contributed to an evolving political discourse and created a localized black-women authored political culture.

Chapter Four

Saturday Night at the S Street Salon: New Negro Women Playwrights

A Saturday night in Washington offered many possibilities for its black residents in the early twentieth century. From nightclubs and restaurants to social events, black Washingtonians could partake in a variety of social and cultural activities. The city boasted a racially specific cultural and social infrastructure because of the relatively substantial population of African Americans and the historical legacy of black communities there. As the population of African Americans continued to grow throughout the New Negro era, the number of social and cultural venues founded by and serving African Americans only increased. This growth also sparked a further diversification of available diversions. While many black Washingtonians used their Saturday nights as a designated time for leisure and consumption, others chose to engage in social and cultural activities that involved explicit political purposes and that contributed to a New Negro political agenda.[149]

Social and cultural activities with political purposes became central to both the political and expressive transformation in black America in the early twentieth century. The circulation of literary publications, the emphasis on the importance of developing the arts in black educational institutions such as Shaw Junior High, M Street High School

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[149] African Americans in Washington often delved into leisure and consumption as well as and social and cultural activities with political overtones during their time off from work. For most, their lives were framed in terms of "both and" rather than "either or." Nevertheless, I want to highlight a particular community of African Americans that regularly used Saturday nights as a time to engage in cultural practices that connected to broader black political currents.

and Howard University, and the establishment of literary, musical, and other arts-based clubs contributed to a politicized, black cultural landscape in Washington. In this period, African Americans built on a legacy of using art as a vehicle for realizing change and became increasingly invested in using cultural venues to promote racial progress[150] Many African American political leaders actively promoted this approach to politics, calling for art that incorporated historical and politically relevant themes.

Communities in black Washington heeded this call with a fervor that established the nation's capital as a cultural and political center for African Americans in the early twentieth century. African Americans artists in Washington created musicals, wrote poetry, novels, and short stories, painted and sculpted artwork, composed songs, and choreographed pieces that both illuminated and commented on political currents of the New Negro era. African American theater, in particular, became central to the politicization of art during this period. Leading African American activists and intellectuals such as W. E. B. DuBois, Alain Locke, and Montgomery T. Gregory encouraged African Americans to write plays about their experiences and provided unprecedented opportunities for the performance and publication of black-authored

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[150] Several cultural historians chronicle the history of the interplay between African American cultural production and black political and social consciousness and activism. Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Tommy L. Lott, *The Invention of Race: Black Culture and the Politics of Representation* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999); Walter C. Rucker, *The River Flows On: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); The Black Public Sphere Collective, *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993); Robin D.G. Kelley and Earl Lewis, *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

plays.[151] More specifically, these men supported the emergence of a new cadre of black

women writers who would become instrumental in the movement to politicize African

American expressive and aesthetic cultures.

These women playwrights used African American drama as a means to make

visible the experiences of black women, building on a tradition already well established

in poetry and fiction.[152] New Negro women playwrights focused on black women's

perspectives, struggles, and triumphs, all with critiques of current concerns. A

foundational work in the genre was Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins' *Slaves' Escape: or the*

Underground Railroad. Written as a musical drama in 1879 and performed by the

Hopkins' Colored Troubadours at the Oakland Garden in Boston on July 5, 1880, her

play depicts the importance of the Underground Railroad to runaway slaves and

abolitionism. The play focuses on both men and women runaway slaves, but hones in on

African American women as leaders and conductors on the Underground Railroad.

Hopkins' work served as a template for plays, by and about black women, which also

dealt with historical, social, and political themes.

Black women in Washington were among the first to craft a cohesive artistic

community. The birth of this community paralleled the growth of black theater both

locally and nationally. This growth occurred through the establishment of outlets and

venues for the production and performance of African American drama. Additionally,

black women playwrights in Washington could interact with, learn from, and exchange

ideas with some of the most prominent figures associated with black intellectual and

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[151] Kathy A. Perkins, ed., *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950* (Bloomington, IN: 1989), 3.

[152] Phyllis Wheatley and Harriet Jacobs were two of the most well-known writers in the black women's literary tradition.

cultural production in this era. Gregory and Locke were particularly significant in the emergence of the black women playwrights' community of Washington in the 1910s and 1920s. Their mentorship and training catalyzed a self-sustaining and at times, gender-specific community of black women playwrights. At the heart of this community were Howard University and M Street High School. Beyond the walls of these nationally recognized black educational institutions was the S Street Salon, a more informal, but equally—if not more important—space for black women playwrights in Washington. The home of writer and playwright Georgia Douglas Johnson, located at 1461 S Street NW in the U Street Corridor, the S Street Salon became the literal and figurative home for black women playwrights in the city and eventually, an artistic hotbed for numerous writers from around the country who contributed to the New Negro Movement. For nearly two decades, writers from New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and several other cities could arrive at Johnson's home on Saturday night and engage with Langston Hughes, Jessie Fausset, Jean Toomer, Anne Spencer, Zora Neal Hurston, or Richard Wright. Nearly every well-known New Negro era writer spent at least one Saturday night at the S Street Salon.

This chapter focuses on black women in Washington who regularly participated in the S Street Salon and the body of work that resulted form these Saturday night sessions. Although black men did play an integral role in forming and shaping the contours of black women playwrights' community, the interactions among these women was even more profound. They influenced and inspired each other to articulate their unique experiences through theater and propelled the outburst of cultural production in

the nation's capital in the form of plays.[153] I use the works of Georgia Douglas Johnson

and Angelina Weld Grimke and the life stories and interactions of Grimke, Johnson,

Mary Powell Burrill, and May Miller to examine the role of the S Street Salon in New

Negro women's culture in Washington. The connections among these women, and their

shared and divergent experiences, illuminate a New Negro women's ethos that evolved as

a result of the specific cultural and intellectual infrastructure that existed in Washington

during the early twentieth century. New Negro women playwrights at the S Street Salon

used their leisure time to comment upon issues such as lynching, women's reproductive

rights, the challenges of African American families, and the plight of black mothers.

Saturday nights at the Salon were not women-only events. But black women formed a

gender-specific community within this literary and expressive community to develop the

voices of African American women playwrights.

The plays of Johnson, Burrill, and Miller attempted to capture an array of black

women's experiences. Specifically, these playwrights wrote anti-lynching plays that

aligned with a distinct, political consciousness. Female-authored anti-lynching dramas of

the early twentieth century challenged racist and sexist ideologies that fueled racial

violence against all African Americans. Engaging political themes such as race suicide,

rape, and the broader social impact of lynching, these playwrights created an alternative

political space in which women became central to lynching and anti-lynching narratives.

Because of women's exclusion from traditional political activities such as voting, holding

offices, and leadership in activist organizations, black women seeking political voices

adopted culturally expressive forms. These plays were part of an alternative, cultural

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[153] Perkins 15.

discourse on lynching. Black women playwrights used anti-lynching dramas to broaden conversations about racial violence to include black women, black families, black communities, and white women. Exploring a women-predominated space dedicated to the writing and production of anti-lynching plays shedd a new light upon Washington as a cultural center for New Negroes, and specifically, for New Negro women.

Before Saturday Nights: Black Women Playwrights in Washington in the Early New Negro Era

Saturday nights at the S Street Salon gave black women in Washington a space in which they could think collectively about how to present and represent black experiences. The cadre of Washington women participating in this Saturday night community included Georgia Douglass Johnson, whose house was the meeting place, Angelina Grimke, Mary Burrill, May Miller, Zora Neal Hurston, Eulalie Spence, Shirley Graham (prior to her marriage to W.E.B. DuBois), and Marita Bonner. Theater historians Kathy Perkins and Judith L. Stephens have anthologized many of the works of black Washington women who attended Saturday nights at the S Street Salon.[154] While comprehensive and thorough in their presentation of the plays as literary texts, these anthologies do not delve into the historical significance of the community that produced the plays. That context is necessary to fully appreciate the political content of the plays.

The faculty at Howard University, which, included Locke and Gregory and DuBois were instrumental in the formative stages of the African American theater

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[154] Kathy A. Perkins and Judith L. Stephens, eds., *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) and Kathy A. Perkins, ed., *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950*.

movement that took place in Washington.[155] DuBois organized the Krigwa Players, a

small theater group performed race—or "propaganda"—plays in cities such as

Washington, Denver, New York, and Baltimore. In 1921, Gregory founded the

Department of Dramatic Arts at Howard with the intention of launching the first National

Negro Theater in the United States. One of the many initiatives of this newly organized

department was the creation of the Howard Players, a small theater group which wrote,

produced, and performed black-authored "folk plays" that addressed the historical and

cultural experiences of African Americans. Prior to the 1910s and 1920s, blacks did not

have access to professional theatre training through institutions, particularly not in the

field of playwriting.[156] The advisory board for the Department of Dramatic Arts at

Howard consisted of both black and white leaders in academia and the theatrical arts.

Notably, whites primarily comprised the board. James Weldon Johnson was one of few

African Americans to serve on the advisory committee besides Gregory and Locke, who

were the most influential African American voices on the board.[157]

At the inception of the New Negro theater movement, there were two distinct

standpoints regarding the form and content of African American plays.[158] For DuBois,

New Negro theatre "must reveal Negro life as it is… must be written by Negro authors

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[155] The African American theater movement was not specific to Washington, but these individuals as well as the resources of Howard University established Washington as a preeminent site for the "new birth" of black theater in the United States.

[156] Perkins 6.

[157] Gregory desired to establish the Department of Dramatic Arts as the premier "training ground" for African Americans in the theatrical arts. To achieve this, he believed that validation from and association with prominent figures such as Winston Churchill, Eugene O'Neil, and Joel Spingarn would heighten the perception of professionalism and prestige for his fledgling department.

[158] Although these two distinct standpoints existed, many writers crafted a repertoire that reflected both standpoints on African American playwriting. Both standpoints acknowledge the significance of Negro theater to racial progress.

who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today…must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval."[159] DuBois openly advocated for the use of Negro theater as propaganda for not only articulating black experiences, but also improving the lives of African Americans. In juxtaposition, Gregory articulated a differing standpoint within the burgeoning African American theatrical arts community. As he maintained, "the Negro has a wonderful opportunity through drama to win a better standing in the community."[160] But that would not come through the production of "plays of propaganda; that would be mistaken effort. I believe that we can win a broader recognition of our rights and responsibilities by demonstrating our abilities as artists."[161] Gregory viewed New Negro plays as a way to validate the humanity of African Americans through the display of their artistic abilities. Whereas DuBois focused on the content and political intentions of Negro plays, Gregory affirmed that creativity and artistic excellence, not explicit political propaganda, would help blacks secure rights and other freedoms. The divergent standpoints expressed by DuBois and Gregory regarding the role of theater in black political struggles mirrored a broader discussion among African American artists and intellectuals of the early to mid-twentieth century regarding the use of black art. African American women in Washington embraced both standpoints

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[159] W.E.B. DuBois, *Krigwa Players Inaugural Playbill* (1926).
[160] Gregory, Montgomery T. *Howard University Newspaper*, 1921.

[161] Ibid.

