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“A CRUSADE AGAINST THE DESPOILER OF VIRTUE”:
BLACK WOMEN, SEXUAL PURITY, AND THE GENDERED POLITICS OF THE
NEGRO PROBLEM

1839-1920

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“A Crusade Against the Despoiler of Virtue”: Black Women, Sexual Purity, and the
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“A Crusade Against the Despoiler of Virtue”: Black Women, Sexual Purity, and the Gendered Politics of the Negro Problem, 1839-1920 is a study of the activism of slave, poor, working-class and largely uneducated African American women around their sexuality. Drawing on slave narratives, ex-slave interviews, Civil War court-martials, Congressional testimonies, organizational minutes and conference proceedings, *A Crusade* takes an intersectional and subaltern approach to the era that has received extreme scholarly attention as the early women’s rights movement to understand the concerns of marginalized women around the sexualized topic of virtue. I argue that enslaved and free black women pioneered a women’s rights framework around sexual autonomy and consent through their radical engagement with the traditionally conservative and racially-exclusionary ideals of chastity and female virtue of the Victorian-era. This is the first full-length project to situate enslaved women within a long tradition of African American women’s struggles for self-defense and sexual self-sovereignty.

This project focuses on the moral imperatives and objectives that governed individual black women's sexual agency. *A Crusade* interrogates the ways that black women's sexual choices represented their aspirational selves. This project treats the question of what the meaning of sex – sexual identity, sexual practices, biological sex and its attendant duties – was in slave, poor, working-class and uneducated black women's meanings of freedom. Revisiting the concept of chastity, a term that has been largely read as oppressive in feminist scholarship, this project outlines slave, poor and uneducated black women's weaponization of this ideal for their own liberation. Fundamentally, this a story of the ways that marginalized women have deployed traditionally conservative and racially-exclusionary ideals for means for radical ends.

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Illustrations

“Slave Cabin, Built Ca. 1830, Photograph.” Education at Library of Virginia. Library of Virginia, page 123.

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INTRODUCTION:

“An impure woman is even dead while she liveth”¹: The Respectability of Subaltern Women

As the nineteenth century came to end, the African American Fisk University professor and minister, Eugene Harris was deeply disturbed. The conditions of black sexual life as he perceived them were at a point of crisis. In his book, *An Appeal for Social Purity in Negro Homes* (1898), he rallied for action. “I plead for the women of society to drop every member that is infected with poison and to make a crusade against the despoiler of virtue, and the foe of the family,” he wrote.² Originally produced as a sermon, Harris’s text was revealing of the deeply sexualized anxieties of the African American middle-class at the turn of the twentieth century.³ “The women have a voice in this country in both church and society, and they ought to use their power for the correction of social evils,” he added.⁴ Echoing the arguments of many elite African American men, Harris warned of a “rampant” and severe deficiency in the sexual and moral stature of black women.⁵ He urged black middle-class women to assume vigilance and leadership in the fight against sexual and moral decay, reaffirming the popular belief that “a race can rise no higher than its women.”⁶

Of course, the “women of society” that Harris addressed were neither unfamiliar with, nor un-invested in, this call to action. In 1896, two years before the publication of

¹ Eugene Harris, *An Appeal for Social Purity in Negro Homes: A Tract* (Nashville, Tennessee: 1898), 14.

² Ibid.

³ The anxieties of African American reformers coexisted with the period commonly referred to as ‘the nadir.’ The ‘nadir of American race relations’ or simply, ‘the nadir’ was coined by Rayford W. Logan to describe the period following the demise of Reconstruction up until 1901. See Rayford W. Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: the nadir, 1877-1901* (Dial Press, 1954).

⁴ Harris, *An Appeal*, 13.

⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁶ For a discussion of this common belief, see Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 43.

An Appeal, African American clubwomen from across the United States organized to establish the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). Along with its key goals of racial self-help, the NACW directed its energies to dispelling the negative public image of African American womanhood and sexuality. Stereotypes of black female sexual promiscuity in the era of Jim Crow segregation attended pervasive sexual assault and harassment against black women. Members of the aspiring and elite classes, NACW women were invested in a 'politics of respectability' as part of a public strategy for equal treatment, civil rights, racial uplift and sexual self-defense.⁷ In their endorsement of elitist and gendered strategies of racial uplift, black clubwomen and reformers reinforced the fraught assumption that respectability was an exclusively middle-class value, and that morality was the exclusive property of the elite.

This is a study of the moral agency and sexual respectability of slave and poor freedwomen before and during the period where respectability became a *politics* of the African American middle-class in the late nineteenth century. It is about the masses of women at the center of a perceived sexual and moral crisis by the late nineteenth century; a construction defined as the 'Negro problem.' The 'Negro problem' was a Southern white invention that challenged the interracial democratic vision of the project of Reconstruction, and later justified racial segregation, anti-black violence and African American disenfranchisement. Subjecting African Americans to racialized stereotypes and pathology, white Southerners highlighted a 'Negro problem' as they sought to regain political power and social domination. They charged the newly freed black community with being a burden on the South that needed to be controlled and contained. Middle

⁷ For a discussion of African American alternative class structures see Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004). On African American respectability politics, see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

class and educated African American reformers internalized many of these claims, especially those regarding the moral and sexual conduct of the black masses. They responded by emphasizing class differences within the race.⁸ In turn, they betrayed a longstanding tradition within the African American female community; a tradition rooted in the moral agency and respectability of enslaved women.⁹

Spanning the antebellum-era through to 1920, this project assesses the ways that enslaved, fugitive, contraband, refugee and poor freedwomen with no formal education, in addition to middle class women, weaponized values and performances of feminine respectability in their racial, gendered, and sexual struggle for liberation. It draws on a wide range of sources, including slave narratives, ex-slave interviews, Civil War court-martials, congressional testimonies, organizational records, conference proceedings and African American newspapers. It tells the story of the subaltern and marginalized black women who, in the depth of normalized and systemic sexual degradation, embarked on a crusade in pursuit of their own vision of freedom and virtue for themselves and their descendants.¹⁰ Sexual activism was a means for African American women to achieve

⁸ For an in-depth discussion of this phenomenon, see Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996)

⁹ Historians such as Martha S. Jones have produced excellent studies of the intersection of notions of respectability and women's rights in free African American women's public culture in the antebellum-era and late nineteenth. This dissertation brings into critical view the fact that ideals of feminine virtue and respectability were weaponized by the majority class of African American women, who were slaves. See Martha S. Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007). Historian Nneka D. Dennie's recent dissertation, "(Re)defining Radicalism: The Rise of Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability, 1831-1895" also explores the place of respectability politics among what she defines as nineteenth century black feminists. The focus on women including Maria Stewart, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells and Anna Julia Cooper, shows that the respectability of subaltern or enslaved women is not central to Dennie's focus. See Nneka D. Dennie, "(Re)defining Radicalism: The Rise of Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability, 1831-1895," (Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts Amherst, September 2015).

¹⁰ I borrow the term 'subaltern' from the field of postcolonial studies to emphasize enslaved women's dehumanized position outside of the American polity, evident in the designation of all slaves as three-fifths of one person. Free black women were vastly marginalized and excluded from American society. Their claim to the rights and protections of full citizenship were ever-tenuous, if not diminished by the landmark Dred Scott ruling in 1857. While the Dred Scott ruling brought to light that all African Americans, whether free or enslaved, could not be American citizens, the distinction

freedom. I use the term “sexual activism” to encompass black women’s sexual resistance, their sexual calculations, and their struggles for sexual justice in a society that systemically devalued black womanhood.¹¹ This is the first sustained study to situate the moral and sexual agency of enslaved women within a long tradition of African American women’s struggles for dignity and sexual self-sovereignty.

This project intersects with the histories of African American women’s sexuality, African American racial uplift and respectability politics, and womanhood in the nineteenth-century United States. It draws attention to the widely-overlooked significance of the gendered ideals of chastity, purity, and female virtue of the Victorian-era within the enslaved and later freedwomen’s community. Despite their social and legal status and lack of a formal education, slave women enlisted ideals of female chastity, purity, and virtue as a mode of sexual resistance and assertion of sexual self-ownership. I analyse these concepts with the same seriousness that it has been afforded in the historical scholarship on middle-class white women in the Victorian-era and middle-class African American reformers, respectively. Fundamentally, this dissertation questions how subaltern and marginalized women have deployed ideals that have been traditionally read as conservative for their own radical ends.

Literature Review

African American Women’s Sexuality History

between being a free black person and a slave should not be forgotten. The former was marginalized and subjugated, whereas the latter could not publicly claim a right to ownership of their bodies and labor. I believe that the word *subaltern* enables a reminder of the distinction between marginalized classes with limited visibility and resources, and those who were voiceless in their subjugation.

¹¹ Beverly Guy-Sheftall, “The Body Politic: Black Female Sexuality and the Nineteenth-Century Euro-American Imagination” in Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, ed., *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), 24.

One of the governing motivations for this project lies in a reimagining of a sexual history of enslaved and freed women that uses the framework of violence *and* explores the sexual interiority of black women against this framework. Intimate histories of black women in the United States are dominated by violence taking precedence at every turn.¹² With few exceptions of studies of marriage and courtship, histories of enslaved women's rape and sexual exploitation at the hands of white slaveholders and overseers dominates our conceptualization of slave women's sexual lives.¹³ In studies of the era of Jim Crow segregation, we often learn about African American women's sexual experiences through narratives of assault and exploitation by white men, as well as abuse by black men. The limits to black women's sexual freedom in this period is also shaped by their relation to white women. For example, the ways that white women took advantage of southern gender customs to reify the presumed superiority of their womanhood over black women, and the impact that this had in black women's lives. The pervasive nature of sexual and sexualized violence in the history of black women in the United States is crucially important and must be repeated and revisited. But, as Cynthia Blair reminds us, "the focus on [certain] critical signposts [have] reproduced an account of an African American sexual past that has generated silences and exposed significant gaps in our understanding of black sexual history."¹⁴ Putting violence at the center of analyses of African American women's sexual history relegates interpretations of pleasure, eroticism, or even the spectrum of black women's ideas about sex to the shadows. As scholars

¹² Scholars such as Shatema Threadcraft are among the few that are theorizing ways of thinking about intimate histories of black women beyond the 'spectacular moments of violence.' See Shatema Threadcraft, *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹³ Examples include Tera W. Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2017); Emily West, *Enslaved Women in America: From Colonial Times to Emancipation* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015); Emily West, *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004); and Rebecca J. Fraser, *Courtship and Love Among the Enslaved in North Carolina* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

¹⁴ Cynthia M. Blair, "African American Women's Sexuality" *Frontiers* 35, no. 1 (2014): 4-10.

Treva B. Lindsey and Jessica Marie Johnson argue in an essay that explores “the possibility of an erotic mapping of slavery and resistance”: imagining slave women and freedwomen as “historically erotic subjects opens narratives of slavery to a radical black sexual interiority.”¹⁵ Moreover, to quote Lindsey and Johnson at length:

Despite the increasing rigor with which scholars are approaching slavery and erotics, the pervasiveness of intellectual scepticism reflect how deeply entrenched narratives of violation, violence, and trauma are to our understanding of black female sexuality. Emphasizing subjugation, exploitation, and dehumanization, however, cannot preclude fuller incorporation of pleasure and erotic possibility in the lives of enslaved black women.¹⁶

This dissertation examines the moral subjectivity of slave and poor freedwomen to understand how their ideas about sex and freedom or liberation shaped their resistance.

Considering the proliferation of new and provocative directions in sexuality and queer histories in the United States, the relative reticence of historical scholarship on African American women’s sexuality stands out.¹⁷ This is not without good reason. The dehumanizing dual stereotypes of the lascivious and sexually immoral Jezebel-figure and the asexual Mammy-figure explain how nineteenth century gendered racial ideology framed black women as either inviting illicit sex or non-sexual.¹⁸ And the trope of the Jezebel-figure has a stubborn and enduring legacy.¹⁹ Moreover, rape and the threat of

¹⁵ Treva B. Lindsey and Jessica Marie Johnson, “Searching for Climax: Black Erotic Lives in Slavery and Freedom,” *Meridians* 12, no. 2, Harriet Tubman: A Legacy of Resistance (2014): 171.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹⁷ These historical works have appeared in edited collections as well as single-authored studies. Examples include John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Histories: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988); Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Martha Hodes, ed., *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999); Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000); Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006); and Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2013).

¹⁸ For a discussion of the Mammy and Jezebel stereotype, see White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*.

¹⁹ For discussions of the enduring stereotype of the Jezebel-figure in contemporary culture see Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen; Shame, Stereotypes, Black Women in America* (New Haven and

rape as a persistent feature in Southern black women's lives led the veteran historian Darlene Clark Hine to suggest that African American women created a "culture of dissemblance" as a mode of sexual protection.²⁰ This "culture of dissemblance," Hines maintained, was a strategy deployed by Southern black women who participated in the Great Migration to protect their "inner lives" from vulnerability and exposure to the dangerous elements of public life and the workplace.²¹ This silence appears to be reflected among scholars of the field, in addition to the fact of the problem of an extreme dearth of sources in the archive. In her important essay "Silences Broken: Silences Kept: Gender and Sexuality in African-American History" (1999), Michele Mitchell discusses what she describes as an "investigatory reticence" regarding sexual matters. Historians' self-censoring is unlikely due to a lack of interest, and quite possibly linked to a fear of "exposing black historical subjects to scrutiny and judgement."²² The violence, the disparaging stereotypes –this is felt in the present and in the histories of African American families and communities.

This dissertation joins a growing trend in black women's sexual history that uses new analytical tools to push beyond the field's entrenched boundaries of silences around sexuality. Works such as Cynthia Blair's *I've Got to Make My Livin': Black Women's Sex-Work in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (2010), Mireille Miller-Young's *A Taste for Brown Sugar*:

London: Yale University Press, 2011) and Tamara Lomax, *Jezebel Unbowed: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

²⁰ Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance" in *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 37.

²¹ More recent works by scholars such as Danielle McGuire have pushed back on the culture of dissemblance theory. See Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

²² Blair, "African American Women's Sexuality," 7. See Michele Mitchell, "Silences Broken, Silences Kept: Gender and Sexuality in African-American History," *Gender and History* 11, no. 3 (Nov. 1999): 433-44. Emily A. Owens refers to this silence as a possible 'politics of respectability' among scholars of African American women's history. See Emily A. Owens, "Fantasies of Consent: Black Women's Sexual Labor in 19th Century New Orleans," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, July 2015).