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and incorporated propaganda and "folk culture" into their works when they became playwrights.[162]

Through the Howard Players, literary outlets created by DuBois and the NAACP, and eventually the S Street Salon, black women in Washington received formal training and exposure in playwriting. It is worth noting that the majority of plays written by Howard students, under the tutelage of Gregory and Locke, were women.[163] Black women at Howard, often excluded from leadership opportunities afforded to male students, used the theatrical arts as a way to express their perspectives on the various social and political currents affecting African Americans. All of the Washington women in this chapter had some connection to Howard's Department of Dramatic Arts, whether directly or indirectly. When Georgia Douglas Johnson began her Saturday night sessions, Locke and Gregory and their women students were among the first participants. Howard and the Dramatic Arts faculty encouraged black women students to learn all aspects of

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[162] During the New Negro era, many of the most prominent African American artists and intellectuals wrote about the "proper" use of black art. Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation* (1926) and Alain Locke, "Art of Propaganda?," *Harlem*, 1, 1 (November, 1928) are two of the most well-known pieces about this issue. Recent secondary literature about arts and letters during the New Negro era such as: Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*; Jeffrey Ogbar, *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Arts, and Letters*, Henry Louis Gates and Gene Jarrett, eds., *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, and Cherene Johnson Sherrard, *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* chronicle the significance of these debates among artists and writers such as Locke, Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Jessie Fausett, Countee Cullen, Angelina Grimke, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Mary Burrill, May Miller, Jacob Lawrence, Aaron Douglass, Claude McKay, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Nella Larsen. The standpoints of these artists regarding using art as propaganda is evident through their respective works that reveal varying facets of African American culture. The New Negro women playwrights in Washington tended to produce more explicitly politicized pieces.

[163] Many of plays written during this era at Howard are currently house at Gregory and Locke Collection at Howard University. My archival research a comparatively larger number of plays authored by women than by men. Kathy Perkins conducted similar research in the late 1980s and arrived at the same conclusion.

the theatrical arts, but the S Street Salon specifically nurtured black women as

playwrights and offered a space in which a New Negro women's ethos could flourish.[164]

Although the African American theater movement and S Street Salon came to

prominence during the 1920s, the origins of a New Negro women's writing culture began

in the 1910s. Prior to DuBois' call for a "new birth" in African American theater in

1926, the NAACP chapter in Washington and members from the Howard community

spearheaded efforts to develop Negro theater in the nation's capital, outside of formal

institutions, such as universities.[165] Using expressive culture to recast a political

movement was not a new phenomenon for African Americans. Because of barriers

preventing women's participation in formal politics, black women in particular often

employed cultural expression as a vehicle to comment upon historical and

contemporaneous social and political issues. Building on that tradition, black women

playwrights became some of the most significant actors in the New Negro movement in

Washington.[166]

In 1916, activist and writer Angelina Weld Grimke wrote the first known example

of a drama written in the anti-lynching tradition and the first twentieth century full-length

[164] Kathy Perkins, in particular briefly discusses the impact of the Department of Dramatic Arts and the S Street Salon on black women writers. However, my research specifically looked at how prolific black women writers were that were associated with both communities. Black women playwrights with connections to both Howard and to the Salon were among the most prominent writers of the New Negro era and also focused on the experiences of black women in their respective works.

[165] DuBois, Krigwa Players Inaugural Playbill, (1926).

[166] Black women authors, dancers, musicians, poets, visual artists and singers contributed to the anti-lynching movement through their respective artistic talents. These women engaged historical information and political themes elucidated in anti-lynching discourse. Many of the most prominent black female artists of the early twentieth century explicitly addressed lynching at one point in their careers. Because of their mobility as artists, these women used their works on lynching to inform the national and international communities about lynching and racial violence in the United States.

play written, performed, and produced by African Americans. It was produced by the

Drama Committee of the Washington, D.C. Branch of the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People and presented at the Myrtilla Miner Normal School in

Washington on March 3 and 4, 1916. The NAACP's political agenda inspired the play's

major themes, although dissenters within in the NAACP criticized the usage of the stage

as a platform for political propaganda. *Rachel*, one of Grimke's many anti-lynching

artistic endeavors, is noteworthy not only as a progenitor for a tradition, but for its

particular standpoint and political underpinnings.

Set in the home of an African American family, *Rachel* focuses on a black

matriarch's recollection of the lynching of her husband and son, the consequences of this

lynching at the time, and her family's response to her recollection of racial violence.

Grimke specifically targeted white women, hoping to reach them through the common

ground of motherhood and to acquire their support in opposing lynching. "If," she

argued, "white women of this country could see, feel, understand just what effect their

prejudice and the prejudice of their fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons were having on

the souls of colored mothers everywhere … great power to affect public opinion would

be set free and the battle would be half won."[167]   In fact, lynching was among one of the

most common themes black women playwrights addressed. "When Black women first

picked up the pen as playwright," Kathy Perkins notes, "they chose to speak out against

the atrocities of lynching."[168] Most of the black women playwrights who frequented the

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[167] Angelina Grimke, " 'Rachel' The Play of the Month: The Reason and Synopsis by the Author," *The Competitor*, 1, 1 (1920): 51-52.

[168] Perkins, *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, 6.

S Street Salon addressed lynching in their works, although varying in their approaches, content, and form.

Figure 18: Angelina Weld Grimke

The melodramatic, emotive, and sentimental nature of the play attempted to unveil the psychological consequences of white supremacy and racial violence on African Americans, particularly black mothers. Grimke attempted to capture how black families experienced lynching as an imminent horror that any family could undergo at any moment. The character Rachel laments after hearing her mother's story of how her father and brother were lynched,

> Then, everywhere, everywhere, throughout the South, there are
> hundreds of dark mothers who live in fear, terrible, suffocating fear
> whose rest by night is broken, and whose joy by day in their babies
> on their hearts is three parts- pain. Oh, I know this is true- for this
> way I should feel, if I were little Jimmy's mother. How horrible!
> Why- it would be more merciful- to strangle the little things at
> birth. And so this nation- this white Christian nation- has deliberate-
> ly set its curse upon the most beautiful- the most holy thing in life-
> motherhood! Why-it-makes-you doubt-God![169]

Rachel's lamentations distinguish lynching as a lived reality specific to the South, where the vast majority of lynchings of African Americans occurred. Lynching was not a

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[169] *Rachel*, 1.1

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frequent occurrence in the nation's capital during the early twentieth century; nevertheless, many of the black women migrating to Washington from the South had experience with lynching.[170]

To make her appeal to white women, Grimke appropriated contemporaneous dominant gender ideology which idealized motherhood to show how black mothers were excluded from that ideology. The dominant ideology of this era categorized women as society's moral keepers. Mothers carried the added burden of epitomizing "positive" normative values such as propriety, respectability, prudence, and temperance. Subject to cultural expectations that upheld social and ideological constraints for women regardless of race, Grimke manipulated prevailing ideology to compel white women, and white mothers specifically, to oppose lynching because of its detrimental effects on motherhood. The very thought that a woman could fathom killing her children out of fear of an inability to protect her children was purposely present in Grimke's play. If mothers across racial lines could visualize the effects of lynching, Grimke felt that white women could be inspired to mobilize against lynching, not because of its racist implications, but because of its devaluation of the idealized construction of motherhood as a gendered, but protected status for all women.[171] Although evaluating the efficacy of a play in

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[170] A notable exception to this was the July 1919 Race Riot that occurred in Washington. One of the many cities that experienced tremendous racial violence during the Summer of 1919, Washington's race riot illuminated racial tensions that pervaded interracial interactions in the federal city. The outburst of "mob violence" that commenced on July 19th also revealed the growing strength of the African American community in Washington. African Americans engaged in armed resistance and violently fought against being relegated to victimhood. After the riot, racial hostility became more virulent and African American organizations such as the NAACP became more active in addressing racial violence and other forms of racial equality confronting African Americans both locally and nationally.

[171] Grimke also built upon a tradition in abolitionist literature in which black and white women framed their opposition to slavery in terms of a common motherhood. The importance of motherhood during this period is discussed in Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Ruth H. Bloch, "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The

motivating individuals to oppose lynching is a difficult task, it is indisputable that Grimke

employed ideologically and historically specific representations of persons affected by

lynching and the anti-lynching movement.[172]

Rachel's monologue also appeals to Christians. By positing Christianity as

antithetical to the horror and spectacle of lynching, Grimke illustrated the glaring

contradictions extant between racial violence motivated by white supremacy and the

Christian principles upon which the United States was founded. Grimke, like her

abolitionists foremothers and forefathers, explicitly connected racial injustice to a failure

to uphold the religious foundation of the U.S.[173] Abolitionist activists and anti-lynching

proponents similarly incorporated a moral stance against the atrocities blacks confronted.

Ideologically positioned as having a heightened moral capacity, women anti-lynching

activists used this positioning to articulate the immorality of racial violence.

Rachel combated other gendered constraints of feminine propriety. "These

constraints, according to art historian Helen Langa "were related to socially constructed

expectations of gender difference in two overlapping contexts: in response to violent

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Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785-1815," *Feminist Studies*, 4 (1978): 101-126; David B. Sachsman and Roy Morris, Jr., eds., *Seeking A Voice: Images of Race and Gender in the 19th Century Press* (West Lafeyette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2009); and Venetria K. Patton, *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

[172] This analysis grows out of a similar argument forwarded in Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[173] John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay, eds., *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); Louis A. DeCaro, *"Fire from the Midst of You: A Religious Life of John Brown* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Margaret P. Aymer, *First Pure, Then Peaceable: Frederick Douglass, Darkness and the Epistle of James* (London: T&T Clark, 2008); and Anna M. Speicher, *The Religious World of Antislavery Women: Spirituality in the Lives of Five Abolitionists Lecturers* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

social acts, and in both looking at and representing male bodies."[174] The representational

choices Grimke made illuminate the constraints of feminine propriety that regulated the

content of lynching plays authored by black and white women. For depicting the actual

event that propels the play, Grimke chose to have the matriarch, Mrs. Loving, recollect

the lynching of her husband and son. This choice complemented Grimke's stated

purpose of speaking directly to white mothers. Mrs. Loving laments, "They broke down

the front door and made their way to our bedroom. Your father kissed me- and took up

his revolver. It was always loaded. They broke down the door."[175] Her husband's

possession of a loaded gun unveils a perceived need for black men to protect themselves.

While white supremacists would have considered Mr. Loving's possession of a gun as

evidence of black male criminality, Mrs. Loving's story conveys a sense fear and

vulnerability that overwhelmed blacks. Mrs. Loving then proceeds to recall that, "Four

masked men fell- they did not move any more-after a little. (pauses) Your father was

finally overpowered and dragged out."[176] The father resisted until defeat. Through Mrs.

Loving, Grimke introduces the mob element of lynching. Mrs. Loving delves further into

her memory and recounts that,

> In the hall, my little seventeen-year-old George tried to rescue him.
> Your father begged him not to interfere. He paid no attention. It ended
> in their dragging them both out.(pauses) My little George-was- a man!
> (controls herself with an effort) He never made an outcry. His last words to me
> were: "Ma, I am glad to go with father." I could only nod to him.[177]

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[174] Helen Langa, "Two Anti-Lynching Art Exhibitions: Politicized Viewpoints, Racial Perspectives, Gendered Constraints," *American Art*, 13,1 (Spring 1999), 30.

[175] *Rachel*, 1.1.
[176] Ibid.

[177] Ibid.

The conflation of manhood with fearlessness and pride permeates this part of the matriarch's story. George's "complicity" with his fate indicates a feeling of inevitability regarding racial violence. Responding to the mob dragging her husband and son down the stairs, Mrs. Loving explains that, "While they were dragging them down the steps…I knelt down by you (Rachel)- and covered my ears with my hands- and waited. I could not pray- I couldn't for a long time- afterwards."[178] Appealing to Christians, this portion of the story asks her audience to imagine not being able to pray. In Mrs. Loving's concluding statements of her reminiscence, she leaves her family and the audience with a cogent image. "The only sounds were the faint rustle of leaves and the "tapping of the twig of a tree" against the window. I hear it still- sometimes in my dreams. It was the tree- where they were."[179] Actual hangings did not usually occur on trees. However, the most popular and collectively engrained image for those in support of and against lynching was a black male body swinging from a tree. Mrs. Loving's final thoughts on the lynching of her son and husband resonate with numerous highly publicized accounts and images of lynching.

While Grimke worked within dominant gender ideology by avoiding vivid depictions of lynching, she countered the dominant narratives that rendered black womanhood and motherhood invisible or insignificant. Mrs. Loving only alludes to the actual lynching. Black women writers rarely referred to such details and generally avoided narrative emphasis on lynchings as public spectacles because of a prevailing

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[178] Ibid.

[179] Ibid.

expectation of feminine propriety.[180] *Rachel* complicated the racial violence narrative by inserting the far-reaching consequences of lynching for African American families. By representing lynching as a form violence that has lasting ramifications for African American families, Grimke shifts the discussion from black male victimization to the victimization of black women through the violence perpetrated against her family. The family emerges a gendered space. Black women's victimization became central to Grimke's anti-lynching discourse.

Rachel opened the door for what Claudia Tate describes as a new point in African American literature in which artistic depictions of racial protest became more acceptable for African Americans to produce and consume.[181] Grimke also succeeded in creating a space for African American women to insert their specific experiences into conversations about the harsh realities confronting African Americans. Her play and her commitment to using drama, fiction, and poetry as forms of activism inspired black women across the nation to "take to the pen." While residing in D.C., Grimke worked with black women writers and supported the establishment of a space for black women playwrights in Washington. Grimke lived in close proximity to what would become the S Street Salon at 1415 Corcoran Street NW. Prior to Johnson opening her home on Saturday nights to aspiring and prominent writers, black women in Washington frequented Grimke's home as a safe-space for honing their skills as playwrights. Although known as a shy woman,

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[180] This standpoint magnifies class implications. The emphasis on feminine propriety largely grew out of middle and upper class communities. I, am not, however, suggesting that lower and working class women did not propagate and ascribe to similar ideas of feminine propriety. (See Langa 33) Also, none of the plays written by the women I studied have a lynching that occurs on-stage. The act of lynching is only hinted to through recollection or implication.

[181] Claudia Tate, *Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 210.

Grimke served as an inspiration and a mentor to African American women in Washington seeking to voice their experiences through the dramatic arts. When Johnson commenced the Saturday night sessions at her home, Grimke was a regular attendee until she moved to New York after the death of her father in 1930.

Georgia Douglas Johnson, the S Street Salon, and New Negro Women's Playwrights

Although *Rachel* received mixed reactions from African Americans in Washington, the play laid the foundation for other black women to experiment with playwriting as a viable medium for participating in the political and the cultural arenas of the New Negro movement. The publication and performance of Grimke's *Rachel*, the establishment of the Department of Dramatic Arts at Howard University, and the emergence of literary outlets calling for African Americans to submit plays marked the arrival of a new era in black Washington women's writing and in the politicization of African American's women's expressive practices. Black women encountered unprecedented opportunities for participating in a black cultural movement that connected writing, performance, and socially, historically, and politically relevant themes. Washington women were in the center of this cultural explosion. One particular black Washington woman, Georgia Douglas Johnson became the most prolific of the African American women's writing community in Washington. In addition to being the most productive, she opened up her home to black writers from all over the country on Saturdays for over forty years. For black women writers and aspiring writers living in

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Washington, 1461 S Street NW was arguably the most significant institution in the

formation of a localized New Negro women playwriting culture.

Figure 19: The Home of Georgia Douglas Johnson/The S Street Salon (2008)

Over the course of her eighty-five years of life, Johnson achieved in a number of

fields. Known primarily as an exemplary poet throughout the New Negro era, Johnson

also studied the violin, piano, and vocal performance, worked as a teacher and an

assistant principal, and served as the Commissioner of Conciliation in the Department of

Labor under President Calvin Coolidge. Her dedication to crafting her skills as a writer,

however, marked her life in Washington, particularly after the death of her husband

Henry Lincoln Johnson in 1925. Inspired by her close friend Grimke's production of

Rachel and encouraged by African American colleagues in Washington, Johnson delved

into playwriting and began expanding her literary repertoire beyond poetry. Theater

studies scholars have explored Johnson's career as a dramatist.[182] Literary scholars tend

to focus on her work as a poet.[183] Yet both literary and theater studies scholars credit

Johnson as a leading figure in the black cultural and literary "Renaissance" that occurred

in Harlem the 1920s. Nevertheless, her centrality to New Negro women's culture in

Washington remains understudied.

Grimke's foray into playwriting, particularly into writing about politically and

socially relevant issues, provided a blueprint for aspiring black women playwrights in

Washington to follow. Judith L. Stephens defines a lynching drama as "a play in which

the threat or occurrence of a lynching, past or present, has major impact on the dramatic

action."[184] This genre gained particular traction within African American writing

communities in the 1920s, most notably among black women writers. Lynching plays

paralleled African American women's involvement in the Anti-Lynching Crusade of the

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1925, when Johnson completed her first,

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[182] For a discussion of Johnson's life as a playwright, see Winona Fletcher, "From Genteel Poet to Revolutionary Playwright: Georgia Douglas Johnson," *Theater Annual* 30 (1985): 41-64 ; Fletcher, "Georgia Douglas Johnson," in Alice Robinson, Vera M. Mowry, and Milly Barranger's edited collection *Notable Women in the American Theater: A Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989); Elizabeth B. Guillroy, ed., *Wines in the Wilderness: Plays by African-American Women from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990); Guillroy, *Their Place on the Stage: Black Women Playwrights in America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988); Judith E. Barlow, ed., *Plays by American Women: 1900-1930* (New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1985); Kathy Perkins, *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950*; Margaret B. Wilkerson, *9Plays by Black Women* (New York: New American Library, 1986).

[183] Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); James W. Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry: Revised Edition* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1931); Cherene Sherrad-Johnson, *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Verner D. Mitchell and Cheryl A. Wall, *This Waiting for Love: Helene Johnson, Poet of the Harlem Renaissance* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000); Alain Locke and Arnold Rampersad, *The New Negro :Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, Inc., 1925).

[184] Judith L. Stephens, "Lynching Dramas and Women: History and Critical Context," in *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, eds. Stephens and Kathy Perkins (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN: 1998), 3

known lynching drama, *A Sunday Morning in the South*, African American women participated in and led local, national, and international anti-lynching campaigns. Theater studies scholars Winona Fletcher and Perkins argue that Johnson explicitly connected her "plays on lynching" to the anti-lynching crusade and to a burgeoning awareness among African Americans regarding the potential the role of drama in effecting social change.[185] Over the course of her lifetime, Johnson wrote several plays within this genre.[186]

The year of 1925 also marked the first time Johnson opened the doors of her home on Saturday nights to established and aspiring African American writers. At the S Street Salon, Johnson emphasized collaboration, rigorous intellectual exchange, and the development of African American women's creative and politically active voices. Prior to Johnson beginning her Saturday night sessions, Grimke welcomed Johnson into her home as a mentor. Subsequently, Johnson embraced the role of a facilitator and mentor for black women writers in Washington who regularly attended the Saturday night sessions in the U Street Corridor. The creation of this space facilitated collaboration on lynching dramas and plays about other political and social realities confronting African Americans.

Johnson's follow-up to *A Sunday Morning in the South*, entitled *Safe* embodies the core elements of the lynching drama genre defined by African American women. *Safe* also illustrates how the plays of New Negro women playwrights in Washington

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[185] Winona Fletcher, "From Genteel Poet to Revolutionary Playwright: Georgia Douglas Johnson," and Kathy Perkins, *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays Before 1950*.

[186] In her dissertation, "The American Negro Playwright, 1920-1964," (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1965), Fannie E. Hicklen identified ten plays written by Johnson; however, only six of these plays are typically credited to Johnson, two versions of *A Sunday Morning in the South*, *Safe*, *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, *And Still They Paused*, and *A Bill to Be Passed*.

subtly differed in form, content, and style from other works within the lynching drama tradition. The cadre of black women playwrights who frequented to S Street Salon combined "stage realism" and "folk drama" techniques, comparatively rigid writing styles, and vivid descriptions of racial violence and the emotional responses. For Johnson and the black Washington women playwrights of S Street Salon, the political and social climate in Washington and across the United States necessitated realistic depictions of the horrors African Americans confronted. Despite their involvement with and training from Gregory and other prominent figures in the black theater movement in Washington, these women diverged from the vision of black theater as an opportunity to showcase black humanity. Plays such as *Safe* and *Rachel* articulated a distinct historical, social, and political awareness about African American women's experiences and sought to incite meaningful social and political change.

In *Safe*, the black woman protagonist is the actual victim of violence. Johnson illuminates the horrific choices black women made in a society in which the threat of lynching loomed constantly over black families. Black-woman-as-mother characters figure prominently in *Safe*, as they did in many New Negro plays. Portraying black motherhood as the primary force in the rearing and protection of black children, Johnson, like Grimke, presents black motherhood as a vulnerable status. Black mothers had to respond to lynching as both a lived and potential experience for their children. Johnson invested in the belief that motherhood, regardless of race deserved protection, although not to the same extent as Grimke. Since black mothers could not protect themselves or their children from being lynched, they could not responsibly and morally fulfill their prescribed responsibilities as mothers, as they needed to do.

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In *Safe*, the main character, Liza, hears about the lynching a black man, Sam

Hosea. Sam is lynched because he hit a white man in a fight resulting from a dispute

about wages. The white man struck first; Sam responded in self-defense. Johnson

steered away from the black male-white female rape argument to emphasize the

pervasiveness of lynching and its link to the racial restrictions of Jim Crow. Accusations

of other crimes such as the one that leads to the lynching of Sam Hosea occurred more

frequently than rape allegations. Liza briefly laments the death of Hosea and

immediately envisions the reaction of his mother to the news of his death as well as

Hosea calling out to his mother before his fatal demise. She also considers Sam's

tenacious work ethic and the close relationship Sam had with his mother. Liza says,"I

been sitting here thinking 'bout that poor boy Sam- him working hard to take care of his

widder mother, doing the best he kin, trying to be a man and stan up for hissef, and what

do he git?"[187] This reflection leads Liza to an even more disturbing conclusion about

racial violence. She thinks about the perpetual, potential violence that face all African

Americans, specifically black boys, born into a white supremacist society. Her thoughts

lead her to conclude that black male children are better off unborn because of the

inevitability of becoming victims of racial violence.

Her thoughts about the vulnerability of black boys and men as a group quickly

spiral into a serious concern for the welfare of the unborn child she is carrying: "What's

little nigger boys born for anyhow? I sho hope mine will be a girl. I don't want no boy

baby to be hounded down and kicked'round. No, I don't want to ever have no boy

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[187] *Safe*, 1.1.

chile!"[188] Despite urgings from the family and friends surrounding her that her child will

be safe, Liza becomes convinced that if her unborn child is male, he will be the victim of

a lynching. Her hysteria mounts as she goes into labor thinking about her responsibility

to protect her child and how she can fulfill that responsibility if she births a male child.

Her family members and friends remain concerned as Liza goes into labor. They did not

anticipate how profoundly the lynching of Sam Hosea had affected her and her views on

motherhood. The desire to protect overwhelms Liza. To represent the plight of black

mothers, Johnson highlights the debilitating emotional response of an expectant mother.

Liza's erratic emotional state implicitly poses a question to the audience: Would you

bring a child into a world where he will be murdered?

When the doctor arrives to deliver the baby, he is informed of Liza's volatile

state. After the delivery, he enters the living room where Liza's family and friends wait

anxiously for news. He explains, "She's all right and the baby was born all right- big and

fine. You heard him cry…"[189] The family responds in the affirmative and the doctor

continues "And she asked me right away, "Is it a girl?"[190] Liza's question is full of hope.

The family urges the doctor to continue relaying what transpired. It is at this point that

Dr. Jenkins fully discloses what happened immediately after Liza delivers the baby. He

explains that,

> I said, "No, child, it's a fine boy," and then I turned my back
> a minute to wash in the basin. When I looked around again she
> had her hands about the baby's throat choking it. I tried to stop

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[188] Ibid.