Black Women in Pornography (2014) and Emily Owens's dissertation, "Fantasies of Consent: Black Women's Sexual Labor in 19th Century New Orleans" (2015) offer exceptional analyses of black women's various engagements with sex.²³ In each study, we find black women who entered and asserted their sexual agency in the pleasure economy, using sex in pursuit of a sense of freedom, autonomy, and often financial profit – within the broader context of violence. We find African American women using whatever tools that was available to them, including sex. The women in this dissertation were not explicitly part of the pleasure economy, and neither did they embrace alternative forms of sexual conduct to the standard of conservative Victorian Christian morality. Yet, they leveraged their sexuality in their struggle for liberation.

This dissertation would not be possible without the historical scholarship on African American women's sexual resistance and anti-rape activism in slavery and freedom. The intersectional interpretative frameworks of this field are the result of the work of black feminist historians dating back to the 1980s.²⁴ These scholars documented the myriad ways that slave women resisted the system of slavery. In addition to traditional and everyday acts of resistance, such as running away or breaking tools, enslaved women also struggled to assert control over their own bodies – and consequently their sexual and reproductive labor. Selective pregnancies, alternative

²³ See Cynthia M. Blair, *I've Got to Make My Livin': Black Women's Sex Work in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); and Owens, "Fantasies of Consent," (2015).

²⁴ For examples, see Paula J. Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Harper Collins, 1984); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South: revised with a new introduction* (1985. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999); Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994); and Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Exceptional contributions have built on this tradition, including Stephanie M. H. Camp's, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). Edited works on the history of African American women's sexuality have also emerged within recent years. See Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie M. Harris, eds., *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2018).

methods of birth control, induced miscarriages, and even infanticide comprised part of a spectrum of slave women's sexual resistance.²⁵ Works by Thavolia Glymph, Hannah Rosen, Crystal Feimster and Kidada E. Williams have shown the continuity of black women's sexual resistance and anti-rape activism in the periods of Emancipation and Reconstruction.²⁶ This project uses this literature as a model for engaging the framework of violence. It builds on the scholarship by transcending beyond the focus on violence to illuminate the moral and subjective dimension of African American women's sexual lives. In other words, it asks what were black women's ideas about sexual practices, marriage and reproduction within and against the context of sexual violence? We can learn more about black women's ideas about sexuality when we turn to the analytical tools of intellectual history.

Intimate histories of women in slavery and in freedom need to be assessed within and against the context of violence. What does it mean that many enslaved women understood sex as part of the sacred union of marriage, even if slave marriages were illegitimate? What possibilities are afoot in an exploration of the complex juncture of enslaved and freed women's sexual agency, their moral subjectivity and their sexual resistance? What moral and/or ideological values motivated black women's sexual activism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? The enslaved and poor freedwomen in this study enlisted social, cultural, and religious values around sex to challenge their systemic denial of the right to dignity, freedom from violation and the sanctity of marriage and family. They brought attention to their own exclusion from

²⁵ For an excellent history of the gendered nature of slavery see Morgan, *Laboring Women* (2004).

²⁶ See Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Crystal Nicole Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); and Kidada E. Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: New York University, 2012).

dominant gendered ideals. And they weaponized these ideals in their struggles for sexual justice and protection in formal and informal ways. This is a history of black women's sexual past that focuses on the moral and ideological – namely, black women's sexual values, ideas, attitudes, and practices. Moreover, on one end, this history shows how black women's ideas about sexuality historically lend themselves to action. On the other end, there is the fact that regardless of how one felt about sex, black women weaponized conventional notions of sex for their own purposes. Thinking within and against the context of violence, this study imagines the place of conservative and conventional ideas around sex in African American women's meanings of freedom and citizenship.

African American Racial Uplift and Respectability Politics

The scholarship on African American racial uplift in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has emphasized the class character of this movement. Racial uplift was both an ideology and a social movement. In an era of pervasive racial terror, sexual violence, segregation and disfranchisement, racial uplift ideology offered a strategy of self-help and self-protection at the same time that it sought to prove African Americans' fitness for full citizenship. Through programs of racial uplift, as historian Kevin Gaines has argued, black elites sought to fashion "a positive black identity."²⁷ For these reformers and leaders, this meant adhering to white expressions of middle-class respectability and emphasizing class differences within the race. But accentuating their similarity to their white middle-class counterparts, black reformers unintentionally naturalized racist stereotypes of sexual and moral degeneracy among the poor African American masses as they sought to help them. As much of the scholarship on racial uplift has shown, by assuming this position of racial exceptionalism and leadership, black

²⁷ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 5.

elites used racial uplift strategies to police and reform the behavior of the poor, largely rural, and largely semi- or non-literate majority.

As extremely generative as the scholarship in this field has been, the focus on African American elites in studies of racial uplift is limiting. The attention to the reform efforts, strategies and interests of formally educated, middle-class and elite African Americans forces an unnecessary departure from existing traditions within the black community. One such example emerges from late nineteenth century African American concerns with sexual respectability, namely chastity and notions of sexual purity. By privileging a class-framework in the history of African American racial uplift, scholars implicitly and explicitly conflate individual and community moral and sexual values with the class goals of an expanded post-Reconstruction educated and middle-class black elite. Scholars rarely examine the enslaved, poor and working-class origins of many of these ‘middle-class’ women. As this dissertation demonstrates in Chapter Four, ‘middle-class’ clubwomen and activists such as Victoria Earle Matthews and Jane Edna Hunter had clearly humble, poor, enslaved, or working-class origins. Their sexual protection activism was influenced by their background as well as their interactions with poor and working-class black women. Moreover, few scholars discuss the moral and sexual values of ordinary African Americans.

For example, in his pioneering intellectual history of African American leaders, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1996), Kevin K. Gaines attributes black women’s (and men’s) concerns with chastity and purity to the “bourgeois cultural values” that elites espoused to differentiate themselves from the poor and working-class majority.²⁸ Gaines asserts that doing so “affirmed their sense of status

²⁸ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 4.

and entitlement to citizenship.”²⁹ Viewing African American ideals of chastity through the prism of middle-class values, Gaines implicitly suggests that such concerns either didn’t exist or were neither central in the thought of African Americans prior to the rise of the racial uplift movement among middle class and elite black reformers in the late nineteenth-century. Gaines is indeed critical of the fact that African American leaders displaced the more broader meaning of racial uplift from its historic emphasis on personal and collective spiritual uplift.³⁰ “Although the racial uplift ideology of the black intelligentsia involved intensive soul-searching, ambivalence, and dissension on the objectives of black leadership and on the meaning of black progress,” Gaines writes, “black opinion leaders deemed the promotion of bourgeois morality, patriarchal authority, and a culture of self-improvement, both among blacks and outward, to the white world, as necessary to their recognition, enfranchisement, and survival as a class.”³¹

Sexual respectability represented a form of cultural currency for middle-class and upwardly mobile African American women who were immersed in gendered strategies of racial uplift at the turn of the twentieth century. Historian Deborah Gray White has shown in her century-long study on black clubwomen that “Chastity became a litmus test of middle-class respectability... Manners, morality, a particular mode of consumption, race work - these criteria were as important as economics for middle-class status.”³² White repeats a similar problem like Gaines; one that does not distinguish between concerns that black women inherited from their emancipated and enslaved forebears, and ones that they adopted from their ideas of bourgeois white society. Sexual danger and vulnerability was a constant feature of African American women’s lives in nineteenth-century United States. As my research shows, one of the many ways that

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 1.

³¹ Ibid., 3.

³² White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 70.

enslaved women sought to protect themselves was through their assertion and performance of sexual respectability. The strategies of sexual self-protection used by late nineteenth century African American clubwomen joined a longstanding tradition – even if a few themselves openly acknowledged and embraced this fact. In many instances, middle-class black women inherited their ideas about feminine virtue and sexual respectability from poor, formerly enslaved with little to no formal education – not vice-versa.

My research does not reject the crucial insights of Gaines, White, and the ground-breaking work of other historians in the scholarship on African American racial uplift. Rather, it shows that commitments to chastity and forms of sexual respectability were never limited to middle class reformers. It considers the costs of privileging class in the study of a group that has a different historical relation to class and class formation to mainstream, white society. Historian Michele Mitchell takes on this consideration in her exceptional book, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (2004). The notion of “racial destiny,” Mitchell argues, united the visions of divergent intraracial collectivities - class, social, political, etc. - under a common ideal. In the era of the nadir and widespread discourse around the Negro problem, Mitchell affirms that we see “critical moments when African Americans contended that the race shared particular interests as a socio-political body and that the collective’s future depended upon concerted efforts to police intraracial activity.”³³ In short, shared ideas of racial destiny transcended individual class interests. This project presents a genealogy of African American women’s sexual concerns and activism in a society that sexually subjugated and vilified black women without regard to their individual class status. This shared oppression meant that desires for sexual self-ownership and self-protection was a

³³ Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 9.

commonly shared language. Under the belief that a ‘race can rise no higher than its women,’ middle-class African American women saw their fate as inextricably linked to their poorer counterparts. Drawing a connection between enslaved women’s sexual and moral agency, and black women of the club movement, this project examines the intersection of sex with black women’s meanings of freedom and liberation.

The scholarship on African American respectability politics also influences this project. Staying true to the definition of the politics of respectability proposed by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, this dissertation considers the ways that enslaved and free black women “emphasized manners and morals while simultaneously asserting traditional forms of protest.”³⁴ The politics of respectability, as Higginbotham notes, identified with the black Baptist middle-class and working poor. It was both conservative and subversive as a strategy. It modelled ideals of manners and morals according to the dictates of mainstream middle-class society. Yet, the very act of assuming this behavior alongside protest was inherently subversive in a society that denied African Americans the right to dignity.³⁵ The politics of respectability, Higginbotham adds, “assumed a fluid and shifting position along a continuum of African American resistance.”³⁶ This dissertation pulls the timeline for such resistance back to into the antebellum-era and beyond the doctrinal confines of the Baptist church to document a long history of African American women’s concerns with sexual respectability, and their uses of performances of Christian respectability as a form of resistance. It offers an analysis of black women’s individual and collective actions before respectability became a public strategy driven by the unprecedented growth of an African American middle-class elite. It imagines the

³⁴ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 187.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

subversive and radical uses of conservative Victorian gendered ideology among subaltern and marginalized women.

Nineteenth Century US Women's History

Feminist scholars and other historians of womanhood in the nineteenth century United States debate the cultural significance of the Victorian ideal of true womanhood in antebellum society. In “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” (1966), historian Barbara Welter outlined the tenets of an ideal of middle and upper-class womanhood.³⁷ Purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity, Welter showed, constituted the reigning virtues of the ideal American woman. Occupying the domestic sphere, the true woman complemented the enterprising, rugged individualist, ideal American man. Scholars have challenged both the cultural monopoly of this so-called ‘Cult of True Womanhood’ as well as its limits. The impetus for some of these responses appears to be a struggle to reconcile the conservatism of predominantly northern, middle and upper class white women with the rise of the early women’s rights movement. For example, more recent studies on True Womanhood, Real Womanhood and the South lady archetypes show that there were competing ideals of womanhood in the nineteenth century.³⁸ Nonetheless, the ideal of true womanhood remains a dominant framework for interpreting middle class womanhood in the Victorian-era.

³⁷ See Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-174. See also Barbara Welter, *Dimity Conviction: the American woman in the nineteenth century* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1976).

³⁸ See Frances B. Cogan, *The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989) and Rebecca J. Fraser, *Gender, Race, and Family in Nineteenth Century America: From Northern Woman to Plantation Mistress* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Louise Newman’s excellent study, *White Women’s Rights* critically analyzes ideals of womanhood, white supremacy and the early US women’s rights movement. See Louise Michele Newman, *White Women’s Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

The intervention of this project into the field of womanhood in the nineteenth century US joins the literature on its limits. It builds on the research of historians such as Louise Newman and Beryl Satter who have critically analyzed the racial ramifications and blind-spots of the true womanhood ideal.³⁹ This project rests in an analysis of true womanhood's appeal outside of the frame of middle- and upper-class white womanhood. I show that enslaved, poor and uneducated African American women weaponized these ideals for their own subversive ends. I take a subaltern and intersectional approach to the era that has received scholarly attention as the early white woman's rights movement. By subaltern, I mean an analysis of women who existed outside of the American polity – enslaved women – who had no legal claim to "rights." I use the ideals that were traditionally reserved for middle- and upper-class white women, and demonstrate the ways that enslaved and freed black women pioneered a radical women's rights framework through their adoption and adaption of these very ideals. In short, black women's exclusion from the realm of true womanhood did not prevent them from enlisting *some* of its governing tenets, especially as they related to chastity and morality.

This project's intervention is influenced by the contributions of black feminist historians of enslaved and freedwomen to the field of US women's history. It builds on a theoretical framework advanced by Deborah Gray White, and others, who have stressed the ideologically 'diametrically opposed' structure of black and white womanhood in the nineteenth century US.⁴⁰ I add to the scholarship with a sustained analysis of the extent to which enslaved and freed black women were receptive to popular notions of true

³⁹ See Newman, *White Women's Rights*. See also Beryl Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) and Beryl Satter, "The Cult of True Womanhood" in *Gender: Space*, ed., Aimee Meredith Cox (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, a part of Gale, Cengage Learning, 2018).

⁴⁰ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 6.

womanhood or the ‘Southern Lady,’ and the value that each ideal held in ordinary African American women’s lives. By focusing on enslaved and later poorer black women with no formal education as sexual and moral subjects, this project offers crucial insight into the seemingly unlikely appeal of the conservative Victorian true womanhood ideal.

Placing Sex in African American Women’s Meanings of Freedom: Chastity, Purity, and Feminine Virtue

Since the sexual liberation era of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, feminists have pushed back on the traditional view of sex as a reproductive practice reserved to the confines of marriage. This shift in thought and culture reflected part of a broader sexual revolution. As the radical feminist scholar Kate Millett argued in 1970, the sexual revolution represented “an end of traditional sexual inhibitions and taboos, particularly those that most threaten patriarchal monogamous marriage: homosexuality, “illegitimacy,” adolescent, pre- and extra-marital sexuality.”⁴¹ In turn, feminists have debated various ‘sexual politics,’ ranging from dynamics of power between men and women in sexual relations, to women’s sexual agency and consent, to discussions around pornography and sex work.⁴²

Collectively, late twentieth-century feminists have contributed to a vast reshaping of acceptable mainstream attitudes towards sex, particularly as it relates to women’s

⁴¹ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 62.