[189] Ibid.

[190] Ibid.

her, but its little tongue was already hanging from its mouth.
It was dead! Then she began, she kept muttering over and over
again: "Now he's safe- safe from the lynchers! Safe!"[191]

Liza's first actions as a mother stem from a desire to protect her child from the horrors of

lynching. She also seeks to protect herself from confronting the pain of losing her child.

The mere perception of the inevitability of the lynching of her newborn son leads Liza to

infanticide. Her desire to fulfill her motherly duty as her child's protector enables her to

commit an act resolutely outside of prevailing constructions of motherhood.

Figure 20: Georgia Douglas Johnson

Liza decides that murdering her son is her only option for proactively responding

to anticipated racial violence. Johnson's usage of infanticide by a black mother offers a

glimpse into the psychological damage the very potential of lynching imposed on black

mothers and families. Most likely, Johnson knew the real story of Margaret Garner, a

runaway slave who killed her children to "save" them from the horrors of slavery; to

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[191] Ibid.

some extent, Liza's actions mirror those of Garner. Novels such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* utilize the theme of infanticide. In fact, a body of nineteenth century literature thematically incorporated slave infanticide.[192] The fear of her son's lynching leads not only to the murder of a newborn baby, but also transforms a mother into a murderer. It is quite possible that Johnson conspicuously uses infanticide in her play in attempt to both revive the literary trope and to equate the horrors of slavery with the horrors of racial violence.

Liza's actions suggest several possible meanings. From one perspective, Liza fulfills her duties as a mother by protecting her son from a fatal threat. No specific threat of violence compels her. The compulsion to act violently stems from her envisioning Hosea's murder as the future consequence for her son. In her mind, Sam Hosea represents all black boys who negotiate their manhood under white supremacy. Sam Hosea's lynching also symbolizes the inability of black boys and men to navigate a terrain in which their humanity is denied and murderous violence is a constant threat. Liza refuses to live in fear or to have her son live in fear. Her decision, although extreme, captured the fatal effects of the mere threat of white violence against African Americans.

From another vantage point, Liza's actions aid the white supremacist agenda. During slavery, blacks were dehumanized, but their labor was highly valued. Margaret Garner's murder of her children undermined slavery: fewer black bodies meant less labor. Despite the fatality and extremity of Garner's actions, killing her children

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[192] See the fourth chapter, "Slavery, Abolition, and Murdering Mothers," of Felicity Turner's dissertation "Narrating Infanticide: Constructing the Modern Gendered State in Nineteenth Century America," (Duke University, 2010) for a discussion of slaves and infanticide as a recurring theme in nineteenth century abolitionist literature.

negatively affected her owner's productivity. In that sense, the deaths of her children challenged the enslavement of black children. Liza's actions, however, only contribute to the vicious cycle violence that claims the lives of African Americans. White supremacists and racists no longer viewed their relationship with African Americans as labor-based. With the abolition of slavery, many whites no longer placed any value on the lives of African Americans and viewed blacks as competition. African Americans were not the property of whites, but were wage laborers competing for the jobs poor and working-class whites held or desired. Liza murdering her newborn son fulfilled the desires of violent white supremacists who advocated violence against blacks. Although in her mind Liza resisted and took a radical stance against racial violence, her stance produced the same result of a lynching. Liza's act is not redemptive; it destroys her life and the life of her child.

Johnson did not explicitly state why she chose infanticide as the climax of her anti-lynching drama. This choice, nevertheless, comments upon the broader, but less discussed effects of lynching on African Americans. It also builds on the trope of infanticide in abolitionist literature. Within this body of literature, infanticide is redemptive ; it is portrayed as a mother acting in her child's best interest. Using such an extreme example post-emancipation facilitated a discussion about the dire circumstances that lynching as a threat and as a lived experience produced for many blacks in the Jim Crow era. The jarring thought of a mother killing her own child could reach across racial lines and cause other women to think about the difficult choices and experiences black women must encounter as a result of the prevalence of white supremacist ideologies and practices. As an anti-lynching activist, Johnson encouraged white women to become

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involved in anti-lynching activism. Like Grimke, she embraced motherhood as a potential site for unification among black and white women. Because the protection of children was integral to both black and white motherhood, a play based upon the actions of a mother spoke more personally to the concerns of women.

Both *Rachel* and *Safe* encountered mixed reactions from African American audiences, particularly from members and leaders of the NAACP, who in fact sponsored the first production of *Rachel*. While there are very few known reviews of either of the plays, Montgomery Gregory of Howard University's Department of Dramatic Arts revealed that with regards to *Rachel* and the committee that worked with Grimke on producing the plate that, "a minority section of this committee dissented from this propagandist platform and were instrumental in founding the Howard Players organization, promoting the purely artistic approach and the folk-drama idea."[193] *Safe* confronted similar critiques because of its resolutely political tone. Black playwrights and dramatists, who disavowed the utility and aesthetic value of art as political propaganda most likely, had negative reactions to women-authored anti-lynching dramas.

The reception did not discourage Grimke or Johnson from supporting other plays within the still-evolving lynching drama tradition. Additionally, Grimke and Johnson encouraged black women in Washington to explore other socially and politically relevant topics through of their playwriting. Two of the most prolific black women playwrights in Washington that attended the Saturday sessions at the S Street Salon were Mary Burrill and May Miller. The relationships among Johnson, Miller, Burrill, and Grimke were rich and complicated, as mentor-mentee, teacher-student, or writer-literary/drama critic. Their

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[193] Gregory and Locke, 414.

exchanges at the S Street Salon were also integral to the political and cultural currents occurring in Washington and in other cities and towns in the United States.

Born only one year after Johnson, Mary Burrill was both Johnson's friend and playwriting colleague. Burrill graduated from M Street High School in 1901. Immediately following graduation, she enrolled in Emerson College of Oratory (which eventually became Emerson College) and graduated in 1904. In 1905, Burrill commenced her career as a teacher at her high school alma mater. Johnson worked as a substitute teacher at M Street High School during Burrill's tenure, and subsequently, the two formed a close personal and professional relationship. Until 1920 when Burrill received a permanent assignment at her M Street High School, she taught English at both M Street and Armstrong Technical High School. In addition to her exhaustive teaching responsibilities, Burrill served as the director of the School of Expression, a department within the Washington, D.C. Conservatory of Music, from 1907-1911. Because of her formal training in oratorical skills, Burrill taught dramatics, elocution, and public speaking while serving as director of the School of Expression. She also directed plays and musical productions throughout the city until her death in 1946. The year before her death, the Dunbar High School Senior Class of 1945 dedicated their yearbook to Burrill (M Street High was renamed Dunbar High School in 1916 after New Negro poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar).[194]

Burrill achieved a distinct reputation as both an exemplary teacher and a visionary director by the 1920s. Not only committed to producing her own works, Burrill also

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[194] Paul Lawrence Dunbar was one of the most acclaimed writers of the early twentieth century and lived in Washington from 1897-1902. While only residing in Washington for five years, he became an influential figure in the black literary community that emerged in Washington during the formative years of the New Negro movement.

regularly organized and executed productions such as J.M Barrie's *Quality Street*. Burrill

worked for and with nearly every prominent black intellectual and cultural institution in

her career. In fact, one of her most well-known achievements was her narration of

Howard University's annual Christmas production of *The Other Wisemen*, a locally and

nationally publicize event among African Americans. The breadth of her endeavors and

accomplishments resulted in the formation of friendships and working relationships with

the some of the most visible of the New Negro women in Washington, including

Johnson. For several years, she shared a home with her close companion Lucy Diggs

Slowe and supported Slowe's efforts to achieve gender equality on the Hilltop.[195] Alice

Dunbar Nelson, wife of Paul Lawrence Dunbar and respected black Washington

playwright was also a colleague and close friend. Burrill's close relationships with black

women writers in Washington such as Dunbar Nelson and Johnson and her exposure to

and involvement Washington's black theater movement at M Street High School,

Howard University, and the School of Expression led her to become one of the original

members and one of the most active members of the S Street Salon group. Although

Burrill wrote her two most-well known plays before Johnson opened up the doors of her

home to New Negro writers, Burrill continued to hone her skills as a playwright, revised

one of her plays, and assisted other black women playwrights when she joined the

community of New Negro playwrights meeting on Saturdays at Johnson's home.

Burrill preceded Johnson in the lynching drama tradition by six years, but did not

join the S Street Salon community until the late 1920s. Published in 1919, her play,

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[195] References to the nature of the relationship between Slowe and Burrill are vague with the exception of the acknowledgement that these women shared a home. It has been inferred, however, that Burrill and Slowe had an intimate, romantic relationship.

Aftermath, tells the story of the lynching of a World War I soldier. Many of the lynching plays written by African American women, including *Aftermath* and *Safe*, focused on racial violence sparked by allegations of crimes other than that of alleged sexual assaults of white women. One of the only documented performances of this play occurred on May 7th, 1928 in New York City. Produced and performed by the New York City Krigwa Players and the Worker's Drama League in the David Belasco Sixth Annual Little Theater Tournament held at Frolic Theater, Burrill responded negatively to this production and to the creative license the producers took with her text. She noted that "The ending tacked on by the players changed what otherwise might have been an effective dramatic close into cheap melodramatic claptrap."[196] The nine-year gap between the writing *Aftermath* and its only known staging speaks to the difficulty playwrights, particularly black women playwrights, confronted in working in the lynching drama tradition. The political nature of these plays established these women playwrights as activists, which signaled the entry of these women into the public, political sphere and challenged existing gender expectations regarding political activism.

In September of 1919, Burrill published an even more controversial play than *Aftermath*. *They That Sat in Darkness* focused on birth control rights for African American women. A contentious issue in African American communities, and in the United States more broadly, movements for women's reproductive rights nonetheless became more visible during the early twentieth century.[197] *They That Sat in Darkness*

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[196] Letter from Mary P. Burrill to W.E.B Du Bois, May 22nd, 1928. The change in the ending, however, is not specified in the correspondence between Burrill and Du Bois.

[197] Nancy Ehrenreich, ed., *The Reproductive Rights Reader: Law, Medicine, and the Construction of Motherhod* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Ruth Dixon-Mueller, *Population Policy and*

was published first in a special issue of Margaret Sanger's *Birth Control Review*. In 1919, Max Eastman also published the play in the *Liberator*. *They That Sit in Darkness* advocates for birth control for African American women as a means to escape poverty and depicts the hardships of a woman raising children under the harsh economic conditions many African American women faced during the New Negro era. This particular issue of *Birth Control Review* was titled "The Negroes' Need for Birth Control, as Seen by Themselves." Grimke contributed her short story, "The Closing Door" for this special issue as well.[198]

The highly controversial content of Burrill's play probably explains why there is no record of its production or performance. Leading black political activists of the New Negro era, particularly those ascribing to black nationalism fought against the reproductive rights movement, which they framed as racial eugenics and as an institutionalized form of racial violence.[199] Burrill used *They That Sit in Darkness* as a

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Women's Rights: Transforming Reproductive Choice (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1993); Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992); Patricia W. Coates, *Margaret Sanger and the Origin of the Birth Control Movement, 1910-1930: The Concept of Women's Sexual Anatomy* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008); James Reed, *The Birth Control Movement and American Society: From Private Vice to Public Virtue* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978); Carole R. McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Dorothy O. Helly and Susan Reverby, *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

[198] For a discussion of "The Closing Door," and how Grimke grapples with black women's reproductive rights, see Jennifer D. Brody, "Queering Racial Reproduction: "Unnatural Acts" in Angelina Weld Grimke's "The Closing Door," *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 23, 2, (April 2003): 205-223.