⁴² The famous Barnard Conference on Sexuality held at Barnard College in 1982 was among the pivotal events fuelling feminist scholarly debates over questions related to sexual politics. Among its organizers were feminist scholars and activists Carole S. Vance, Gayle Rubin, Ellen DuBois and Ellen Willis. The conference was attended by 600 women from across the United States as well as feminists from the UK, France and Holland. One of the major texts inspired by this event is Vance’s *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. See Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston, London, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984) and Elizabeth Wilson, “The Context of ‘Between Pleasure and Danger’: The Barnard Conference on Sexuality *Feminist Review*, no. 13 (1983): 35-41.

sexuality.⁴³ The old traditional view of female sexuality as passive –which held that a young woman’s body must be guarded by her father until she is ‘given away’ in marriage to her husband – was replaced with the view of sex as potentially pleasurable and empowering for women. As scholar Carol Tarvis reflects in a review essay of the position of many of these feminists: “The experience of sex itself [...] ‘changed in the process of women’s sexual revolution,’ becoming a more open-ended kind of encounter, and the meaning of sexual changed too, from a story of ‘female passivity and surrender to an interaction between potentially equal persons.’”⁴⁴ Relatedly, feminists increasingly challenged the long view that women risked ‘taint’ and ‘corruption’ through association with illicit sex – an argument that attended patriarchal control over women’s sexuality.⁴⁵ Women’s financial independence, many feminists argued, would result in a profoundly positive and empowering change in women’s relationship to sex as well as to their own bodies. For example, greater female social and economic independence diminished the need for existing conventions that taught young women to prime themselves for marriageability through the preservation of her virginity or chastity. One of the main messages from this cultural revolution in sexual thought mandated that a woman’s ‘worth’ or ‘value’ was not tied to her sexual behavior. Because of this crucial cultural

⁴³ It is important to highlight a few points on this matter. Firstly, there have always been figures and organizations that challenged sexual norms in American society. In the late nineteenth century, free lovers and intellectual radicals challenged mainstream conventions around female sexuality and marriage. Secondly, the era of modernity from the early twentieth century has been widely interpreted as a moment of change in American sexual practices. The so-called ‘modern woman’ marked a departure from the figure of the Victorian woman. If the Victorian woman was sexually ‘pure’ and passionless, the ‘modern woman’ acknowledged women’s capacity for passion. And thirdly, feminists of the sexual revolution era in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were by no means universal in their thought. As the sexual revolution gave way to a shift in norms, new battlegrounds emerged among feminist thinkers. One of the areas of extreme contestation was the pornography industry and commercialized sex work. See Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (1984) and Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁴⁴ Carol Tarvis, “Revisiting Some Feminist Classics in Light of the New View,” *Feminism & Psychology* 18, no. 4 (2008): 561.

⁴⁵ On sexual shame as discussed by sexual revolution feminists in the late twentieth century, see Muriel Dimen, “Politically Correct? Politically Incorrect” and Dorothy Allison, “Public Silence, Private Terror” in Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (1984). See also, Carol Tarvis, “Revisiting Some Feminist Classics in Light of the New View,” (2008).

moment, notions of ‘sexual purity’ have been framed by many contemporary feminists as an oppressive patriarchal myth.⁴⁶

But while largely read as oppressive in feminist scholarship, notions of chastity, purity, and female virtue were mobilized by enslaved and freed black women fighting for sexual autonomy and dignity in the Victorian-era. I use the concepts of chastity, purity, and female virtue in this project as central sexual categories. While their meanings were often vague and overlapping, each concept represented a powerful gendered ideal in the social and political landscape of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century United States.

I define chastity in this dissertation as sexual innocence, sexual abstinence, and the restriction of sexual intercourse to the confines of marriage. This definition is drawn from its Christian definition. The biblical references to chastity are numerous. In the Book of Corinthians, a passage states: “Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.” (1 Corinthians 6: 18). In Hebrews 13:4, there is a strict association of chastity with marriage: “Let marriage be held in honour among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.” In her excellent study on the history of marriage in the slave and emancipated black community, historian

⁴⁶ Indeed, contemporary feminists, including black feminists, have launched critiques of modern day purity culture as found in the Evangelical church. Religious conservatives’ powerful emphasis on purity culture has permeated US politics, such as in the abstinence-only and abstinence-based educational policy of the Bush-era. For examples, see Jessica Valenti, *The Purity Myth: How America’s Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women* (New York: Seal Press, 2009) and Breanne Fahs, “Daddy’s Little Girls: On the Perils of Chastity Clubs, Purity Balls, and Ritualized Abstinence” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* 31, no. 3 (2010): 116-142. In a memoir, former born-again Christian, Linda Kay Klein attributes purity to culture to Evangelical Christianity as well as society’s general subjugation of women. See Linda Kay Klein, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018). There are numerous feminist blogs and articles online discussing the dangers of purity culture. Black feminists have also weighed in on the impact of this culture on black women. See Crunk Feminist Collective. “4 Reasons Why Black Women Should Reject Purity Culture.” <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2016/09/12/4-reasons-why-black-women-should-reject-purity-culture/> (accessed March 25, 2019).

Tera W. Hunter highlights the ways that slavery violated the covenant of marriage, forcing slaves to revise customary wedding vows to compensate for the lack of the civil marriage law. Emphasizing Genesis 2:24, (“For this cause will a man go away from his father and his mother and be joined to his wife; and they will be one flesh”), Hunter argues that African Americans “were forced to reconfigure the idea that two flesh would become the proverbial one, that man and woman, like Adam and Eve, would merge in all aspects.”⁴⁷ Enslaved women appealed to ideals of chastity in large part as a result of their Christian identity. Yet, they equally used it as a weapon of resistance in a system that depended on their sexual and reproductive labor for its own survival. This study examines how enslaved and freed women appealed to chastity as an affirmation of their spiritual autonomy and desire for sexual self-ownership.

In the late nineteenth century, purity was a major buzzword in a society that was obsessed with real and invented racial differences, the ‘quality’ of races, and the so-called threat of amalgamation (meaning interracial sex.) As this project shows, the language of ‘racial purity’ could never be divorced from notions of sexual purity. In a society that widely believed interracial sex was a moral crime, it is no surprise that ideas of sexual and moral purity went hand in hand.⁴⁸ Under dominant racial thought and ideology in the late nineteenth century, such as social Darwinism, purity standards fell almost exclusively on the backs of women, who were viewed as the producers of the race. This patriarchal construction enabled white men to control the sexuality of white women while they transgressed the sexual standard themselves. By Reconstruction, white women became a mobilizing force in a movement called the Social Purity movement. Joining the

⁴⁷ Tera W. Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2017), 6.

⁴⁸ In addition, interracial sex was illegal in most states in the nineteenth-century. For a legal history of interracial marriage in the United States, see Peggy Pascoe: *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

temperance cause of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, white female purity activists campaigned to establish a single sexual and moral standard across men and women. By the turn of the twentieth-century, purity organizations proliferated across the United States. Notions of purity fell along a spectrum - such as 'good' or Christian moral character, abstinence from alcohol, and the avoidance of obscene literature and company. This study analyses the enduring nature of discourse around sexual purity in the black community, beginning with enslaved women and ending with Black Nationalist women.

The Victorian iteration of female virtue in the United States has its origins in the Revolutionary-era.⁴⁹ Defined along a binary of gendered duties and responsibilities to the new Republic, female virtue most consistently refers to dominant understandings of moral excellence: the presumed Christianized characteristics of the ideal female American citizen. The powerful rhetoric of female virtue delegated sacred duties to white women at the same time that it constrained the freedoms of its beneficiaries. It harnessed the natural rights of women to their traditional duties as wives and mothers, making it a conservative and limiting ideal. In a society that was slave and free, feminine virtue did not extend to the nation's enslaved female population.⁵⁰ Female virtue rested in the organization of a political system characterised by a gendered white citizenry, where white men enjoyed the full privileges and benefits of citizenship, and white women occupied a subordinated status on the periphery. This study introduces slave, poor, uneducated and working-class freedwomen to this picture: subaltern women who existed outside the political system and whose womanhood was systematically denied the

⁴⁹ For an excellent discussion of the genesis of gendered ideas of virtue during the Revolutionary period, see Ruth H. Bloch, *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650-1800* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

⁵⁰ Indeed, in addition to slave women, indigenous, poor, working-class, and immigrant women were also excluded from the realm of virtue to varying degrees.

sanctity of marriage, family and dignity as a natural right. This dissertation looks to the ways that enslaved and freedwomen laid claims to the exclusionary, essential, and patriarchal concerns of chastity and feminine virtue for their own radical ends.⁵¹

In many ways, this project calls for scholars to revisit concepts that have been written off as oppressive by contemporary standards with a critical historical analysis. The differing social, legal and political contexts of a middle-class white woman's life and an enslaved woman's in the 1850s, for example, meant that they experienced gendered concepts differently. For white women, notions of female moral and sexual purity has historically functioned within the confines of white patriarchal control. Their patriarchal protection existed in exchange for their submissiveness and dependence. This brand of sexism was not available to black women. Instead, they were positioned in Victorian society as the polar-opposite of pure, white womanhood. The sexism that black women experienced was rooted in their racial degradation, meaning that claims to the natural rights of women - however limited - were blighted. It is important to stress that this project does not suggest that black women blindly appealed to oppressive and patriarchal concepts without caution or critique. As this project shows, black women appealed to ideas of chastity, purity and feminine virtue, but categorically denied true womanhood's expectation of female submissiveness. They called out their inability to depend on black men because of black men's powerlessness to protect their wives, daughters, sisters and mothers under white supremacy. They resolved instead to defend themselves. As I argue, black women used conservative and racially-exclusionary gendered ideals to bring attention to their racial, sexual and gendered subjugation. They enlisted these concepts for subversive ends in a society that denied them the professed natural rights of

⁵¹ I refer to *female virtue* as a term to reflect the language of the nineteenth-century and its attendant ideas about gender and sex. However, when I am discussing the notion of virtue at work, I use the term *feminine virtue* to reflect my contemporary and political understanding of the construction of gender and gender expression.

womanhood. Enslaved and freed black women neither simply vied for the same treatment as their white, middle-class counterparts. As this project shows, they used these sexual categories to resist their sexual oppression and build a framework around sexual self-sovereignty in a society that was otherwise reticent about the topic of sex. By elevating the significance of the sexual categories of chastity, purity, and female virtue, *A Crusade* investigates the ways that black women's sexual choices and attitudes represented their aspirations and visions of freedom. In other words, this project explores meanings of sex – sexual identity, sexual practices, understanding of biological sex and its attendant duties – in slave, poor, working-class and uneducated black women's meanings of freedom.⁵²

Methodology and Sources

This dissertation draws on a range of sources, including slave narratives, transcripts of interviews with former slaves, legal documents, organizational records and African American newspapers. It presents a genealogy of African American women's sexual activism from 1840 to 1920. Utilizing tools made available by intersectionality theory, subaltern studies, as well as theorizations of colonial, white hegemonic archives, this project is a work of excavation that includes reading archival silences on an already largely inaccessible topic. As many historians have shown, the voices of the marginalized and subaltern are so often buried in the archive. In many cases, we are only able to learn fragments of a subject's life, and even then, these fragments are compromised by the often oppressive or violent context in which they enter the historical record.⁵³

⁵² This project affirms the fact that enslaved women deployed a variety of strategies using sex simply for their own survival. By emphasizing the position of sex in subaltern and marginalized black women's meanings of freedom, this dissertation explores ideas of sexuality within and against the framework of violence. In other words, this dissertation imagines sex as part of enslaved women's ideal and aspirational lives as Christian women, Victorian women, or otherwise.

⁵³ For leading works on the theorization archival silences see, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press Books, 1995); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Terror,*

I am ever-mindful of the archival constraints that shaped this project. Most of these women did not write their own stories; the preservation of their lives exists in the fragments of details recorded by biased and prejudicial record-keepers. The voices of enslaved women are few and far apart in the archive. Their appearance in the historical record is most often not of their own making, but the result of the context and conditions of violence that held them in bondage. Although black women and girls sought sexual justice before the state during the Civil War, we find their testimonies fragmented, muddled and buried deep in the Union Army archive. While middle-class African American clubwomen were better positioned to craft their own legacies, the voices of their poor and largely non-literate subjects occupy a subordinated status in African American organizational records, conference proceedings and newspapers. The intersection of power, class, education and status severely limits our ability to access the intimate lives of subaltern and marginalized women. Taking a synthetic approach to my sources enables me to build a fuller picture than the one offered in the archive.

If a dearth of slave, poor, working-class and semi- and non-literate women's voices in the archive serves as a methodological constraint, the central topic of sex of this project only exacerbates existing difficulties. Conversations about sexuality were so coded in Victorian society so as not to appear obscene, especially among women. Speaking frankly about sex was not only considered unfeminine but it also threatened the modesty and respectability of a woman. Sex was predominantly discussed in a winding manner of euphemisms. I thus compiled a list of terms most commonly used to refer to consensual sexual intercourse as well as rape and sexual assault. For example, general terms relating to the spectrum of consensual and non-consensual sex, and interracial sex

Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

used before 1865 included ‘association,’ ‘intercourse,’ ‘forced into association,’ ‘consummate,’ or even ‘what married people do.’ After the Civil War, a new language emerged around interracial sex, reflecting white sexualized anxieties towards a new class of freedpeople. These terms included ‘social equality,’ ‘intermingle/ing,’ ‘intermixture,’ and ‘integration.’ The language specifically around rape included the words ‘ravish’ and ‘outrage.’ It is important to note that there was often temporal overlap in the popularity of these terms. Also, some of these terms had distinctly racial connotations that served to present the sexual threat that black men posed to white women specifically. Examples of this are clear in the popular uses of the terms ‘social equality’ and ‘outrage,’ which commonly appeared in scare-pieces on the mythical black male rapist. It is also important to note that the word ‘sex’ by nineteenth century usage referred most often to biological sex and anatomy.

I made the decision to use the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Ex-Slave Interviews in this project. I elected to use the WPA narratives as they are commonly known, for two main reasons. First, their evidentiary issues, to me, are relatively unimportant when weighed against their cultural, social, and political importance. Historians have pointed to the problems of authenticity in this archive. Conducted in the midst of the segregated south of the 1930s as a New Deal program, the interviews were designed to preserve the voices of the last surviving generation of people born in slavery. The overwhelming majority of the interviewers were white, and some came from families that once held the families of the interviewees in slavery. Scholars have noted the inherent issue of the rhetorical situation between the interviewer and interviewee given this context. Scholarly skepticism also reflects some of the issues that are familiar to the field of oral history. The memory and subjectivity of respondents, most whom experienced slavery in childhood, have not been viewed as the most credibly positioned

to give an account of this period. But we lose an incredibly rich source-base when we remove the WPA narratives from our analyses.

The second reason why I insisted on using the WPA narratives is because this project illuminates a history of ideas. The ‘who,’ ‘what,’ ‘where,’ ‘when’ or ‘why’ of an African American woman’s experience does not negate the fact that certain ideas existed. This is also true of the published slave narratives that I use, which also have evidentiary problems. For example, I use the case of the narrative of Harriet Jacobs, published under the pseudonym, Linda Brent. The use of fictional names to protect the identity of the author and her family in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) was a necessary measure. But this decision might be used to question the authenticity of the account. The fact that slave narratives were part of a literary market in the mid-nineteenth century must be remembered in scholarly analyses. Methodologically, however, I measure the value that is placed on ideas around chastity, purity, and feminine virtue by analyzing the context in which they emerge in informants’ responses in the WPA interviews as well as in accounts in slave narratives. For example, formerly enslaved women interviewed by the WPA often remembered their enslaved mothers through the lens of feminine nurture, kindness, and moral authority. For an informant to state that “my mother raised us right. She was a good Christian woman,” I am able to determine the existence of Christian moral codes across generations. The charge that such a source-base is heavily-mediated and subjective can be met with careful historical treatment. They are no less subjective than other forms of evidence, such as diary accounts.

Chapter Outline

Each chapter of this dissertation provides a snapshot of the alternative sites and modalities of enslaved, contraband, fugitive, freed and working poor black women’s

sexual activism, focusing on their sexual attitudes, moral codes and performances of moral subjectivity and respectability. I show how they fought for dignity and the respect for the sacredness of their marriages, families and their own bodies in a reticent Victorian society that sexually exploited their bodies for white capitalism.

In Chapter One, I present the myriad ways that slave women struggled for sexual self-ownership and self-protection using the Christian and secular Victorian ideals of chastity and feminine virtue. I argue that the Christianized values of modesty and chastity offered a tool of sexual resistance as well as an assertion of spiritual autonomy under slavery. Chapter 2 introduces the fugitive, contraband and freedwomen who sought sexual justice during the Civil War and Reconstruction. This chapter analyzes the ways that black women and girls took advantage of a new legal framework despite their liminal status in occupied territory. Presenting themselves as moral subjects in their testimonies of sexual violence and abuse, this chapter explores how African American women used gendered ideals to leverage their right to justice.

In Chapter 3, I explore the “moral uplift” work of a vastly expanded cohort of educated and middle-class black women reformers across rural settlements. Their self-styled “crusade” against the one-room log cabin symbolized an enslaved past riddled with moral degeneracy. Sexual promiscuity, sexual violence, and even gestures to incest within poor, rural black family homes motivated reformers to destabilize this space. I argue that this is the moment where elite black reformers tether the definition of “respectability” to middle-class ownership. I analyze the moments of intraracial class tensions and unity in these campaigns.

By the turn of the twentieth century, middle and working-class black women organized to protect the sexual integrity of domestic workers employed in white homes. In Chapter 4, I analyze working poor black women and girls’ migration as an “invisible

exodus” in protest of labor conditions that threatened the sexual integrity and respectability of these women. This chapter then explores the pragmatism of middle class black women who sought to protect black female migrants as they faced new sexual dangers in the urban environment. A major thread throughout this dissertation maintains the continuum of sexual violence against African American women from slavery through the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century. In the epilogue to this project, I recap African American women’s resistance to evolving contexts of violence. I maintain that black women’s struggles for sexual self-sovereignty were always confined by the context of their violation. In studying their weaponization of ideals of feminine virtue, we are reminded of the fact that black women strove to assert their sense of sexual self-ownership and sexuality in ways that wholly denied the racist and sexist cultural stereotypes that justified the violence against them. The struggle for dignity and sexual sovereignty is an ongoing one for black women.

Chapter 1: “I had resolved that I would be virtuous, though I was a slave.”¹

With deep shame, the fugitive slave and abolitionist Harriet Ann Jacobs reflected on her choice at the age of fifteen to give her body to a white man.² Sharing her story in the narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) she confessed that, “I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation.”³ The details of Jacobs’s early life shed light on the vital context underlying her morally conflicted decision, recasting her act as one of strategic sexual resistance governed by an assertion of her sexual self-sovereignty and virtue. She was born enslaved in Edenton, North Carolina in 1812 and described her childhood as “so fondly shielded.”⁴ Having lost both of her parents by the age of eleven, she held close to the kin left around her. She shared dreams of freedom with her slave brother, John. She was in some ways protected by a doting and devout Christian grandmother, Molly Horniblow, who had not only gained her freedom but also the respect of Edenton’s black and white community. But Jacobs’s sense of a protected childhood melted away with the onset of adolescence. She abruptly learned that coming of age ushered in a “sad epoch in the life of a slave girl.”⁵

¹ Linda Brent, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1861), 87.

² I use this language intentionally to highlight the transactional nature of Jacobs’s sexual relationship with Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, a local white attorney.

³ For consistency with citations, I refer to the name Linda Brent, the pseudonym used by Harriet Ann Jacobs. Within the body of the text, I use the name Harriet Jacobs as it is widely agreed that she was the actual author of this narrative. All the names used in the body of the text are not the character’s names as given in the narrative, but the names of the real-life figures. This is based on the research of scholars including Jean Fagan Yellin. See Brent, *Incidents*, 83. See also Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004).

⁴ Brent, *Incidents*, 11. Owned by the Horniblow family, Jacobs likely lived with her mother, father and younger brother, John, in one of the outhouses behind Horniblow’s Tavern. See Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs*, 8.

⁵ Brent, *Incidents*, 44.

From the age of twelve, Jacobs learned that the father of her new (infant) mistress, Dr. James Norcom, coveted her budding sexuality.⁶ Forty years her senior, he sought to implement ways to coerce an illicit sexual liaison with her. “My master began to whisper foul words in my ear,” she wrote, “Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import.”⁷ Correctly suspecting that Jacobs’s previous mistress had taught her how to read and write, he began to slip her notes with explicit sexual content. When Jacobs dared to fall in love as a young woman with a local, free black carpenter who proposed to purchase her freedom and to marry her, Norcom reacted with jealous fury and rage. His response gave Jacobs an unnerving introduction to the dangers of intimacy in slavery, prompting her to later question: “Why does the slave ever love?”⁸ Norcom vowed to build a house four miles away from town where he planned to hold Jacobs captive as his concubine. In a visceral recollection of this moment, she testified: “I shuddered; but I was constrained to listen, while he talked of his intention to give me a home of my own, *and to make a lady of me.*”⁹ In Norcom’s threat, the promise that rape would ‘make a lady’ of a slave girl belied the expectation of civility, gentlemanliness and patriarchal protection afforded to middle and upper class white women. The gendered sphere of the home was not the ideal kind of most

⁶ Jacobs and her immediate family were owned by Margaret Horniblow. In her narrative, Jacobs remembered with appreciation and disappointment the illusion of kindness that Horniblow treated her. She was grateful that Horniblow taught her how to read and write – a crime under the system of slavery. She also partially credited her former mistress with furthering her moral education and Christian training. However, upon the death of Horniblow, Jacobs learned that, despite her Christian teachings, her mistress did not see Jacobs as a neighbor. Instead of granting Jacobs her freedom, Horniblow bequeathed Jacobs along with her bureau and its contents to her three-year-old niece, Mary Matilda Norcom. Jacobs captured this blow in her narrative, stating, “So vanished our hopes. My mistress had taught me the precepts of God’s word: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’... But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor. I would give much to blot out from my memory that one great wrong.” See Brent, *Incidents*, 16.

⁷ Brent, *Incidents*, 44.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 82. (Emphasis added)

young women's dreams, but a site of sexual terror. Under the law of U.S. slavery, Jacobs's sexuality belonged to her master.

For a few short years, Jacobs rebelliously stalled Norcom's advances through the protection of her respectable grandmother. However, internalizing her master's actions as her own shame, she suffered in silence. Eventually, Jacobs resolved on a plan. She entered a sexual relationship with Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, a local white attorney. Through this illicit sexual liaison, Jacobs hoped to forge a path to her own freedom. Moving through what she described a "perilous passage" reflected one example of the deeply morally conflicted paths that black women took in a society where they were rendered sexually available, and neither viewed as ladies nor capable of virtue. For enslaved women, this path was especially entrenched in violence as dominant ideas of Christian moral virtue and female sexual purity rested exclusively in the domain of free, white middle and upper class womanhood.

In her appeal to her target audience of northern white female anti-slavery sympathizers, Jacobs implored her readers to forgive her failure to preserve the ideals of female chastity and virtue. She pleaded: "But O, ye happy women whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the object of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girls too severely!"¹⁰ Drawing on the powerful ideology of true womanhood that underlined purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity as its reigning virtues, Jacobs criticized the racial double-standard of a white capitalist patriarchal society's treatment of women.¹¹ Outlining the

¹⁰ Brent, *Incidents*, 83.

¹¹ Feminist scholars and other historians of nineteenth century US womanhood have emphasized the cultural import of the Victorian ideal of true womanhood in antebellum US society. In "The Cult of True Womanhood" and *Dimity Convictions: American Womanhood in the Nineteenth Century*, historian Barbara Welter outlined the tenets of the ideal that dominated middle and upper class expression of womanhood. Purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity constituted the reigning virtue of the ideal American woman, and

extreme difficulty for black women to affirm these virtues under the institution of slavery, she continued:

If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing [the story surrounding her first pregnancy]; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery. *I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect*; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me. I felt as if I was forsaken by God and man; as if all my efforts must be frustrated; and I became reckless in my despair.¹²

Jacobs's self-censure offers insight into the moral subjectivity of enslaved women, particularly their Christianized concerns with chastity, and the value they placed on Christian and secular notions of female virtue. What did female virtue mean to a woman bound in slavery? What was the value in aspiring to ideals of chastity within a system that depended on the sexual exploitation of black women's bodies for its survival? How did women reconcile the unlikelihood of embodying these values as slaves?

the followers of this ideal conformed almost to a "cult," as Welter argued. Occupying the domestic sphere, the true woman represented a complementary and nurturing component to the enterprising, rugged individualist, ideal American man. Indeed, the expectations of the true womanhood ideal meant that working-class, immigrant, native and black women were excluded from its reach. Slave womanhood, I argue, stood farthest from this ideal, but slave women used tenets of this popular cultural archetype in creative and radical ways. It is important to note that studies on true womanhood, Real Womanhood and the South lady archetypes have more recently debated the extent to which white women's rights activists rejected these ideals in their political agendas. Rebecca J. Fraser's *Gender, Race and Family in Nineteenth Century America: From Northern Woman to Plantation Mistress* is among the most recent works to examine ideals of womanhood across race and region in the United States. My research bridges this literature on predominantly white women with the scholarship on enslaved women. See Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-174; Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: the American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1976); Frances B. Cogan, *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010); and Rebecca J. Fraser, *Gender Race and Family in Nineteenth Century America: From Northern Woman to Plantation Mistress* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

¹² Brent, *Incidents*, 83-84 (Emphasis added).

This chapter looks at the radical position of chastity in the antebellum female slave community.¹³ Whether realized or aspirational, enslaved women's ideals of chastity lay at the intersection of their moral values, their sexual resistance, and their desire for, or affirmation of, their sexual self-sovereignty. I define sexual self-sovereignty in this chapter as a person's desire to assert control over the borders of their own body. Rape, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation under slavery constituted the systematized transgression and violation of the borders of black women's bodies, denying them self-ownership. I argue that slave women weaponized ideals of chastity of the Victorian-era as a strategy of resistance and an ethic of spiritual autonomy and individual and community survival. Christian chastity offered slave women a *principle* that they could aspire to in organizing their sexual lives and intimate bonds in an institution that depended on their sexual exploitation for its subsistence.¹⁴ If the sanctity of black marriages and families was wholly denied –both socially and legally under slavery, chastity and notions of female virtue befit enslaved women's understanding and

¹³ Chastity in this chapter refers to its broad Christian definition. It is the belief that sex should only take place within the confines of marriage. Before marriage, the expectation is that men and women should practice sexual abstinence, which not only includes refraining from sex but also exposure to sinful elements that could 'spoil' a person's good moral character. There are many Biblical references to chastity. For example, in the Book of Corinthians, a passage states: "Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body." (1 Corinthians 6:18). In Hebrews 13:4, there is a strict association of chastity with marriage: "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." As mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, historian Tera W. Hunter explains the way that slavery violated the covenant of marriage, and forced slaves to revise the customary wedding vows to suit the lack of civil marriage law. She invokes Genesis 2:24 which states, "For this cause will a man go away from his father and his mother and be joined to his wife; and they will be one flesh", and argues that African Americans "were forced to reconfigure the idea that two flesh would become the proverbial one, that man and woman, like Adam and Eve, would merge in all aspects." See Tera W. Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 6.

¹⁴ In discussing her Christian moral education provided by her grandmother and former mistress, Jacobs references the notion of 'pure principles' more than once in her narrative. She wrote, "For years, my master had done his utmost to pollute my mind with foul images, and to destroy the pure principles inculcated by my grandmother, and the good mistress of my childhood." See Brent, *Incidents*, 84; 44. It is important to note that this chapter builds on the theoretical position that oppression under slavery was never absolute. As the violence of the institution was ever-constant, so was slave women's traditional, quotidian and spiritual forms of resistance.

definition of freedom. At times, the chastity ideal reflected a slave woman's expression of her sense of self-respect and Christian identity, suggesting private, spiritual self-ownership. At other times, chastity offered a language in which enslaved women could attempt to negotiate their sexual and/or reproductive labor. Like a framed-picture depicting a vision of freedom, some slave women held on to the ideal of chastity with their romantic partners in the hopes of delaying marriage and a family until they secured their freedom.

Through an exploration of the traditionally conservative ideal of chastity in the enslaved female community, scholars can understand how a concept that is sometimes read as oppressive in feminist scholarship was deployed by marginalized and subaltern women for their own liberation. Slave women used ideals of feminine virtue and chastity for radical ends. Moreover, slave women's *active* claims to Christian chastity and morality contrasted with the traditionally passive claims to sexual and moral purity of middle and upper class white women.¹⁵ The distinction between "passive" and "active" forms of feminine virtue is influenced by historian Emily Haynes's excellent study of black and white women activists in northern abolitionist circles. This chapter enlarges on Haynes's framework by turning to the moral agency of enslaved women. Slave women did not simply seek to participate in the Victorian ideal of true womanhood. Asserting their sexual and moral purity, but *not* their submissiveness demonstrated enslaved women's redefinition and politicization of meanings of feminine virtue in the United States.¹⁶ Slave women often held their own ideals of

¹⁵ April R. Haynes, *Riotous Flesh: Women, Physiology and the Solitary Vice in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 80.