[199] George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995); Craig S. Wilder, *In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Carol Allen, *Black Women Intellectuals: Strategies of Nation, Family, and Neighborhood in the Works of Pauline Hopkins, Jessie Fausset, and Marita Bonner* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998); August Meier and John H. Franklin, *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Dean. R. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

way to articulate a racially and gender-specific experience of African American women. These women confronted negative reactions from black nationalists who believed that aborting a black fetus or baby was an act of racial violence. Black women choosing to think about their rights to abortion and other reproductive rights, and specifically the necessity of birth control and reproductive health services for African American women risked being labeled as opponents of black nationalism.[200] These agendas affirmed the necessity of strengthening the black community by increasing the number of blacks. Both black men and women promoted black nationalism and viewed abortion and birth control as antithetical to a progressive, racial advancement agenda.

The S Street Salon community, most notably the black women playwrights from Washington provided Burrill a space in which she could wrestle with social and political issues that were often marginalized within New Woman and New Negro cultural and political agendas. It is unclear what the views of her fellow playwrights were regarding birth control and abortion rights, but her continued participation in the community suggests that she was not deterred from articulating an unpopular standpoint. The Saturdays she spent at the S Street Salon coupled with the intimate relationships she formed with black women Washington playwrights situates Burrill as a central figure to a New Negro women's theatre culture in the nation's capital.

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[200] There is not an extensive body of scholarship that examines black nationalism and women's reproductive rights in the early twentieth century. For discussions of black women in black nationalist movements and organizations and of ideas about black women, their rights and responsibilities, and their roles in the black nationalist movement, see Patricia Hill Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006); Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); E. Frances White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); and Kate Dossett's *Bridging Race Divides: Black Nationalism, Feminism, and Integration in the United States 1896-1935*.

As a playwright, S Street Salon participant, and a teacher, Burrill touched the lives of many black women in Washington. One of the most lauded writers of the New Negro movement, May Miller was a student of Burrill's at M Street High School. Over the course of her ninety-six year life, Miller became the most widely-published woman playwright who emerged during the New Negro era. Born on January 26, 1899, Miller came from a particularly distinguished African American family in Washington. Her father, Kelly Miller was a famous sociologist and a professor and dean at Howard University. At the age of fifteen, while enrolled at M Street High school and under the tutelage of M Street teachers Grimke and Burrill, Miller wrote her play entitled *Pandora's Box*. After graduating from M Street High School, Miller journeyed to the Hilltop as a college student. She graduated in 1920. At graduation, Miller won the university's first playwriting award for her one-act play, *Within the Shadows*. Afterward, Miller immediately began a career as teacher of Speech and English at Douglass High School in Baltimore.

Throughout her twenty-year career as a teacher at Douglass High School, Miller also joined Du Bois's Krigwa Players and developed her talents as a performer, a dramatist, and a director. During the summer months, Miller furthered her playwriting studies at Columbia University under the direction of nationally-recognized theater scholar Frederick Koch. In the mid-to-late 1920s, Miller acquired a number of accolades for her plays. In 1925, *The Bog Guide* won third place in the *Opportunity* playwriting contest. The following year, in the same literary competition, Miller's *The Cussed Thing* received an honorable mention. Miller's experiences with Grimke, Burrill, and Johnson at M Street high school, the Howard Players and the Department of Dramatic Arts, the

Baltimore Krigwa Players, Columbia University, and eventually, with her participation in the Saturday sessions at the S Street Salon contributed to her successful career as a playwright.

Miller acknowledged the significance of the black women's playwriting community in Washington throughout her career as a writer. She described the S Street Salon as "informal…Maybe ten people would attend at a time… It was a drop-in place."[201] On any given Saturday night, Langston Hughes, Du Bois, Jessie Fausset, Carter G. Woodson, or Richard Wright would attend and contribute to a writing community created by and predominated by African American women in Washington. At one particular Saturday session, Woodson encouraged Miller and playwright Willis Richardson to co-author an anthology of plays about black heroines and heroes. Published in 1935, the anthology, *Negro History in Thirteen Plays*, according to theater scholar Kathy Perkins "garnered national recognition for Miller and Richardson."[202] For this collaborative effort, Miller wrote four plays, *Sojourner Truth*, *Harriet Tubman*, *Samory*, and *Christopher's Daughter's*. Unlike most of her black Washington women playwriting counterparts, Miller did not write a play within the lynching drama tradition in the early part of career. *Nails and Thorns*, Miller's sole play in her entire body of work that focuses on lynching, was not published until 1933, nearly twenty years after writing her first play. Although Grimke, Douglass, and Burrill spoke with Miller about writing a play about lynching, a contest sponsored by the Association for Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching in 1933 ultimately motivated Miller to author a

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[201] May Miller Interview with Kathy Perkins, September 2, 1987.

[202] Perkins and Stephens, 175.

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lynching drama. Her singular foray into this genre, however, resulted in her receiving top honors in Association for Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching's contest. Before submitting a finalized version for the contest, her S Street Salon community offered feedback and suggested ideas and revisions for *Nails and Thorns*. Despite the accolades Miller garnered for this play, there is no record of the play being performed. The play focuses on the effects of lynching from the perspective of a white family. A white sheriff arrests a mentally handicapped black man. The sheriff's wife becomes increasingly concerned that the black prisoner may not be safe in jail and that a mob will attack the prisoner as a result of the lack of adequate security. The sheriff does not listen to his wife, and a mob attacks and kills the black prisoner. In the aftermath of the lynching, the sheriff's family devolves as a result of guilt and disgust. By centering her narrative on a white family, Miller invokes racial and gender ideologies that speak directly to whites and challenges whites to concern themselves with effects of lynching on not just black families, but on white families as well. One of the last plays written in the lynching tradition by the New Negro women playwrights of Washington, *Nails and Thorns* highlights the evolution of black women writers using drama as a means to articulate African American experiences and to advocate for social change.

Conclusion

At its height in the 1920s and 1930s, the S Street Salon was the most viable and welcoming space for black women writers in Washington. Although the Saturday sessions continued until Johnson's death, the collaborations and exchanges that occurred during the latter part of the New Negro era provided African American women in the

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nation's capital with an unprecedented opportunity to develop distinct creative and

politically resonant voices. The stories and plays of Grimke, Johnson, Burrill, and Miller

exemplify how this informal space founded by a black woman facilitated the emergence

of a New Negro women's ethos. The combination of formal institutional support for

black women's playwriting and black women's informal, local networks that became

solidified with the creation of S Street Salon resulted in a unique culturally expressive

and politically-engaged cadre of African American women in Washington.

The black women playwrights who engaged in the lynching drama tradition

refused to view lynching as a phenomenon that solely impacted individuals and

emphasized the impact of lynching on communities, families, and most notably,

motherhood.

> But I lived in a town once where they lynched a man and I can never
> forget how the town and people suffered. It wasn't what they did to the
> unfortunate man alone. He was out of his misery. It was what they did
> to every soul in that town. They crucified everything that was worthwhile-
> justice and pride and self-respect. For generations to come the children
> will be gathering the nails and thorns from the scene of that crucifixion.[203]

Playwrights created a critical lens to envision both the 'strange fruit' hanging from a tree

and the black and white families and communities that suffered the consequences of

white terror. Female-authored anti-lynching plays portrayed lynching as an experience of

collective victimization. The rejection of the black male subject as the sole victim of

lynching is arguably the most consistent and transgressive element of this theatrical sub-

genre. Challenging the centrality of black men to an anti-racial violence agenda provided

fodder for scathing critiques from men and women. When the first known female-

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[203] May Miller, *Nails and Thorns*, 1.1, 1933.

authored anti-lynching play was produced, Ida B. Wells-Barnett had already established herself as one of the most prominent anti-lynching activists. Wells refused to confine herself to the discussion of lynching and black men; she openly addressed black women's victimization and the effects of lynching on families and communities.

Black women playwrights such as Grimke, Johnson, Miller, and Burrill followed in her footsteps and offered other ways of examining the consequences of racial violence. Neither Wells nor the playwrights omitted the reality that black men were lynched in greater numbers than black women, and yet, all of their anti-lynching works address the numerous victimizations that occur as a result of lynching. Many of the female playwrights engaged in the anti-lynching drama tradition attempted to reconfigure lynching as a collective, victimizing experience that proliferated beside other distinct forms of racial violence to uphold white supremacy and patriarchy. Those activists who did however, were women and primarily women artists and writers. While the success of these plays as transformative sites of social and political change cannot be measured, their existence displays a collective and interracial effort by women to write themselves into both a masculinized political agenda and a male-centered narrative of racial violence victimization. To varying extents, the plays written by Grimke, Douglass, Burrill, and Miller engaged, manipulated, and debunked the interwoven ideologies of white supremacy and patriarchy that, together, condoned and advocated the subjugation of African Americans in the U.S. in the early twentieth century. The S Street Salon functioned as a literal and figurative home for black women in Washington using plays to insert their voices into New Negro political and social movements.

Chapter Five:

The "Other" Saturday Night: New Negro and Blues Culture Consciousness

Black Washingtonians used their brief respite from jobs and family

responsibilities on Saturday night to participate in a burgeoning black leisure culture that

extended beyond New Negro activism.[204] For black women, leisure activities such as

book clubs, social clubs and organizations, and performances by black artists at venues

such as the Howard Theater provided a space to articulate a sense of self outside of their

identities as family members, workers, and community leaders. Blues culture was one of

the most significant leisure spaces in which this articulation took place, particularly for

working-class African Americans. Angela Davis argues that "the blues…articulated a

new valuation of individual emotional needs and desires." Blues music was a vehicle for

African Americans negotiating what Davis calls "new psychosocial realities." [205] For

black Washingtonians, these realities included both the challenges of the Jim Crow era

and new opportunities for educational attainment, employment, political involvement,

cultural expression, and social activity.[206]

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[204] Attendees of the S Street Salon participated in black leisure culture in Washington as well. Although Johnson hosted the Saturday sessions almost every Saturday for decades, many of the most frequent participants alternated how they spent their Saturday nights in Washington. In fact, it was not uncommon for S Street Salon participants to conclude a lengthy writing session and jointly attend a show or an after hours club in the U Street Corridor. Johnson's home was located in this historic black neighborhood.

[205] Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Bilie Holiday* (New York: Random House Inc., 1998), 5.

[206] A similar argument is made by Tera Hunter in *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War*. She discusses how black women navigated limited freedoms as well as new opportunities.

African American women entered a rapidly growing cultural sphere in which autonomy, consumption, mobility, and performance intersected. Black women who engaged in particular kinds of leisure activities, such as dancing in nightclubs or attending house parties with alcohol and gambling, risked their reputations. These women refused to allow the perceptions of others or their occupational and familial responsibilities to dictate the boundaries of their lives. In this chapter, I focus on the spaces and identities that African American women developed for themselves through blues culture. Although blues culture was not gender exclusive, black women developed their own communities within blues culture by expanding their existing social and cultural networks.[207] Black women also sought out new opportunities to exist in multiple realms of the urban experience, despite the limited amount of time they had for leisure activities. Labor was the primary obligation of black women in the New Negro era. But physical freedom and greater mobility permitted African American women to imagine and shape an existence not entirely determined by obligation. Through blues culture African American women articulated a sense of self that was detached from the demands of their employers and their families.[208] Furthermore, blues lyrics functioned as an

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[207] These networks included abolitionist and suffrage groups, church communities, mutual aid associations, and civic and political clubs and organizations. Although limited by the constraints of enslavement, many African American women belonged to both formal and informal networks outside of their families pre-Emancipation. During Reconstruction and throughout the last two decades of the nineteenth century, black women rapidly formed and joined numerous organizations that served a plethora of interests ranging from the political to the leisurely.