¹⁶ Several scholars, mainly in the field of literary criticism have analyzed black women's redefinition of womanhood through the genre of the sentimental novel and other forms of fiction. The concentration of this work is predominantly on late nineteenth and early twentieth century educated and middle-class African American women activists and reformers such as Frances E. W. Harper, Anna Julia Cooper and Pauline E. Hopkins. For example, in *The Coupling Convention*, Ann duCille makes the point that women like Cooper refused the discourse of deference. duCille writes that, "While she [Cooper] had a finely honed sense of the imperialist impulse and its power to colonize the female mind and body, she never quite

feminine virtue. It is important to emphasize that this chapter does not intend to romanticize Victorian ideals of chastity among enslaved women. Rather, acknowledging the pervasive sexual violence that plagued the lives of slave women, it explores slave women's ideas about chastity ideal to shed light on the moral and intellectual dimensions of enslaved women's sexual lives within and beyond the framework of violence. As nontraditional political actors, slave women asserted their moral agency through the chastity ideal *without* the prerequisite of an education, or a middle class or even free status. This chapter shows the moral tradition that slave women fashioned through their struggles for sexual self-sovereignty.

Excluded from Virtue

African and African American women long contended with an evolving legal framework and social attitude that systematically devalued their subjective womanhood while it placed a monetary value on their bodies, and their productive and reproductive labor. In the mid-seventeenth-century, developing slave laws in the colonies of Maryland and Virginia laid the foundation for the organization of race, racism, gender and labor in colonial American society.¹⁷ A critical Virginian civil law passed in December 1662 dictated that “*Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a Negro woman should be slave or free, be it therefore enacted and declared by this present Grand Assembly,*

managed to fully extricate her own mind from the tenets of true womanhood, as she proclaimed the purity and chastity – but most emphatically not the submission and domesticity – of black women.” See Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 53. For a discussion of the ways that middle class black women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century redefined popular notions of womanhood, see Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹⁷ The colonies of Virginia and Maryland accounted for 42% of all slaves in colonial America in 1790. For a discussion of the origins of slavery and racism in colonial America see Alden T. Vaughan, “The Origins Debate: Slavery and Racism in Seventeenth-Century Virginia” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 97, no. 3 (1989): 311-54. See also Weber State University. “Statistics on Slavery.” http://faculty.weber.edu/kmackay/statistics_on_slavery.htm (accessed March 25, 2019).

that all children born in this country shall be held bond or free according to the condition of the mother...¹⁸ The distinction between enslaved motherhood and free motherhood that was drawn along racial lines set in motion the historic devaluation of black womanhood, motherhood and families. As historian Emily West writes, “By decreeing that children follow the status of their mothers, Virginia paved the way for white men’s sexual exploitation of enslaved women in order to provide them with valuable enslaved offspring.”¹⁹ Through a string of laws between the 1660s and 1680s, black womanhood was steadily defined and naturalized by its diametrical opposition to free, white womanhood. For example, after 1668 the Virginian legislature levied a tax on free black women from which white women were exempt.²⁰ In doing so, as West continued, “Virginia led the way in formalizing laws that increasingly separated black people from whites.”²¹

If colonial slave and race-based laws denigrated the subjectivity of black womanhood, the Revolutionary period elevated and dignified meanings of white female subjectivity.²² Bourgeois Revolutionary ideals of virtuous citizenry were defined strongly along gendered lines. The ideology of republicanism reinforced the binary of the private/public and the domestic/marketplace spheres, applying civic duties to men and women that conformed to the new republican vision of self-governance. The notion of the “male public spirit” demanded a complementary female component: that of “female private morality.”²³ The gendering and feminization of meanings of virtue, as historian Ruth Bloch has argued, meant that for the first time in American society, white women acquired a new

¹⁸ Emily West, *Enslaved Women in America: From Colonial Times to Emancipation* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 105. (Emphasis in original).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 25-26.

²¹ Ibid., 105.

²² Glenna Matthews, *The Rise of Public Woman: Woman’s Power and Place in the United States, 1630-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 63.

²³ Ruth Bloch, “The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America” *Signs* 13, no. 1 (1987): 38.

visibility as the “public-minded woman.”²⁴ This new identity of the “public-minded women” meant that middle and upper class white women now stood as “guarantors of their husbands’ and children’s attachment to the new frame of government.”²⁵ The image of the chaste woman replaced preexisting stereotype of the temptress, a staple in cultural and literary forms.²⁶ The chaste woman represented the moral custodian of the home and, by extension, the Republic. Thus, as the Revolutionary-era crowned white women with a new special civil duty and responsibility, black women were overlooked. With the assumption of citizenship resting at the core of an individual’s eligibility for these new gendered meanings of virtue, black women, like Native and other marginalized women were theoretically excluded from emerging secular definitions of virtue.

Starting in the early 1800s, the continuation and survival of the institution of slavery fell even more heavily on the backs of enslaved women. In 1807-8, the international slave trade closed, marking a major turning point in the history of slavery in the United States.²⁷ The rise of the domestic slave trade was fueled by with an explosive increase in the slave population, which grew from roughly 650,000 to 3.9 million.²⁸ Predominantly the result of natural increase, the growth in the slave population meant that the US “went from a country that accounted for 6 percent of the slaves imported to the New World [in the late eighteenth century] to one that in 1860 held more than 60 percent of the hemisphere’s slave population.”²⁹ Within this major shift, the position of slave women and their productive and

²⁴ See Bloch, “The Gendered Meanings of Virtue,” 38; and Matthews, *The Rise of Public Woman*, 62-63.

²⁵ Matthews, *The Rise of Public Woman*, 62-63.

²⁶ For a discussion of the temptress figure see Matthews, *The Rise of Public Woman*, 63.

²⁷ The law passed on March 2, 1807, but did not take effect until 1808.

²⁸ See Census data, 1790: 654,121; 1860: 3,950,511 in Weber State University. “Statistics on Slavery,” http://faculty.weber.edu/kmackay/statistics_on_slavery.htm (accessed March 25, 2019)

²⁹ See Steven Mintz, “American Slavery in Comparative Perspective.” Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/content/historical-context-american-slavery-comparative-perspective> (accessed March 25, 2019). See also Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Slavery, By

reproductive labor became central. As West explains, “As the slave population of America rose, slaveholders began to perceive women they held in bondage differently. They viewed female slaves less as workers who were inferior to male slaves and more as prime reproducers of a valuable and unique labor force.”³⁰

The dominant Victorian gendered ideology of true womanhood prevalent in the antebellum period must be understood in this context. Highlighting purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity as the ideal virtues of womanhood, true womanhood excluded black women from its realm. Moreover, during this period, as Deborah Gray White has theorized, black and white womanhood in the nineteenth century became increasingly interdependent.³¹ The presumed moral superiority and virtue of white womanhood depended on the racism and sexism that denigrated and debased black womanhood.³² The presumed sexual purity of white womanhood depended on dominant cultural stereotypes of black women as lascivious and immoral. This interdependent relationship had profound consequences for the material lives of black women – especially enslaved women. While the ideal of white female purity called for the civility and chastity of white gentlemen, the bodies of black women became the site in which white male lust and unbridled sexual desire could be concentrated. Indeed, the virtues afforded to middle and upper class white womanhood did not mean that white women were not confined by a form of sexism that reinforced their subordinate position in society. As White further highlights, “The silence and submissiveness demanded of them, their exile to the home and from schools, their inability to own property

Numbers.” TheRoot.com. <http://www.theroot.com/slavery-by-the-numbers-1790874492> (accessed March 25, 2019).

³⁰ West, *Enslaved Women in America*, 31.

³¹ Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South: revised and with a new introduction* (1985. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 6.

³² Ibid.

rested on a notion of femininity that made piety, delicacy, morality, weakness, and dependency the reserve of white women alone.”³³

True womanhood’s emphasis on white middle and upper class women naturalized the notion of purity along class and racial lines. It juxtaposed ‘pure’ women against ‘fallen women,’ who included women who were lower-class and/ or racial outsiders. In explaining the impact of this juxtaposition as it related to sexual violence, Estelle B. Freedman notes that most Victorian-era Americans believed that “the former deserved protection from assault but the latter did not.”³⁴ As outsiders, free black women and enslaved women were subject to widespread sexualized without protection or the possibility of justice.

Former slave Cornelius Holmes asserted this popular understanding in an interview with an agent of the Federal Works Projects Administration in the 1930s. Sharing some of his earliest memories, Holmes noted that his grandfather had “never heard of a bad white woman befo’ freedom.”³⁵ He explicitly referenced the interdependent relationship between the sexual lives of mistresses and slave women in the period of antebellum slavery. As Holmes stated, “De Negro women protected de pure white woman from enticement and seduction of de white men in slavery time.”³⁶ Holmes was not speaking literally: he probably did not mean to suggest that slave women voluntarily exposed themselves to sexual violence to protect the sexual purity of white women. Rather, he spoke to the normalized violence of southern white men in a hierarchical, patriarchal society and the benefit this served in

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 22.

³⁵ Interview with Cornelius Holmes in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 2, Eddington-Hunter*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.142> (accessed November 1, 2018), 296.

³⁶ Ibid.

preserving notions of pure white womanhood. The chastity of southern white womanhood served as a justification for southern white men's violence and insubordination of slaves and other minority groups. As Holmes aptly observed, "Dat was worth more to de South, my grandpap say, dis sanctification of de white women, than all de cotton and corn dat de Negroes ever makes, in all de years of slavery times."³⁷

On Chastity and the Enslaved Community

"They married just like they do now but they didn't have no license," stated former slave Henry Banner from Arkansas.³⁸ Speaking with S. S. Taylor, an interviewer from the WPA *A Folk History of Slavery in the United States* project, Banner perhaps wanted to set the record straight on any assumptions about love, intimacy, courtship and marriage in the slave community. "Some people say that they done this and that thing but it's no such a thing," he added, "They married just like they do now, only they didn't have no license."³⁹ Banner was not unjustified with his suspicions. Since slavery, many Northern and Southern whites long assumed that chastity was not a valued feature of African American life. Proponents of racial ideologies claimed that people of African descent were biologically and intellectually inferior. Proslavery apologists particularly argued that slavery was a 'civilizing' institution, and that African Americans were better off under the paternalistic watch of southern whites than living autonomously. Even some abolitionists reinforced notions of slave sexual and moral degeneracy in their critique of the institution of slavery. For example, in his influential reflection, *Pictures of Slavery in Church and State* (1857), the famed abolitionist and minister

³⁷ Ibid. 297.

³⁸ Interview with Henry Banner in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. Federal Writers' Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 1, Abbott-Byrd. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.021> (accessed March 25, 2019), 70.

³⁹ Ibid.

John Dixon Long used language about slave women's sexuality that was not dissimilar from the wording used by proslavery advocates. "Chastity is out of the question," he wrote.

"There is a certain attachment between male and female, but the horrible slave laws allow it to be little more than the promiscuous commerce of beasts. There is, however, a genuine love between mother and child. The slave can truly say, 'I have no father, but I know my mother.'" ⁴⁰ On both sides of the slavery debate, such arguments led back to the assertion that slave men and women were innately immoral, uncivilized, sexually promiscuous and undiscerning about chastity and marriage.

For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, assumptions about slave sexual degeneracy remained largely unchallenged in historical scholarship. It was not until a new generation of scholars emerging out of the Civil Rights era with studies on the slave community, that these assumptions were revisited. This was the result of scholarship that shifted towards an analysis of the humanity and agency of slaves themselves. ⁴¹ "On what evidence does this legend of slave promiscuity rest" asked historian Eugene D. Genovese in 1974. ⁴² "The idea that the slaves hopped in and out of bed with each other as well as with the whites originated among self-serving slaveholders concerned to prove that the separation of families and the sexual exploitation of black women by white men aroused little or no resentment or moral revulsion in the quarters," Genovese argued. ⁴³ In an article published in 1981, Steven E. Brown added that "Although many masters displayed a lack of concern toward marriages, slaves were quite conscious of courtship rites and very much concerned

⁴⁰ John Dixon Long, *Pictures of Slavery in Church and State, including personal reminiscences, biographical sketch, anecdotes, etc., etc.* (Philadelphia: Published by the Author, 1857), 15.

⁴¹ Colossal examples include Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) and Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

⁴² Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 461.

⁴³ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 461.

with sanctifying marriages through ceremonies.”⁴⁴ In recent years, more nuanced studies that center the lives and labors of enslaved women have emerged. But the field remains largely reticent on the topic of enslaved women’s sexuality and sexual lives.

Despite limited time to socialize, the constant threat of family separation, and the expectation that the needs of masters and mistresses was a slave’s top priority, enslaved men and women sought ways to forge intimate bonds that were invested with genuine and deep emotional meaning.⁴⁵ While slave relationships may have appeared unconventional to outside white onlookers, due to the constant threat and occurrence of family separations, etc., such arrangements reflect more a slave’s desire to protect their intimate relationships in a precarious situation than their disregard for conservative Christian rules against prenuptial intercourse.⁴⁶ The intersection of slave women’s moral and sexual values, their sexual agency and their sexual resistance, can be imagined through slave’s attitudes towards courtship and marriage.

Courtship

Slave women adhered to a moral and sexual standard that was both indigenous to their condition and adopted from mainstream American society.⁴⁷ This was the case with enslaved women’s use of the traditionally conservative Victorian ideals of chastity within their own community. Despite their subaltern status and lack of education, slave women aspired to notions of Christian chastity and feminine virtue. Slave girls’ introduction to their

⁴⁴ Steven E. Brown, “Sexuality and the Slave Community,” *Phylon* 42, no. 1 (1981): 3.

⁴⁵ Rebecca J. Fraser, *Courtship and Love Among the Enslaved in North Carolina* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 3.

⁴⁶ For a superb discussion of the many different forms of relationships that slaves entered, and some reasons, see Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*.

⁴⁷ Indeed, historian Rebecca Fraser reminds us that “it was argued that slavery was needed in the south to try and impart certain moral values and in order to teach them what it meant to be civilized.” See Fraser, *Courtship and Love Among the Enslaved*, 18.

sexuality was borne out of a collision between their newfound sexual self-consciousness and the reality of their slave status. “Through personal experiences, such as courting, consensual sex and sexual abuse as well as the expectations of antebellum adults,” writes historian Courtney Moore, “girls learned that they were property, a legal and cultural classification that was subject to different standards.”⁴⁸ The joy and excitement of love, courtship and marriage that accompanied free adolescent life was equally precarious for young enslaved women. An unspoken rite of passage that long haunted the minds of enslaved parents and caregivers; slave female adolescence was marred with sexual danger.