[208] Clark-Lewis argues that Emancipation did not change how black women in Washington viewed labor as their "cardinal obligation", but she does not delve into their lives outside of this obligation with the notable exception of black women's involvement in church communities. Consequently, her framing of black women's labor during the New Negro era reaffirms the notion that black women defined and identified themselves almost exclusively within the realm of labor. Her examination of domestics in Washington only explores their "lives outside of labor" through the "respectable" space of black churches.

imaginative space for black women to express their frustrations, desires, and

disenchantment.

In 1928, Bessie Smith recorded "Washwoman's Blues." The lyrics of this song

evoke the experiences of black domestics:

All day long I'm slavin'", all day long I'm bustin' suds
All day long I'm slavin', all day long I'm bustin' suds
Gee, my hands are tired, washin' out these dirty duds
Lord, I do more work than forty-'leven Gold Dust Twins[209]
Lord, I do more work than forty-'leven Gold Dust Twins
Got myself a achin' from my head down to my shins

Sorry I do washin' just to make my livelihood
Sorry I do washin' just to make my livelihood
Oh, the washwoman's life, it ain't a bit of good

Rather than be a scullion cookin' in some white folks' yard
Rather than be a scullion cookin' in some white folks' yard
I could eat aplenty, wouldn't have to work so hard

Me and my ole washboard sho' do have some cares and woes
Me and my ole washboard sho' do have some cares and woes
In the muddy water, wringin' out these dirty clothes.[210]

According to music historian Daphne Duval Harrison, black women blues artists such as

Bessie Smith, served "as pivotal figures in the assertion of black women's ideas and

ideals from the standpoint of the working class and the poor."[211] Furthermore, Harrison

identifies blues singers such as Smith, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, and Ida Cox as

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[209] Gold Dust Twins references a brand of washing powder popular during the 1920s. The product was marketed as an all-purpose cleaner that could make several household cleaning jobs easier. The packaging of product included the image of two "pickaninnies." This image was one of the most well-known trademarks of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The back of box features images of the "two pickaninnies" performing several of the household chores that African American women domestics performed.

[210] Bessie Smith and Spencer Williams, "Washwoman's Blues," Columbia 14375-D, August 24, 1928.

[211] Daphne D. Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 10.

"spokespersons" and "interpreters" for black working class women during the New Negro era. Their songs expressed the realities of black women striving to navigate a terrain in which their bodies, aspirations, and experiences were marginalized socially, culturally, and politically. "Washwoman's Blues" connected the artistic expression of a nationally recognized African American woman performer to the experiences of millions of African American women working in domestic service. While the song illuminated the experience of being a domestic, the final stanza signaled that African American domestic workers had lives outside of their labor. The "cares" and "woes" of which Smith sang spoke to a fuller humanity of African American women that was not determined by their occupational status alone. The lyrics of "Washwoman Blues," revolved around the labor of African American washwomen, but the concluding lines refuted the equation of black women's lived experiences with their labor. Through this song, the realities of domestics' lives materializes. In this imaginative space, black women could express their dissatisfaction with still not having full control of their lives. This blues anthem for African American women domestics gestured toward a desire for a sense of personal autonomy and freedom.

As the scholarship on African American women shows, the majority of black women in the United States were employed as domestic servants throughout much of the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries. Whether as a personal domestic servant for a single family or as a laundress for several families, black women labored in other people's houses to support themselves and their families.[212] In this sense, the labor

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[212] Wealthy black families in cities such as Washington also employed African American women as domestics in their homes. The ability to employ domestic servants signaled affluence and an elite social

of African American women during this period mirrored that of African American women in slavery.[213] Although emancipated from the institution of chattel slavery, harsh economic realities compelled black women to perform strikingly similar kinds of work in low paying jobs as domestic servants.

Most African American women entered into domestic service out of necessity and endured exploitative working conditions. Some black women chose particular kinds of jobs, such as laundry work, because it allowed them to stay in their homes, away from their white employers. Black domestics working in the homes of white families often received low wages and worked almost every hour of the day. Working in these homes, black women also encountered threats of physical and sexual violence similar to the violence female slaves combated during slavery.[214] Smith's "Washwoman Blues," depicted a common experience for black women in the New Negro era, while also attempting to capture the personal feelings and attitudes of these women regarding their work.

status. Though viewed as preferable employers by many African American women domestics, domestics received similar low-paying wages from wealthy, African American employers.

[213] This labor included cooking for, cleaning the house of, doing the laundry for, and providing other domestic duties in the homes of plantation owners. David B. Gaspar and Darlene C. Hine, eds., *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) and Deborah G. White *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1999) discuss the labor female slaves performed. Jacqueline Jones' *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, From Slavery to the Present*, Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labor After the Civil War* detail the labor of black women post-emancipation and compare the black women's labor during and after slavery.

[214] The violence women experienced during slavery is well documented in Deborah G. White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, David B. Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, and Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). Thavolia Glymph, Tera Hunter, and Jacqueline Jones address the similarities in the violence black women confronted pre- and post-emancipation.

In the first verse, Smith labels the labor domestics perform as "slavin." She

directly correlated the tasks performed by black women domestics and the hours these

women spend performing these tasks with slavery. Furthermore, Smith expressed the

fatigue domestics felt. In historian Elizabeth Clark-Lewis's interviews with New Negro

era domestics in Washington fatigue and the unending demands of being a domestic

feature prominently. According to former domestic Weida Edwards, "You had to do

everything, twenty four hours to the day."[215] African American domestics in Washington

also explicitly connected their experiences as domestics to that of slaves. This

connection rested upon a collective expectation among African Americans that the labor

conditions they endured during slavery would be a historical memory and not a

continued, lived reality.   In reference to her white employer, Darethia Handy recollected

that "she'd just keep you doin' this or that to have something to say or do. She didn't

really care about the house- she just wanted you running and doin' for her. Like my

people talk about when they was in slave times in Cookson."[216] That's just what that

woman wanted- a slave."[217] For black domestics in Washington, the first and second

verses of Smith's Washwoman's Blues depicted not only the labor they performed, but

their thoughts about performing arduous tasks. These verses also spoke to the physical

toll domestic work took on black domestics' bodies. From their hands to their shins,

Smith depicted an aching black body that sacrificed itself for survival.[218]

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[215] Clark-Lewis 106.

[216] Handy is referring to Cookson, Texas. She migrated from Texas to Washington during the early 1900s.

[217] Clark-Lewis 109.

The third verse focuses on black women making a livelihood being domestics. Harsh economic realities necessitated that black women support themselves and their families. Consequently, black women, however grudgingly and reluctantly, became domestics. Smith's line "Sorry I do washin' just to make my livelihood" captured the sentiment shared by Washington domestics regarding their occupational status. Former Washington domestic Maria Stone described her working conditions as having "no peace, quiet, or semblance of order."[219] Stone's description also conveys a desire for tranquility. Even though most of these women migrated to Washington in search of an urban experience, they also sought serenity. Peace and quiet were valued as part of a notion of personal freedom. Another domestic, Virginia Lacy echoed Stone's sentiment of being on the clock twenty-four hours a day and of having such a demanding and volatile employer. Lacy recalled having to be prepared to serve "day and night- for that woman."[220] The interviews conducted by Clark-Lewis reveal an African American women's domestic community whose member articulated the same sentiments expressed in blues lyrics. Smith and other blues women gave voice to these stories. They also provided an outlet for expressing their discontent and frustrations with their occupational status, because these songs were available to African American working-class women through live performances and records.

Poor white women often had to work to survive as well. Nevertheless, substantial economic disparities between blacks and whites meant that the majority of African

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[218] In Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), Green makes a similar point about how African Americans in Memphis used the framework of slavery to describe what was most arduous about their labor.

[219] Clark-Lewis 117.

[220] Clark-Lewis 108.

American women had to become wage-earners to subsist or to support their families. Contemporaneous gender ideologies relegated women to the private sphere and stigmatized women who worked outside of the home. Within this ideological framework, it was presumed that wage-earning women occupied a certain class and marital status: a woman who worked for wages was perceived to be from a lower class status and, most likely, unmarried.[221] This ideological framework did not describe the realities of African American women's lives. Racialized, gender-specific expectations that black women would remain in the private sphere did exist. Nevertheless, most black families could not survive without the financial contributions of their daughters, wives, and mothers. After migrating to cities such as Washington, black women entered the workforce as laundresses, domestic workers, and cooks to sustain their new, urban lives.[222] African American women migrants to the nation's capital also embodied a determination to redefine their relation to their labor, shifting from constant oversight and a twenty-four-hour day, to a situation that allowed them more control over both their labor and their own lives.[223]

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[221] Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Leslie W. Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States, 1900-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Anne Marion MacLean, *Wage-Earning Women* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1910); Susan E. Kennedy, *If All We Did Was Weep at Home: A History of White Working-Class Women in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979); and Linda K. Kerber and Jane S. De Hart, eds., *Women's America: Refocusing the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[222] I posit the notion of "re-entry" because most black women migrating during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were either slaves or the children of newly emancipated slaves.

[223] Elizabeth Clark-Lewis' *Living In, Living Out*: *African American Domestics in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940* discusses the transformation of this relationship using African American women migrating to Washington from the rural South. Through interviews with former domestics in Washington during the

Migrating to urban centers like Washington offered opportunities other than new occupations for black women to configure new ideas of self. Black women migrants as well as old settlers or "Washington natives" indulged in the possibility of an urban experience that included time for parties, galas and balls, book and literary clubs, theater and music, and self-expression. These activities helped African Americans transcend the limitations of Jim Crow and the racist ideologies of white supremacy. Finding or establishing outlets for combating the harsh realities of second-class citizenship became integral to the urban, New Negro experience. The ability to partake in activities for pleasure and for embracing an emerging cultural consciousness attracted African Americans to Washington and, consequently, led to the formation of localized, black leisure subcultures that thrived throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The New Negro movement attempted to assess and address the political, social, economic, and cultural desires of a rapidly urbanizing African American population.

While all African Americans grappled with expectations within the black community that stigmatized black leisure behavior, black women confronted standards that were both higher and harsher. The politics of black respectability emphasized the importance of African American women's propriety. Prevailing cultural standards within the black community designated the private sphere as the appropriate place for black women. These standards were based as much in efforts to protect as to regulate black women's bodies. African Americans in Washington configured racially specific, class-specific, color-specific, and gender-specific leisure subcultures. For elite black women, leisure culture, specifically society culture, presented them with an outlet in which to

express their cultural identities as New Negro women. The ability to purchase fancy dresses, cosmetics, and tickets to the most exclusive black events in Washington provided these women with a sense of agency that was formerly inaccessible to even the wealthiest African Americans because of the lack of racially specific cultural and social events and venues. Following in the footsteps of late-nineteenth century black clubwomen, elite black women in the twentieth century also formed organizations to pursue specific political and cultural goals.

But what of the women who were not part of society or members of clubs? How did black women shed expectations and stereotypes to craft sites for leisure and pleasure? Although many of the social spaces that black women created during this era reinforced gendered expectations of women's propriety, some New Negro women openly rejected them. For these women, the ability to move about the city signaled the freedom to express a sense of self that did not adhere to the feminine ideals promoted in the black press and in the rhetoric of many prominent African Americans. The embrace of impropriety situated this cadre of African American women as New Negroes because they, as literary studies scholar Daphne Lamothe argues, were "wrestling with and against the constraints of representing the race."[224] More specifically, their struggles against demands to represent the race positioned them as a working-class community of New Negro women. This community of women championed the importance of self-determination for a modern black woman. New Negro working-class women struggled against representing their racial community. Negotiations and transformations of race,

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[224] Lamonthe, 181.

class, gender, color, and sexual politics occurred in blues culture in Washington. Black working-class women empowered themselves through the music black blues women.