Still, young enslaved women sought ways to explore their adolescent interests to the best of their ability. They daydreamed of love and played kiss-chasing games.⁴⁹ Since very few could read or write, slave girls may not have written love notes, but they whispered and giggled about boys with their friends. Much like their white contemporaries, they experienced sweeping emotions and behaviors common in adolescent life.⁵⁰ While Moore contends that “many, perhaps most slave girls were forced to fashion an identity that reconciled their humanity with their chattel status,” the moral education that they received from their mothers and other slave female authority figures suggests that their sexual maturity birthed a deep sense of self-protection, resistance and a quest for survival.⁵¹ This constituted a burning desire for a sense of sexual self-sovereignty that was not activated in white girls, whose path to sexual maturity was placed on a pedestal of patriarchal protection in exchange for domesticity and submissiveness.

⁴⁸ Courtney Moore, “Free in Thought, Fettered in Action: Enslaved Adolescent Females in the Slave South,” (Ph.D. diss., University Florida, 2010), 137-8.

⁴⁹ Moore, “Free in Thought, Fettered in Action,” 138.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Using ideals of chastity, slave mothers tried to protect their daughters from sexual maturity for as long as they could. Even as they embraced adolescent slave girls' newfound identities in some ways, the fear of what stood before them in adulthood loomed over many slave parents. As a result, slave parents often attempted to delay courtship. This contrasted with white parents who welcomed this stage in a young white girl's life because of the prospect of the accumulation and consolidation of family wealth that it promised.⁵² Elite Southern white parents especially invested wealth and time into their daughter's debut as it signaled a young woman's entry into society and availability for marriage.⁵³ Slave mothers and caregivers, however, monitored a young enslaved woman's courtship out of fear. Many acted as a chaperone or imposed strict rules on their daughters.⁵⁴ In Texas, former slave Amos Lincoln argued that such methods by slave mothers constituted a positive, moral good. "Dem's moral times," he claimed, "A gal's 21 'fore she marry. They didn't go wanderin' 'round all hours. They mammies knowed where they was."⁵⁵ Speaking with pride about the watchfulness of slave mothers over their daughters, Lincoln showed some of the ways that slave women protected and policed the sexuality of their daughters. While their activism was rooted in fear for an adolescent slave girls' sexual future, Lincoln's comment gives a clear association of slave women and female authority figures as the enforcers of chaste, Christian sexuality and morality in the slave community.

⁵² Ibid., 149.

⁵³ Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 118.

⁵⁴ Moore, "Free in Thought, Fettered in Action," 149.

⁵⁵ Interview with Amos Lincoln in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 3, Lewis-Ryles*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.163> (accessed November 1, 2018), 18.

When there was the absence of a slave mother to police a young enslaved girl's chastity, slave girls sometimes chose to conform to the conventions of Christian respectability and modesty anyway. In a WPA interview, seventy-five-year-old Becky Hawkins from Arkansas was explicit about practicing modesty as a slave teen. "When my husband was courtin' me, my dress was down to my shoe top. He never saw my leg!" she recalled.⁵⁶ "I married when I was seventeen. My mother was dead and I'd rather been married than runnin' loose – I might a stepped on a snake."⁵⁷ Hawkins's interesting use of language reveals the inherent danger that she believed she faced if she remained unmarried without a mother to protect her virtue. The notion that she 'might a stepped on a snake' can be read as a biblical reference to the serpent who is an agent of evil and ruin in the book of Genesis. Or the reference might have reflected the rural context in Hawkins's life. Parents telling children to be careful not to step on a snake being both a common literal and figurative warning.

Hawkins's explanation of her choice to practice modesty highlights the specific context of a slave girl's Christian moral training and policing. Perhaps she understood her own sexual purity and virtue in a similar tradition to white families; where fathers acted as the protectors of their daughters' chastity until they 'gave them away' as part of the marriage ceremony ritual, to their new husbands. In Hawkins case, however, her mother was supposed to be her protector. In the absence of her mother, Hawkins's comment suggests that she sought a husband to secure a new protector. In her own way, Hawkins revealed her valuation of chastity as an ethic of individual and community survival, particularly in the

⁵⁶ Interview with Becky Hawkins in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 3, Gadson-Isom*. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.023> (accessed March 25, 2019), 210.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

absence of her mother as a moral enforcer and protector. Her behavior also offers insights into the role that the broader slave community may have played in influencing her decision to court with modesty. Perhaps members of the community knew her mother. Perhaps she feared judgment from other female authority figures. Or, perhaps Hawkins had a clear understanding of the protective intention underlying her mother's teachings of Christianized respectability and sexual restraint. Providing such commentary about actions that took place after her mother's death, Hawkins's comment shows the legacy of the moral agency of enslaved women. From their marginalized and subaltern status, slave women served as moral educators on the principles of chastity across generations.

Courtship among slaves took place within the very limited time that they received for leisure. This mainly included Sunday evenings and during holidays such as the Fourth of July and Christmas.⁵⁸ Occasionally, there were further opportunities to court during special events like corn-shucklings and dances.⁵⁹ In these moments, slave women made do with their very limited means to dress up. They adorned and beautified themselves with beads and necklaces made of chinaberries and chestnuts, scented themselves with roses, orchards and honeysuckles, ground berries to create make-up and tied their hair in head-wraps.⁶⁰ In Alabama, former slave Lucindy Lawrence Jurdon fondly remembered getting herself ready for courtship. "I 'members dat when us courted us went to walk an' hunted chestnuts. Us would string dem an' put 'em 'round our necks an' smile at our fellers."⁶¹ As Moore writes, "By grooming themselves, slave girls defined their differences from males, the need for

⁵⁸ Moore, "Free in Thought, Fettered in Action," 146-7.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 142.

⁶¹ Interview with Lucindy Lawrence Jurdon in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.010> (accessed March 26, 2019), 243.

individuality, and the desire to attract mates.”⁶² Of course, such indications of their blossoming sexuality often signaled to white male slaveholders, overseers, and members of the community that a slave girl was entering sexual maturity and thus presumed available for sex. As in the story of Jacobs, the predations of her master began when she started adolescence.

Customs and expectations surrounding courtship varied from region to region, and from plantation to plantation. Sometimes courtship practices occurred under the supervision of slave mothers and caregivers, but they also often involved the intervention and surveillance of masters and mistresses who saw the economic value of slave courtship. Thus, there were many variables that influenced the shape of courtship in the slave community. The age at which courtship began varied across plantations. Often, the commencement and extent of courtship (if any) depended on the individual temperament of the slaveholding patriarch. For example, on the plantation in Georgia where Phil Towns’s parents were slaves, there appeared to be a strict moral code enforced by the master. According to Townes, slaves slept in sex-segregated rooms until they married. “The girls passed thru two stages – childhood, and at sixteen they became ‘gals,’” explained a reporter of Towns’s account.⁶³ “Three years later they might marry if they chose but the husband had to be older – at least 21.”⁶⁴ There were designated hours for courting and since there were no clocks, a “‘time mark’ was set by the sun.”⁶⁵ Young men were prohibited from giving gifts to girls during the courtship phase and consent from the slave parents *and* the master was required before

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Interview with Phil Towns, “Old Slave Story” in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 4, Telfair-Young with combined interviews of others*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.044> (accessed November 1, 2018), 38.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

marriage. Towns's description of the plantation where his parents were held represents the paternalistic arrangement that masters very often enforced on their slaves. The notion that the consent of slave parents shared the same weight as the consent of masters was part of the performative fiction of slavery as a benevolent institution.

In contrast to Towns's recollection, on the plantation in North Carolina where Hilliard Yellerday's parents were held captive, the master had no interest in making his slaves adhere to a Christian sexual moral code. Girls as young as twelve and thirteen were forced to have sex with "Negro men," some of which were "six feet tall," Yellerday recalled.⁶⁶ Describing the height of the men, Yellerday sought to emphasize the wide difference in age and physical stature as evidence of the severity of the crime. It appeared that slave girls had no option of pursuing a love interest of their own choosing on this plantation. As Yellerday continued, "Mother said there were cases where these young girls loved someone else and would have to receive the attentions of men of the master's choice. This was a general custom."⁶⁷ Berry Clay in Georgia corroborated this fact as a general custom. "Courtships were very brief for as soon as a man or woman began to manifest interest in the opposite sex, the master busied himself to select a wife or husband and only in rare cases was the desire of the individual considered," reported Clay's interviewer.⁶⁸ For Yellerday, the intervention of masters whose interest in slave courtship was for profit, harmed the sexual morals of the community. Presenting a judgement that was very common among whites as

⁶⁶ Interview with Hilliard Yellerday in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 2, Jackson-Yellerday*. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.112> (accessed November 1, 2018), 434.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Interview with Berry Clay in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 1, Adams-Furr*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.041> (accessed November 1, 2018), 191.

well as some blacks, particularly men, Yellerday added, “This state of affairs tended to loosen the morals of the Negro race and they have never fully recovered from its effect. Some slave women would have dozens of men during their life. Negro women who had had a half a dozen mock husbands in slavery time were plentiful. The holy bonds of matrimony did not mean much to a slave.”⁶⁹ With sexual consent resting in the power of the slaveholder, it is no surprise that many, like Yellerday, understood slave women’s sexuality *only* in terms of their exploitation.

Yet, we know that slave women continuously sought to assert their moral and sexual agency in their intimate and romantic relationships. Customs such as ‘going abroad’ on a Sunday evening to visit a beau on another plantation shows that many enslaved people committed to monogamous, long distance relationships. For some, having a partner who lived on a separate plantation worked as a form of protection. Partners could be spared the trauma of seeing a loved one under the lash. The custom of courting abroad also spoke to slaves’ desires to avoid incestuous relationships. In some instances, a gendered hierarchy both within the enslaved community and imposed by white masters and mistresses dictated the terms of slave pairings. For example, Rosa Starke in South Carolina recalled that a male house slave “might swoop down and mate wid a field hand’s good lookin’ daughter, now and then, for pure love of her, but you never see a house gal lower herself by marryin’ and matin’ wid a common field-hand n****r. Dat offend de white folks, ‘specially de young misses, who liked de business of match makin’ and matin’ of de young slaves.”⁷⁰ The crude notion that young mistresses intervened in slave ‘match-making’ was again a seemingly

⁶⁹ Interview with Hilliard Yellerday, *North Carolina Narratives*, 434.

⁷⁰ Interview with Rosa Starke in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 4, Raines-Young*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.144> (accessed November 1, 2018), 148.

benign image emerging from idea of a benevolent and paternalistic plantation arrangement. In Starke's recollection, slave men had greater freedom to choose a female mate, regardless of her role. Whereas, the expectation of an enslaved domestic girl was that she would only marry a man who was either free or a held role that was equivalent to her position.

The institution of slavery denied enslaved women's claims to ideals of feminine virtue and the sanctity of marriage. This was symbolically reflected in a slave woman's wedding day. Unlike her white counterparts, the 'happiest day' of a slave woman's life often took place after work under the cover of night. Depending on individual circumstances and the attitude of the slaveholder, a slave wedding was either a moment of celebration or a coerced event. They were sometimes jubilant, formal ceremonies attended by family and friends from other plantations. In other cases, slave weddings consisted of a rushed reading of a piece of paper. For example, in a plantation in Georgia, one informant noted that "no pains were spared to make [weddings] occasions to be remembered and cherished. Beautiful clothes – her own selections – were given the bride, and friends usually gave gifts for the house. These celebrations, attended by visitors from many plantations... ended in gay "frolics" with cakes, wine, etc., for refreshments."⁷¹ Marriages that were forced by a slaveholder's hand tended to be short and pragmatic, whereas weddings of two loving and consenting partners were visibly more decorative and celebratory. While slave marriages held no weight under the law, slaves often sought their own rites to confirm and sanctify their unions. The famed tradition of jumping over a decorated broomstick may not have originated in the slave community and was not uniformly observed. Instead, as historian Tera W. Hunter has noted, it represented one of many rituals that slaves adopted to observe

⁷¹ Interview with Phil Towns, *Georgia Narratives*, 39.

their unions.⁷² “Jumping the broom” was also practiced in a variety of different ways. Enslaved couples often attached meaning to the direction in which they jumped over the broom.⁷³ For some, jumping forward represented a step into nuptials, whereas jumping backwards, reversed this commitment as form of divorce.⁷⁴ For others, jumping the broom in both directions constituted the ritual of matrimony.⁷⁵ The existence of this popular tradition within the enslaved community demonstrated the value and commitment that slaves placed on marriage, and potentially chastity, in a society where the marriage contract like all other forms of contract was beyond their reach.

The experience of courtship in an enslaved woman’s life was neither always fully consensual nor limited to the slave community. As part of their struggle for sexual autonomy and a life that was closer to freedom, slave women engaged in various forms of sexual calculations that included sex with white men. They were also subject to stalking, seduction and rape. The well-known narrative in the opening of this chapter, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is one the most articulate expressions of the complex nature of enslaved female sexual agency. To protect herself from her master’s predations, Jacobs devised a strategy that undermined his total access to and control over her body. By entering an illicit sexual relationship with a white man, one who happened to wield more social power than her master, Jacobs hoped to inspire Norcom to send her to the auction-block as punishment for her actions. Once up for sale, she hoped that Sawyer would fulfill his promise to purchase

⁷² In *Bound in Wedlock*, Hunter notes that jumping the broom was the most common wedding ritual among slaves. Explaining the possible origins of the tradition, Hunter writes, “The tradition most likely originated in Europe and, like many others, was adapted for African-American slaves. Slave masters were less than earnest in exploiting the tradition given its association with premodern paganism. But many slaves used it to mark new beginning in their lives when few other commonly observed rites were available to them.” See Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*, 62.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

her. The inherent conflict between a self-reflexive and self-determined individual who by status was enslaved property is crystalized in Jacobs's narrative. Like many other slave women, she understood the mechanisms of leveraging white male power to forge a space in which she could live free or, at least, quasi-free.⁷⁶ She hoped for a way to secure Sawyer's commitment through the exchange of sexual labor and the sentimental bond of progeny. But her plan was risky. In bearing a child as a slave girl, Jacobs inevitably increased the value of Norcom's estate. Moreover, under the culture of slavery, Sawyer was not legally obligated to recognize offspring by a slave woman – a prerogative that many white men exercised. Rendered property, an enslaved woman's assertion of her humanity and self-sovereignty was never be fully divorced from negotiations that hinged on her productive and reproductive value.⁷⁷

Jacobs's sexual relationship with Sawyer could neither have been affirmatively consensual or pleasure-based. Any space for pleasure was confined within the profoundly imbalanced relation of power between an elite, southern white man and a slave girl. Jacobs admitted to the possibility of a fantasy of attraction and consent,⁷⁸ writing that, "By degrees, a more tender feeling crept into my heart."⁷⁹ But this feeling was indivisible from Jacobs's knowledge that Sawyer's kindness was transactional in nature. "Of course I saw whither all

⁷⁶ For an excellent discussion of black women's struggles across the spectrum of freedom, unfreedom and slavery, including the terms "virtually free" and "quasi-free" see Amrita Chakrabarti Myers, *Forging Freedom: Black Women and the Pursuit of Liberty in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

⁷⁷ Historian Jennifer L. Morgan has explored in detail how African women experienced slavery very differently to enslaved men because of their sex. Slave women were exploited for their productive and reproductive labor. See Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

⁷⁸ The relationship between sexual consent and enslaved women is brilliantly analyzed in the work of Emily Alyssa Owens, whose dissertation explores enslaved women within Louisiana's 'pleasure economy.' The term 'fantasies of consent' is borrowed from Owens's dissertation. See Emily Alyssa Owens, "Fantasies of Consent: Black Women's Sexual Labor in 19th Century New Orleans," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2015).