New Negro Women Singing the Blues

At the foundation of the New Negro era was a desire for new political, social, and culture consciousnesses among African Americans. Blacks invested in leisure culture in an effort to fulfill the social and cultural aspects of this desire. Blues culture was as Angela Davis argues a "cultural articulation of African American identity and consciousness."[225] In *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestics in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940*, Elizabeth Clark-Lewis emphasizes black women's participation in religious communities as evidence of black women's experiences outside of their labor. Black churches, however, were among the many opponents to the rising popularity of blues music and black women's participation in blues culture.[226] Although Clark-Lewis does not discount black women's participation in blues culture, she does not foreground this musical tradition in her depiction of black women's lives or the connections between blues women's lyrics and the conditions, emotions, and experiences of black domestics in Washington. Most Africans American women in Washington attended religious services on Sundays and valued these services as vehicles for claiming a fuller humanity, but the

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[225] Davis 144. Furthermore, Davis argues that the music of blues women such as Smith sought to accomplish the same goals as the visual and literary art associated with the New Negro Movement. She acknowledges however, that most of the leading figures of the movement ignored and discounted the value of blues and jazz music.

[226] The following discuss the intersections between blues culture, black women, and African American churches: Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church*; C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990); Demetrius K. Williams, *An End to This Strife: The Politics of Gender in African American Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

lyrics of blues women's recordings evoked other important elements of their identity as well.[227]

Bessie Smith's blues anthem for domestics was situated in a black musical tradition that presented distinct possibilities for its performers and its audience. Blues music during the early twentieth century pushed boundaries of sexual mores, gender roles, and black respectability.[228] This musical tradition became popular in the 1920s, at the same moment in which many African Americans strove to create social spaces that emphasized respectability. Emerging in the 1920s, recorded blues music starkly contrasted with the live music played at black Washington's society events. A distinct black working-class consciousness pervaded the blues. Notably, some of the most prominent blues singers were women. Because of the prevalence of sexual imagery, the depiction of non-traditional gender roles, the use of profanity, and the privileging of black working-class experiences, many black Washingtonians and prominent figures of the New Negro era distanced themselves from the blues.[229]

The black women who participated in blues culture, whether by choice or because they were excluded from elite society, embraced it as a means to escape the harsh

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[227] Scholars of African Americans in Washington such as Letitia W. Brown, Kate Masur, Nelson F. Kofie, Sharon Harley, and Jacqueline Moore highlight the importance of black churches to Washington's African American community. My argument, however, suggests that a black women's blues tradition also occupied a distinct place within African American communities.

[228] See Francis Davis, *The History of the Blues: The Roots, The Music, The People* (New York: Hyperion, 1995); Imamu A. Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980); David Evans, *Ramblin' on My Mind: New Perspectives on the Blues* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Daphne D. Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*; Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*.

[229] Davis 144. The exception to this, however, was Langston Hughes. Hughes embraced blues culture and the themes and narratives extant within the culture.

realities of their lives.[230] Blues music and blues artists were featured in very few formal

spaces in Washington. Consequently, the consumption of blues music was primarily a

private, although not necessarily an individual experience. Washington was one of the

larger markets for recorded blues music.[231] Blues music recordings played on

phonographs provided the soundtrack for working-class African American parties and

social gatherings. More specifically, the lyrics of these recordings provided a popular

culture forum for depicting black working class women's experiences and feelings during

the New Negro era. The lyrics were infused with direct references, allusions, and double

meanings regarding African American life, particularly the lives of black domestics.

Black women blues artists dominated the recording industry in the 1920s. One of

the first commercial hits of the blues music genre was Mamie Smith's version of Perry

Bradford's "Crazy Blues." Released in 1920, 75,000 copies of the recording sold within

the first month. As detailed by blues scholars Angela Davis, Daphne Harrison, Robert

Dixon, and John Goodrich, major record labels such as Columbia and Paramount

recognized the commercial viability of blues music and particularly the potential for

black women artists. In 1923, Bessie Smith's first recording, a cover of Alberta Hunter's

"Down Hearted Blues," sold over 750,000 copies in less than six months.[232] Most blues

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[230]Historian Jacqueline Moore explored culture and leisure among the black elite in Washington during late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and concluded leisure provided an escape from the daily struggles of racism. Her focus on the black elite, however, does not incorporate blues culture in Washington and how the black elite responded to the rise of blues music and blues clubs in the nation's capital.

[231] Davis' *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Daphne Duval Harrison's *Black Pearls*, and Robert Dixon and John Goodrich's *Recording the Blues* (New York: Stein & Day, 1970) discuss the popularity of recorded blues music in predominantly African American markets such as Washington, Chicago, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. Although there are no specific numbers about sales, each author identifies Washington as a prime market because of its substantial black working-class community.

[232] Chris Albertson, *Bessie* (New York: Stein & Day, 1972), 76.

recordings sold for around one dollar, placing them in the consumption budgets of working-class African Americans, although as luxuries.[233] Although some domestics made as little as five dollars a month for their services, more appear to have made between five and ten dollars a week.[234] While barely enough for subsistence, black women did use their wages to participate in leisure and consumer cultures by purchasing beauty products and blues recordings of artists like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey. Combined sales for Rainey, Smith, Cox and other famous blues women were in the millions. Until the Great Depression, the recordings of black blues by black women and the purchasing of these records by African American propelled a multimillion dollar industry.

The sounds of Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Ida Cox signaled a temporary release from a world in which blacks arduously toiled and an entry into a space in which the voices and narratives of black women articulated a sense of possibility and agency for these women. The lyrics of songs such as Ma Rainey's "Bo-Weevil Blues," "Broken-Hearted Blues," and "Dream Blues," were sexual, provocative, profane, emotional, and emphatic.[235] In "Bo-Weevil Blues," a song written by Rainey, she sings:

> I don't want no man to put no sugar in my tea
> I don't want no man to put no sugar in my tea
> Some of 'em so evil, I'm afraid he might poison me
>
> I went downtown, and bought me a hat
> I brought it back home, I laid it on the shelf

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[233] Derrick Stewart-Baxter, *Ma Rainey and the Classic Blues Singers* (New York: Stein & Day, 1970), 2. From the interviews Clark-Lewis conducted, salaries for most black women domestics ranged from five dollars a month to fifteen dollars a day.

[234] Clark-Lewis's *Living In, Living Out* and Moore's *Leading the Race.*
[235] Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, "Bo-Weevil Blues," Paramount 12603-B, 1927; Rainey, "Broken-Hearted Blues," Paramount 12364-A, 1926; and Rainey, "Dream Blues," Paramount 12098, 1924.

Looked at my bed, I'm getting' tired of sleepin' by self

Rainey metaphorically articulates a lack of desire for having sex with a male partner. The poisoning she fears also speaks to both potential literal and figurative consequences of engaging in sexual activity with men. A black woman could contract a sexually transmitted infection from her male partner or she could be emotionally "poisoned" by such relationship. By the end of the song, however, Rainey laments not having a sexual or romantic partner. It is possible that Rainey is gesturing toward romantic and physical relationships with women because she declares her distaste for men. It is also possible that she was expressing frustration with men.[236] Either possibility disrupted prevailing heteronormative ideologies, which were not race-specific. Women, such as Lucy Diggs Slowe and Mary Burrill, who shared their lives together did not fit into the New Negro ideal of an acceptable family and neither did black women openly critical of black men.[237] Yet black women sharing the sentiments expressed in "Bo-Weevil Blues" could purchase Rainey's recording and hear their frustrations come to life through metaphor and allusion. Blues women, through their lyrics, crafted an imagined space in which black working-class women could grapple with their gender and sexual identities. These songs gave black working-class women a voice without demanding that they themselves

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[236] Blues scholars such as Davis and Harrison also address non-heteronormative sexual themes in blues women's music. Although not explicit, a recurring theme in blues lyrics is black women's dissatisfaction with heterosexual relationships as well as black women engaging in same-sex relationships.

[237] In *Inventing the New Negro*, Lamothe discusses the ideal of the black family, which included a black male patriarch and a "respectable" black woman as husband/wife, father/mother. Idealized African American relationships and families are also discussed in Jennifer D. Brody, *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998) and Ann DuCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

explicitly express their feelings about the social realities of being a New Negro working-class woman and fully risk their reputations within African American communities.

In "Dream Blues," Rainey spoke to the mistreatment of black working-class women, specifically by their lovers, but also by society in general. She laments "Lord, I wonder, what am I to do/ Lord, Lord, I wonder, what am I to do/When everybody try to mistreat you." The mistreatment of which Rainey sang could be exploitative labor, political disenfranchisement, segregation and racial discrimination, physical and rhetorical racial and sexual violence, or beauty ideals that demonized black women's physical attributes. "Dream Blues" focuses on a dream in which a man mistreats his woman, but expands in the fourth stanza to think about the mistreatment of black women more broadly. The aching and crying of black women becomes visible through this recording. Beyond oral histories of black women during this era, very little documentation of black women's feelings regarding their personal and professional lives exist. The lyrics of Rainey and other blues singers attempting to compose reality-based recordings, therefore, function as archives for the sentiments and emotional experiences of New Negro working-class women. Similar to black women playwrights capturing the political perspectives of African American in anti-lynching dramas, the lyrics of blues women embraced the particularities of black working-class life to represent both the joys and sorrows of African American women.

Lyrics about polyamorous relationships, drinking liquor and becoming intoxicated, being sexually satisfied, rejecting marriage, and even domestic violence were common in among black women blues singers.[238] In Rainey's, "Cell Bound Blues," she

tells a story of a couple physically fighting, the woman shooting and killing her male

companion, and that women being jailed for the murder and not understanding why.[239] In

the recording, Rainey explains that "I walked in my room the other night/ My man

walked in and begin to fight/ I took my gun in my right hand,/ "Hold him, folks, I don't

wanna kill my man."/ When I did that, he hit me 'cross my head/ First shot I fired, my

man fell dead." With these verses, Rainey sheds light upon intra-racial violence and the

reality that tumultuous relationships between black men and women existed. The

prevailing ideal of heteronormative and patriarchal relationships was not a lived reality

for all black women. Although statistics and other forms of documentation about intra-

racial domestic violence do not exist, the recurrence of themes of domestic violence in

blues women's lyrics is suggestive of black women's concern, if not necessarily their

direct experiences with physically abusive relationships.[240] Furthermore, the abused

women in songs such as "Cell Bound Blues" were not just victims. They fought back

and in extreme cases, killed their abusers. The women in blues songs about domestic

violence, as Angela Davis affirms, did not "perceive or define themselves as

powerless."[241] New Negro women rejected the notion of powerlessness. For domestics

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[238] Angela Davis compiled many of the lyrics of black women blues singers in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. Davis explores the significance of these themes for black women and connects them to what she identifies as a working-class black feminist consciousness.

[239] Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, "Cell Bound Blues," Paramount 12257, 1925.

[240] In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminisms*, Davis argues that the lack of documentation about domestic and sexual violence within black communities stems from the desire for African Americans to counter racist stereotypes of black men as violent, savage, and uncontrollable. Furthermore, Davis asserts the difficulty of acknowledging abuse perpetrated by those who are themselves abused. Blues women were among the few to break the silence regarding this violent reality, but within the confines of fictional, musical narratives.

and other working-class black women in Washington, blues lyrics that evoked a newly empowered African American woman resonated with their desire for autonomy and self-determination. From Smith's "Black Mountain Blues" and "Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair" to Rainey's "See See Rider Blues" and "Rough and Tumble," blues women presented African American women unafraid of challenging the men in their lives and taking action against men who were emotionally and or physically abusive.[242] Despite the sensationalist quality of such violent narratives, these lyrics became part of a cultural consciousness that privileged the stories of women for whom black respectability politics seemed at odds with the realities of a modern world.

As historian Daphne Harrison has argued, blues women served as interpreters and spokespersons for working-class women. Black women in Washington who purchased blues recordings and who played blues at their social gatherings used this music as a means to transgress the boundaries of black respectability and to explore new gender and sexual identities. When the blues recordings of black women artists played at social gatherings, African American women who visibly enjoyed this music became aligned with a more public identity that rejected respectability and championed women's personal autonomy and the fulfillment of their desires. Consequently, blues music most frequently played in the privacy of African American homes. Black women risked being labeled as promiscuous, lascivious, or morally depraved if they indulged in blues culture; these labels had tangible consequences for black women. This context suggests that

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[241] Davis 34.

[242] Bessie Smith, "Black Mountain Blues," Columbia 114052-D, 1924; Smith, "Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair," Columbia 14209-D, 1927; Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, "See See Rider Blues," Paramount 12252, 1925; and Rainey's "Rough and Tumble Blues," Paramount 12303, 1926.

blues culture was as much a private as a public affair. A woman's reputation in a

community such as the African American community in Washington could affect which

civic and social clubs a woman could join, whether a woman would receive invitations to

black social events, and her prospects for both romantic and plutonic relationships.[243]

Despite the threat of exclusion from some of black Washington's most celebrated social

clubs and organizations such as the Bethel Literary Club, several black women in

Washington used blues music to articulate a New Negro leisure identity. The voices and

lyrics of black women blues singers echoed a budding consciousness among New Negro

working-class women in the nation's capital and throughout the United States.

Conclusion

Black Washington offered leisure spaces that often re-inscribed rigid class

boundaries. The class distinctions among black women during the New Negro era were

arguably most evident in the leisure activities these women had access to on any given

Saturday night. Society culture embraced propriety and exclusivity. Very few black

women in Washington could attend the debutante balls and seasonal galas held by social

clubs and elite societies who often had long histories in the nation's capital. Black

working-class women invested in blues culture during their leisure time to further explore

the parameters of their New Negro identities. Excluded from white leisure spaces as well

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[243] The intersection of social status, reputation, and respectability in black Washington is discussed in-depth in Jacqueline M. Moore's *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999 and Audrey E. Kerr's *The Paper Bag Principle: Class, Colorism, and Rumor and the Case of Black Washington, D.C.*, Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2006. Both Moore and Kerr emphasize the importance of feminine propriety and respectability for black women seeking acceptance into many of black Washington's social, cultural, and civic clubs and organizations. Kerr, in particular, explores how rumors about black women circulate and how those rumors come into existence. Women associated with blues culture in Washington often were at the center of rumors in black Washington.

as many elite black leisure spaces, black poor and working-class women seeking to articulate a modern sense of personal autonomy created a leisure subculture that revolved around musical expression of their interests and perspectives. The lyrics and sounds of black blues women provided a soundtrack for black women from the lower class in Washington crafting leisure spaces in which they could shed the vestiges of a former epoch and to embrace the possibilities of a New Negro sensibility. Through this leisure subculture, black women in D.C. could explore freedom, not only as desired political reality, but as a social, sexual, and cultural reality. For non-elite African American women, blues culture afforded an opportunity to articulate a sense of freedom to entice in pleasure. New Negro women invested in this culture to engage in a New Negro experience that did not pivot around their labor, political activity, or their families. These women embraced the ability to enjoy, relax, and consume as fundamental to their expression of a New Negro womanhood ethos.

Conclusion:

Rethinking New Negro and Black Modernity

Black women in Washington, D.C. created and claimed New Negro womanhood by reconfiguring prevailing racial and gender ideologies. New Negro women used their bodies, higher education, aesthetic and expressive practices, and political activities to situate themselves within the "modern world." The desire for a modern subjectivity extended beyond political rights and equal access to educational and employment opportunities, to include participation in pleasure economies, purchase of products that adorned the body, the rejection of intra-racial gender hierarchies, and the formation of communities that nurtured the humanity and potential of black women. The combination of political standpoints and activities, cultural and aesthetic innovations, educational goals and aspirations, and leisure activities of black women in D.C. resulted in varying formations of New Negro womanhood in the nation's capital.

Class, race, religion, urbanity, domesticity, labor, gender, sex, sexuality, political and organizational affiliations were integral in black women's expressions of New Negro womanhood. Early twentieth century Washington was particularly significant because of the abundance of political activities, educational and professional opportunities and cultural and expressive practices that flourished among black women in this urban space. Washington's New Negro women are important in understanding how ideas about how political, economic, social and cultural agency for black women challenged New Negro's ideological focus on black men and New Woman's ideological focus on white women. Gender, as black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins, explicates "has a racial face,

whereby African American women, African American men, White women, and White men occupied distinct race/gender categories within an overarching social structure that proscribed their prescribed place."[244] For black women during the New Negro era, black men's experiences and perspectives were privileged and positioned as synonymous with the black experience. The ideologies of the "New Woman" also presumed that all women were white.[245] This presumption led to the limited visibility of racial oppression and racial particularities on the New Woman agendas. The liberatory potential of the ideas of the New Negro and the New Woman was limited by their neglect of their respective complicity in the oppression of black women.

New Negro womanhood encompassed black women's ideas about their own position as modern historical subjects. New Negro Womanhood was not a movement per se, but a range of ideas about black women's identities and their continual development during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although Washington D.C. is the focus of this dissertation, the city was not wholly exceptional in regards to New Negro women's identities. Black women's experiences in Washington D.C. offer both a representative and a unique understanding of how black women engaged with black modernity in an urban context. The particularity of Washington stems from the numerous resources and institutions that supported black women's efforts to claim modern identities such as Howard University, M Street High School, numerous clubs and organizations, and a dynamic community infrastructure for African Americans that dated

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[244] Collins, Patricia Hill, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, New York: Routledge, 2004, 221.

[245] In Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's *"African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race,"* Higginbotham discusses the unstated premise of racial homogeneity (whiteness) and the subsequent universalizing of women's culture and oppression as well as the investment and complicity of white women in the oppression of African Americans, and specifically African American women.

back to the late eighteenth century. The expansion of opportunities for black women in politics, for leisure and consumption, in education, and in arts and culture, however, occurred in New York, Chicago, Paris, and numerous other cities throughout the African diaspora with existing and growing populations of people of African descent. New Negro womanhood as an ethos encapsulated the political, social, and cultural aspirations of women of African descent attempting to participate in and configure black modernity.

The specific meanings and historical consequences of black modernity for black women reveal a distinct history of defiance, self-realization, individual and collective identity formation and resistance and struggle. New Negro women etched out the parameters of individual and collective aspirations and desires within a modern world in which they were treated as second-class citizens. Black women in Washington, D.C. negotiated the historical entanglement of democratic ideals, white supremacist ideology, dominant patriarchy, black patriarchy, and American modernity (in its broadest sense) in their public and private lives. For New Negro women in Washington, the significance of claiming a space within the modern world extended beyond the civil and political rights supposedly guaranteed by the Constitution. These women articulated a desire to define oneself and one's communities in a way that recognized the humanity and personhood of black women. Styling one's hair, establishing literary clubs on college campuses, or attending an after-hours jazz or blues set in Washington's U Street corridor are varying iterations of black women striving for modern subjectivities.

From the seemingly mundane realm of hairstyles to the anti-lynching campaigns waged largely by African American women, New Negro womanhood was a space in which black women could envision and create modern black womanhood. Through

various iterations of this consciousness that evolved out of this space, black women functioned as authorial, modern subjects. While still combating prevailing racist, sexist, and classist notions, New Negro women in D.C. embraced the importance of individual and collective affirmation and fulfillment. Their social networks, political organizations, hair salons, and leisure activities became as significant as their occupations and families in how these women perceived and identified themselves. The physical emancipation of black women from slavery did not eradicate the psychological and emotional scars of enslavement or liberate these women from the racial caste system of the Jim Crow era. New Negro womanhood was among the strategic interventions of black women seeking to cope with Jim Crow, racial violence, black patriarchy and the perpetuation of white cultural hegemony.

Black women in D.C. participated in institutions, movements, and daily activities that explored this newfound sense of autonomy, however limited. This autonomy was challenged not only by the realities of Jim Crow, but by black men as well. Relationships between black men and black women are particularly intriguing when examining black women's investment in new Negro womanhood during an era in which the plight of black men became practically synonymous with the plight of African America in its entirety. Although many black women in D.C. did not reject the idea that race trumped gender in the larger context of fighting for equality, many Washington black women vehemently fought for gender equality with comparable tenacity.

Emancipation and the subsequent migration of many black women to urban centers such as Washington offered these women new opportunities to define themselves outside of marriage and motherhood. These domestic identities remained integral to how

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black women perceived themselves, and yet black women in Washington openly expressed identities unrelated to their status as wives or mothers. The processes of psychological and emotional emancipation of black women opened the door for ideas about what black women could pursue, challenge, and configure. Armed with both skepticism and optimism about American democracy and racialized gender hierarchies, African American women in Washington and in urban centers throughout the African diaspora imagined new possibilities for black women in the United States through the lens of New Negro womanhood.

"Configuring Modernities" is an urban, gender history of African American women in Washington. Historians of black women juggle desires to explore the distinctiveness of black women's experiences and to move these experiences from the periphery to the center without displacing those already existing at the center or reifying the power of the center. Broadening how historians think about black women's public behavior during this era opens the door for new considerations of black women's experiences. Furthermore, my dissertation pushes the boundaries of U.S, women's, and African American history to include the experiences women who challenged dominant ideologies of white supremacy and patriarchy and who confronted restrictive and limiting ideologies within communities combating these dominant ideologies. I also expand how we think about Jim Crow era black women and black modernity. New Negro women in Washington made specific claims about modern black womanhood. Using these women of the urban upper south, we broaden our understanding of pre-World War I iterations of New Negro identity and of black women's multifaceted engagement with political and cultural currents that often marginalized their voices. The racism of white women and the

sexism of black men compelled New Negro women to navigate the oppressive strictures of white racism and black sexism within progressive movements for political and social change. Black women created a space where women could simultaneously address racist and sexist ideologies.

By expanding the spatial and temporal framing of the New Negro era to encompass new locations of political and cultural activity and earlier decades of African American participation in these activities, African American women become more visible as architects of the New Negro experience. Black women in Washington began fashioning themselves as new and modern as early as the 1890s. The mass migration of black women to Washington largely occurred between 1860 and 1900. During the first decade of twentieth century, black women in Washington were administrators at local schools, had created an alternative advertising discourse for marketing black beauty products, and were re-imagining their political strategies for demanding universal suffrage. "Configuring Modernities" re-periodizes the New Negro era to engulf new activities and perspectives of black women that emerged during the first and second waves of mass migration to the urban, upper south. Using World War I as a beginning point for thinking about New Negro ideology renders invisible the pre-War efforts of African American women attempting to articulate new ideas about being modern. The influx of black women to New York occurred later than that to Washington. Consequently, privileging New York as the preeminent site for New Negro culture and consciousness heavily relies upon focusing on the effects of World War I on African Americans. Although the Great War affected black women, primarily black men experienced the war first-hand. Positing World War I as foundational to New Negro

ideology privileges black men and black masculinity as the driving force behind a New Negro movement. Black women and men, however, began envisioning and constructing new ideologies and political, social, and cultural spaces almost thirty years before U.S. victory in World War I.

At the center of this project are fundamental questions: how did New Negro women simultaneously grapple with multiple oppressive ideologies? What spaces were integral to struggling against racial and gender ideologies that relegated black women to the peripheries of political and cultural currents? How did black women view the modern world and their status within it? "Configuring Modernities," responds to each of these questions by illuminating the experiences of African American women in Jim Crow Washington. Through exploring diverse, but connected arenas of black women's culture, I introduce New Negro womanhood as a multi-pronged path to claiming a distinct place within modernity. Political and cultural modernities intersected in the space of New Negro womanhood. For black women in Washington, and throughout urban spaces in the African diaspora, this intersection propelled a reconfiguration of self and a re-imagining of aspiration and possibility.

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