⁷⁹ Brent, *Incidents*, 84.

this was tending,” she added, “I know the impassible gulf between us; but to be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave, if her miserable situation has left her any pride or sentiment.”⁸⁰ Driven by the determination to refuse Norcom’s sexual access to her body, Jacobs’s illicit sexual relationship with Sawyer was both coerced and consensual. Her statement that “I had resolved that I would be virtuous, though I was a slave” lands as a powerful example of the way that words often lend themselves to action.⁸¹

Like many slave women, Jacobs was compelled to assert her sexual self-ownership within the conditions of her own violation. She wrote, “It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment.”⁸² Her decision most closely aligns the contemporary notion of ‘constrained consent’ – in which sexual consent emerges as a preferable option to an unpleasant, negative or potentially violent alternative.⁸³ However, scholars have yet to develop a term that can fully capture this prominent and pervasive feature of enslaved women’s sexual lives.

Jacobs was profoundly conflicted over the moral implications of her strategy of sexual self-protection. She identified her moral transgression as a betrayal of her own sense of Christian virtue as well as a betrayal of her kin and community. For Jacobs, her sexuality

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid. 87.

⁸² Ibid. 85.

⁸³ The legal framework on the question of sexual consent is an ongoing one. Since the 1980s, feminists have engaged in heated debates over the place of sex and the meaningfulness of consent as a concept in a patriarchal and misogynistic society. For a deep discussion on the historical legal and institutional trajectory of the issue of sexual consent, culminating in present-day questions about “affirmative consent” laws, see Janet Halley, “The Move to Affirmative Consent,” *Signs* 41, (2015). <http://signsjournal.org/currents-affirmative-consent/halley/> (accessed November 1, 2018).

and sexual choices were directly tied to not only her personal integrity, but that of her family, especially her grandmother. “I secretly mourned over the sorrow I was bringing on my grandmother, who had so tried to shield me from harm,” she lamented, “I knew that I was the greatest comfort of her old age, and that it was a source of pride to her that I had not degraded myself, like most slaves.”⁸⁴ Jacobs’s incorrect notion that slave women had complete control over their sexuality is problematic. Perhaps this overemphasis was a device that she employed as part of her abolitionist mission to showcase the self-autonomy and subjectivity of women held in bondage. Perhaps it reflected the specific slavery context that she experienced – one in which she had a childhood that was ‘so fondly shielded.’ Or perhaps Jacobs made this claim from the sense of guilt and responsibility that she developed because of her master’s advances. It is important to highlight that Jacobs understood her sexual integrity in relation to a tradition of moral authority and principles imparted to her from her formerly enslaved grandmother. Reasoning that “the wrong does not seem so great with an unmarried man,” revealed the self-conscious moral calculation that informed Jacobs’s act of sexual resistance.

“After freedom I married”⁸⁵

Enslaved women’s choices around marriage offer a powerful display of the utility of ideals of chastity as a strategy of resistance, mode of gendered empowerment, a form of birth control, and an ethic of spiritual autonomy and individual and community survival. Their choices around marriage ranged from seeking to practice sexual abstinence within

⁸⁴ Brent, *Incidents*, 86.

⁸⁵ Interview with Lucy Withers in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 7, Vaden-Young*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.027> (accessed November 1, 2018), 222.

one's ability to do so, to negotiating the terms of marriage with husbands, to delaying the prospect of marriage until freedom was secured. Due to the culture of slavery, slaves were not subject to the same kind of scrutiny around premarital sex as whites. The stereotype of the Jezebel framed enslaved women as sexually promiscuous and inviting. It normalized the idea that slave women natural proclivities directed them to illicit sex. But even as white society held slave women to a separate racist standard, slave women themselves often chose to adhere to Christian codes of chastity and sexual respectability. The reality of life under slavery's sexually exploitative system meant that slave women devised ways to reconcile their sense of spiritual autonomy and resistance within unconventional and often violently enforced family structures. Maintaining a strong sense of community, they stitched together familial ties and embraced illegitimate children born of forced unions. Of course, enslaved women's ideals of chastity existed in tension with the expectations of their productive and reproductive labor. Living *aspirationally* toward Christian chastity enabled slave women to anchor themselves in a tradition of self-protection and survival within the female community. This was evident in the moral lessons that slave mothers and grandmothers imparted to their children and grandchildren. It was also evident in the way they spoke about themselves and the decisions they made – or hoped to make – in freedom.

The story of Ellen and William Craft in their thrilling narrative, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860) offers strong a case in point. They were held captive in Macon, Georgia. Ellen's desire to marry as a free woman initially motivated the couple to plan their escape. Due to the uncertainty and difficulty of life under slavery, William and Ellen Craft adjusted their plans and agreed to marry while enslaved. But they never gave up hope of living out their marriage in freedom. What did it mean to wait until freedom to get married? In narrating Ellen's response to his first proposal, William recorded:

My wife was torn from her mother's embrace in childhood, and taken to a distant part of the country. She had seen so many other children separated from their parents in this cruel manner, that the mere thought of her ever becoming the mother of a child, to linger out a miserable existence under the wretched system of American slavery, *appeared to fill her very soul with horror*; and as she had taken what I felt to be an important view of her condition, I did not, at first, press the marriage, but agreed to assist her in trying to devise some plan by which we might escape from our unhappy condition, and then be married.⁸⁶

The threat of family separation as well as the prospect of bringing offspring into slavery was one of the strongest factors influencing slave women's sexual resistance. What is also evident in William's recollection is that the assumption of chastity constituted part of Ellen's method of sexual resistance. While the passage emphasizes Ellen's fear of family separation in slavery, the underlying logic of William's reflection is centered around the notion of chastity. Without marriage, and thus no sexual intercourse, there would be no children to worry about. It is possible that William and Ellen Craft may have practiced prenuptial intercourse, but the assumption undergirding Ellen's desire to escape to marry in freedom was that marriage came first, followed by sexual intercourse and a family.

Ellen negotiated the terms of her relationship with William. Her refusal to get married and consequently conceive while enslaved demonstrated an assertion of her desire for, and assertion of, sexual self-sovereignty. It was a refusal that many slave women simply could not exercise without extreme difficulty. Ellen and William's own decision to marry in slavery on the condition that they seize the first opportunity to escape reflected the difficulty of reconciling intimate bonds with life in bondage. Yet, it is clear in Ellen and William's story that an ideal of chastity offered a mode of sexual resistance and sense of individual (and familial) protection, preservation and survival for Ellen.

⁸⁶ William and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (London: William Tweedie, 337 Strand, 1860), 27. (Emphasis added).

Slave men played a role in reinforcing gendered values around female chastity and virtue. Again, William Craft's own narration in the *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* gives insight into the way that slave men idealized on the notion of sexual purity of their love interests, beaus, and wives. In a veiled revelation of his wife's chastity, William wrote, "My wife's new mistress was decidedly more humane than the majority of her class."⁸⁷ Positing that this mistress spared Ellen the everyday and sexualized violence and degradation that was so prevalent across plantation life, William effectively enshrined Ellen with a badge of virtue and honor. "My wife has always given her credit for not exposing her to the worst features of slavery," he noted.⁸⁸ Ellen's treatment by her mistress might not have been the worst kind under slavery, but this does not mean that Ellen might not have experienced such violence with a previous master. William's emphasis on Ellen's chastity could have been a way to assert their respectability in retrospect. What is worth noting is that the sexual chastity of Ellen is highlighted in the narrative, suggesting that black men, like their white counterparts, prided themselves on the virtue and sexual chastity of their wives.

Fugitive slave Henry Bibb was also concerned about the chastity of his first and second wives. In his account, *Narrative of the Life and Adventure of Henry Bibb*, he spoke about his first wife's reluctance to get married while enslaved. After a period of courtship, Bibb and his wife "entered upon a conditional contract of matrimony." The notion of a 'conditional contract of matrimony' reflects that slaves used a language of freedom (contracts) in their references to marriage. Bibb continued to note "that after marriage we would change our former course and live a pious life; and that we would embrace the earliest

⁸⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

opportunity of running away to Canada for our liberty.”⁸⁹ Like Ellen Craft, Bibb’s first wife, Matilda, understood the danger of marrying and having children in slavery. She also understood that slavery was incongruous to her ability to fully enter a Christianized state of matrimony and live a pious life. Thus, marriage in slavery represented a temporary measure for this couple.

The traumas involved in marriage in slavery that most deeply affected men included their powerlessness to protect their wives in their role as slave husbands. Witnessing his wife “shamefully scourged and abused,” Bibb decided to forego marriage in slavery by leaving his wife.⁹⁰ His decision to leave this marriage revealed the significance of ideas of manhood among slave men, and the frustration that they expressed in their inability to serve as protectors. It is no surprise that Bibb spoke more positively of his second wife, whom he met in freedom. The absence of the heavy hand of a slaveholder perhaps enabled Bibb to feel more confident of his manhood within this marriage. “She is to me what a poor slave’s wife can never be to her husband while in the condition of a slave; for she can not (sic) be true to her husband contrary to the will of her master,” he wrote.⁹¹ Although Bibb presented a critique of the moral degradation of slavery and the violation that it imposed on black family life, he also reinforced many of the prevailing assumptions surrounding enslaved womanhood. In his narrative, a slave woman’s sexuality belonged not to herself or her husband, but to her master.

Whereas slave women weaponized ideals of chastity as part of their sexual and moral agency and resistance, slave men tended to engage ideals of chastity as they related to their

⁸⁹ Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself. With an Introduction by Lucius C. Matlack* (New York: Published by the Author, 5 Spruce Street, 1849), 37.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 92.

girlfriends and wives. In other words, ideals of chastity offered slave women a means of resistance in their struggle to control the borders around their own bodies. Slave men, however, valued ideals of *female* chastity as part of their own sense of manhood. For example, for Ellen Craft, the prospect of enslaved motherhood, and her powerlessness to protect her children from the evils of the institution, motivated her to delay marriage and (theoretically) practice sexual abstinence. Whereas, for Bibb, the worst part of marriage under slavery arose from his powerlessness to protect his wife, including her sexuality. William Craft expressed exactly this fact when he spoke of his wife's chastity. He proclaimed, "Oh! If there is any one thing under the wide canopy of heaven, horrible enough to stir a man's soul, and to make his blood boil, it is the thought of his dear wife, his unprotected sister, or his young and virtuous daughters, struggling to save themselves from falling prey to such demons."⁹² This deeply rooted frustration and anger expressed by enslaved men perhaps explains why slave women who were sexually abused by their masters or overseers were sometimes ostracized from the slave community. Reverend Young Winston Davis, a former slave living in Florida described the culture of shame that slave men sometimes directed to slave women who were victims of rape and sexual abuse. He stated that "The Race became badly mixed then; some Negro women were forced into association, some were beaten to death because they refused. The Negro men dare not bother or even speak to some of their women."⁹³ Slave men who directed their anger towards female victims by white men shows that slave women often carried the burden of an unfair standard of sexual morality. Slave women's ideas of chastity and sexual self-

⁹² William and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 8.

⁹³ Interview with Reverend Young Winston Davis in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 3, Florida, Anderson-Wilson with combined interviews of others*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.030> (accessed November 1, 2018), 89-90.

sovereignty were linked to their sense of self as well as the external influence of the attitudes of slave men in the community.

Indeed, slave women could not consistently uphold the idealized conventions of female chastity. Their value as slaves was tied to their productive and reproductive labor. Stories and accounts of women used as ‘breeders’ populate the many testimonies of former slaves. For example, Peter Brown’s mother was viewed as a “fast breeder.”⁹⁴ She gave birth to ten children, including three sets of twins. Brown’s father appeared to negotiate his wife’s labor with their master because she was so fertile. “They told him... they wouldn’t make her work no more, [and allowed her to] take care of her children.”⁹⁵ This kind of arrangement, however, was extremely rare.⁹⁶ In another interview, Laura Thornton from Midway, Alabama argued that slaveholders generally had no interest in reducing the productive labor of their ‘prized breeders.’ “They never kept no slaves for breeding on any plantation I heard of,” she stated. “They would work them to death and breed them too.”⁹⁷ In Indiana, Rosaline Rogers conceded this point. She was born enslaved in South Carolina and was sold and taken to Tennessee. With knowledge drawn from multiple regional experiences, she explained that

⁹⁴ Interview with Peter Brown in in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 1, Abbott-Byrd*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.021> (accessed November 1, 2018), 311.

⁹⁵ Interview with Peter Brown, *Arkansas Narratives, Part 1*.

⁹⁶ For literature on slave breeding, see Gregory D. Smithers, *Slave Breeding: Sex, Violence and Memory in African American History* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2013) and Ned Sublette and Constance Sublette, *The American Slave Coast: A History of the Slave-Breeding Industry* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2016).

⁹⁷ Interview with Laura Thornton in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 6, Quinn-Tuttle*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.026> (accessed November 1, 2018), 326.

“Slave mothers were allowed to stay in bed only two or three days after childbirth; then were forced to go into the field to work, as if nothing had happened.”⁹⁸

Enslaved women’s experience of repeated sexual violence, abuse and exploitation sometimes influenced their sexual lives after slavery. Living with the trauma of these experiences, freedwomen sometimes decided to forgo the prospect of marriage and a family after emancipation. Such was the case in the story of Rose Williams, who was traded by William Black in Bell County, Texas. Williams recalled the grotesque language around chastity and purity that was used as she stood, at the age of fifteen, on an auction block for sale. “Den massa Black calls me to de block and de auction man say, ‘What am I offer for dis portly, strong young wench. She’s never been ‘bused and will make a good breeder,’” she stated.⁹⁹ Purchased by a slaveholder called Hawkins, Williams openly stated that she never forgave him for forcing her to live with a slave man called Rufus ‘against her wants.’ Williams recalled repeatedly fighting Rufus’s large body off her own when he crawled into bed with her. Finally, after many attempts to protect herself, Williams’s master threatened to whip her if she did not allow Rufus access to her body. As Hawkins had purchased Williams’s family, the threat of separation compelled her to submit. “I thinks bout massa buyin’ me offen de block and savin’ me from bein’ sep’rated from my folks and ‘bout bein’ whipped at the stake. Dere it am,” she lamented. “What am I’s to do? So I ‘cides to do as de massa wish and so I yields.”¹⁰⁰ Williams’s story is not uncommon to the stories of many

⁹⁸ Interview with Rosaline Rogers in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 5, Indiana, Arnold-Woodson*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.050> (accessed November 1, 2018), 166.

⁹⁹ Interview with Rose Williams in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 4, Sanco-Young*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.164> (accessed November 1, 2018), 175.

¹⁰⁰ Rose Williams, *Texas Narratives*, 178.

other slave women. But, her attitude towards marriage after freedom is interesting. Although she had two children with Rufus, including one who was born after she was freed, Rose forced Rufus to leave and never remarried.¹⁰¹ In fact, disregarding her forced union in slavery, Rose proclaimed at the age of around 90 that she ‘never married’ at all.¹⁰² “I never marries, ‘cause one ‘sperience am ‘nough for dis n****r,” she stated. “After what I does for de massa, I’s never wants to truck with any man. De Lawd forgive dis cullud woman, but he have to ‘scuse me and look for some others for to ‘plenish de earth.”¹⁰³ The trauma of sexual exploitation compelled Williams to take a vow of sexual abstinence in freedom. Some former slave women actively sought marriage as one of the first expressions of their freedom. But others, such as Williams, retreated from their presumed biological duty to reproduce the race. Freedom for these women meant the ability to assert their sexual self-sovereignty by establishing and controlling the borders around their own bodies.

Enslaved women who were forced to marry partners chosen by their masters often left and sought adjust their lives at the first sign of freedom, demonstrating their desire to realize their sexual self-ownership. In Arkansas, Henry Nelson remembered that his mother left her first husband once she was free. She was made to marry an “elderly” man named Eli when she was just thirteen.¹⁰⁴ “She didn’t live with her first husband after slavery. She left him when she was freed. She never did intend to marry him. She was forced to do that,” Nelson recalled.¹⁰⁵ Likewise, Willie McCullough’s mother and grandmother were both not

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Henry Nelson in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 5, McClendon-Prayer*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.025> (accessed November 1, 2018), 197.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 198.

allowed to choose their own husbands. When his mother turned sixteen, her master “went to a slave owner near by and got a six-foot n****r man, almost an entire stranger to her and told her she must marry him.”¹⁰⁶ After a very brief ceremony that consisted of the master reading a piece of paper to them, they were informed that they were married and instructed to go into a cabin and go to bed. McCullough recalled his mother’s story with the observation that her consent was absent from the entire event. “The slave owners treated them as if they had been common animals in this respect,” he reflected.¹⁰⁷ While it is unclear whether McCullough’s mother had any children with this forced husband, her affection towards another man, McCullough’s father, manifested itself in freedom. “My mother said that she loved my father before the surrender and just as soon as they were free they married.”¹⁰⁸

The value that slave women and men placed on legal marriage after emancipation is indicative of the fact that they associated the institution of marriage with freedom and self-determination. This association also demonstrates the fact that former slave women understood marriage was a way to exercise control over their sexuality and sexual life. Getting marriage licenses marked a new episode that offered some protection from the threat of sexual violation, assault and the separation of families that accompanied slave marriages. It also erased the power and position of the former master from their bond of matrimony.¹⁰⁹ Thus, in many cases, slave women sought to adjust their lives by having their marriages legally recognized. Eliza Hays’s parents “went together till freedom and weren’t

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Willie McCullough in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 2, Jackson-Yellerday*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.112> (accessed November 1, 2018), 78.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ See Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*.

married except in the way there married in slavery... When freedom came, he [her father] taken her [her mother] to his place and married her accordin' to the law."¹¹⁰ Legal marriage for former slaves thus represented a source of pride. It offered an opportunity to live out their desires for a family free, at least in theory, from violation.

Legal marriages after emancipation also infused former slave women with a source of pride and control regarding their own chastity, and the respectability and legitimacy of their children. For example, when asked about marriage during an interview, Ellen Cragin responded, "My first child was born to my husband. I didn't throw myself away."¹¹¹ Interestingly, Cragin's prideful comments was specifically about the moral choice that she could make in freedom. This is indicated in her esteem for her own mother, Luvenia Polk, who was viewed as a 'breeder' and repeatedly raped until she stole her own body in an escape. Despite her mother's sexual history, Cragin affirmed that "My mother was a great Christian woman. She raised us right."¹¹² Separating her mother's moral values from her sexual history constituted part of the survival ethic that informed slave women's ideals of chastity. The internal moral and sexual values of slave women therefore often reflected their moral and sexual choices in freedom.

Enslaved women and girls received their moral training through a confluence of forces, the most powerful of which was the moral influence of their mothers and slave

¹¹⁰ Interview with Eliza Hays in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 3, Gadson-Isom*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.023> (accessed November 1, 2018), 221.

¹¹¹ Interview with Ellen Cragin in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 2, Cannon-Evans*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.022> (accessed November 1, 2018), 47.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 42.

female authority figures. Harriet Jacobs felt shame and guilt following her master's advances because of the moral education that her grandmother had imparted. "[H]e tried his utmost to corrupt the *pure principles* that my grandmother had instilled [sic]," she wrote.¹¹³ "He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred."¹¹⁴ Jacobs's grandmother's influence reflected a broader belief in the moral superiority of enslaved women in comparison to their masters and mistresses. Moreover, her reference to "unclean images" was linked to the general belief that exposure to immoral imagery or an immoral environment compromised the moral purity of an individual. Thus, slave women retained their belief in their own chastity and purity despite the widespread immoral culture of their forced environment, suggesting both their vulnerability to external forces as well as their resilience. Jacobs presented herself as morally pure and virtuous by nurture as well as by nature through her descriptions of her grandmother and mother. While her grandmother taught her 'pure principles,' she also related a memory of her deceased mother. "They all spoke kindly of my dead mother, who had been a slave merely in name, but in nature was noble and womanly," she affirmed.¹¹⁵

It is important to note that former slaves sometimes attributed their moral training to their mistresses, and less commonly, their masters. But in many of these cases, the moral training of their owners was consciously observed for its incongruity to their enslavement. Moreover, the influence of slave mothers as moral agents was often portrayed as *the* source of a slave child's training. For example, Tena White in Christ Church, South Carolina acknowledged the influence of the white people around her growing up. "If I didn't been

¹¹³ Brent, *Incidents*, 44.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

around the house wid white people I wouldn't hab this opportunity today, an dey good to me an gib me nuf to keep my soul an body together.”¹¹⁶ Although Tena did not explicitly describe exactly how these people ‘helped’ her, there is the suggestion in the expression ‘to keep my body and soul together’ that she did not experience the sexual violence and trauma of many slave girls in the plantation house. Importantly, against this recognition, White also made a point to highlight and honor her mother. Recalling an episode during the War, she stated, “My mother raise me right. When de Yankee come through we been at Remley point. My Ma took care ob me. She shut me up and she gard me. De Yankee been go in de colored people house, an dey mix all up, and dey do just what dey want. Dey been brutish.”¹¹⁷ Speaking about her mother’s ability to protect her from sexual violence during a Yankee raid, White presented a clear juxtaposition between the white people who perhaps didn’t sexually violate her, and her heroic, protective mother.¹¹⁸ This kind of recollection spoke to how the moral education, influence and labor of slave mothers was inextricably tied to young slave girls’ knowledge about sex and sexual self-protection.

Former slave men and women were often explicit about the link between moral training by mother particularly, in the home, and notions of virtue. For slave Lindsay Faucette from North Carolina, there was only one way to live “an’ dat is de right way. Educate your cillum, if you can but be sho you give dem de proper moral training at home.”¹¹⁹ Alluding to the limitations preventing slave mothers from educating their children

¹¹⁶ Interview with Tena White in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 4, Raines-Young*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.144> (accessed November 1, 2018), 198.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Lindsey Faucette in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1*,

– such as work obligations or their own lack of a formal education –Faucett was clear in the belief that moral training could still be achieved. Indeed, slave women’s ideas of purity derived largely from their Protestant Christian faith. It infused and shaped their outlook towards their own condition, their responsibility, and their redemption from worldly sins. As Susan Hamlin from South Carolina interpreted, “All you got tuh do is libe right, yuh got tuh libe (live) de life. What is de life? – Purity. – What is Purity? – Righteousness. – What is Righteousness? – ‘Tuh do de right t’ing. – Libe right, - pray an’ praise. Beliebe on de delibrin (delivering) Sabior. Trus’ Him. He lead yuh.”¹²⁰

Former slave women often expressed their adoration of their slave mothers, grandmothers and female slave authority figures through their discussion of purity and rituals of cleanliness. Mintie Maria Miller from Texas remembered playing and eating with white girls as a child. Yet, her most prized memories seemed to emerge from the evenings where she reunited with her mother. “My mammy takes me down to the bayou and wash my face and put me on a clean dress,” she stated,¹²¹ Perhaps by describing this memory, Miller sought to emphasize the effort her slave mother put into keeping her clean – just like the white girls she played with. Lillie Williams recalled her grandmother raising her along with two other girls and a boy while her mother was contracted out to work for a white family. “Grandma was old-timey. She made our dresses to pick cotton in every summer. They was

Adams-Hunter. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.111> (accessed November 1, 2018), 306.

¹²⁰ Interview with Susan Hamlin in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 2, Eddington-Hunter*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.142> (accessed November 1, 2018), 225.

¹²¹ Interview with Mintie Maria Miller in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 3, Lewis-Ryles*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.163> (accessed November 1, 2018), 85.

hot and stubby. They looked pretty. We was proud of them. Mama washed and ironed. She kept us clean, too,” explained Williams.¹²² In Georgia, ninety-year-old Lina Hunter’s grandmother, Granny Rose, also taught her to “keep clean and fix up nice.”¹²³ And, as a little girl, Nan Stewart, who lived with her family in slave quarters affixed to the back of the master’s Big House, also remembered the importance of cleanliness to her slave mother. “When I’se littl’ I sleeped in a trun’l bed,” she stated, “My mammy wuz mighty ‘ticular an’ clean, why she made us chilluns was oush feets ebry night fo’ we get into de bed.”¹²⁴ Such recurring trope of rituals of cleanliness in former slave women’s memories of their mothers and grandmothers challenged the popular association of purity and cleanliness with white women and girls. These sentimental recollections went beyond displays of the daily duties of motherhood. The rituals performed by mothers during their time away from the field or a white home, revealed their private values of purity, the homes they wanted to maintain, and the sense of self-respect and dignity that they wanted their children to learn.¹²⁵

¹²² Interview with Lillie Williams in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 7, Vaden-Young*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.027> (accessed November 1, 2018), 177-8.

¹²³ Interview with Lina Hunter in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey-Jones*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.042> (accessed November 1, 2018), 260.

¹²⁴ Interview with Nan Stewart in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 12, Ohio, Anderson-Williams*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.120> (accessed November 1, 2018), 86.

¹²⁵ It is good to note that ‘cleanliness’ also referred to other duties of labor, whether personal or domestic or enslaved duties. Many informants who participated in the WPA project referred to how they (or their mothers) kept their homes clean as way of showing their sense of self-respect and virtue. For example, in Arthurtown, SC, Dolly Haynes described cleaning and working in her garden as a virtue. She stated, “Wen de nurvus spells leaves me an’ I feels a little strong in de legs I wuks mah garden. I loves to be doin’ somethin’ to keep clean, ‘cause I jes ain’t no rockin chair setter.” Doing work around the home and keeping it clean, for Haynes, was the opposite of idleness. Richard Mack from Charleston, SC, corroborated this belief in the link between cleanliness in the mind, body, and home, and virtue. “Yes Ma’am! Oh Heaven!—we got to be clean—we change out of the flesh to the spirit; a crown prepared for us; all we save and help are stars in our crown; you go from Mansion to Mansion—higher—higher,” he recorded. See interview with Dolly Haynes in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project*,

Indeed, some slaves attributed their moral education explicitly to their masters and mistresses. But such education formed part of the dominant culture of paternalism that shaped relations between masters/mistresses and their slaves. Second to the patriarchal head of the plantation, and in charge of running the affairs of the household, mistresses commonly sought total control over their slaves; demanding industriousness, loyalty, diligence and even displays of gratitude. W. Solomon Debnam certainly performed this role when he stated, “During my entire life no man can touch my morals, I was brought up by my white folks not to lie, steal or do things immoral. I have lived a pure life. There is nothing against me.”¹²⁶ In seeing their slaves – particularly house slave girls – as extensions of themselves, mistresses often desired that their slaves perform in a manner that was representative of their role as the female of the home. For example, in Spartanburg, South Carolina, a former slave woman named Caroline Farrow recollected that “My mistress had me work in de house, kind of a house-girl, and she made me keep clean and put large ear rings so I would look good.”¹²⁷ Mirriam McCommons in Georgia noted that her mistress taught her “to be neat and clean in evvything [sic] I done, and I would ‘long de road a-knitting and nebber miss a stitch.”¹²⁸ Mistresses sometimes taught their slaves to read as part

1936-1938. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 2, Eddington-Hunter*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.142> (accessed November 1, 2018), 260; and interview with Richard Mack in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.143> (accessed November 1, 2018), 153.

¹²⁶ Interview with W. Solomon Debnam in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.111> (accessed November 1, 2018), 243.

¹²⁷ Interview with Caroline Farrow in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 2, Eddington-Hunter*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.142> (accessed November 1, 2018), 40.

¹²⁸ Interview with Mirriam McCommons in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3,*

of their effort to convert their slaves to Protestant Christianity. Mistresses who sought to control every aspect their enslaved property, including their behavior and appearance certainly played a role in shaping the moral values of slave women. Although ideals of womanhood were formally reserved for middle and upper class white women, the popularity of these ideas meant that house slave women were also privy to its conventions. This exchange of popular values could easily have taken place through house slave women's attendance to their mistresses in their dressing rooms, while lining the walls of female social affairs or even through the paternalistic demands of a mistress who saw themselves as a morally civilizing force. However, more often not, it was slave parents that equipped their daughters – whether house slaves or field slaves - with a sense of moral vigilance to help protect themselves while working in white homes and in the fields. The role of enslaved mothers as protectors speaks to the indigeneity of black women's ideals around feminine virtue as well as the ways that these ideals were adopted from white society.

Slave girls had to protect themselves from violence inflicted by white women as well as white men while working in their owners' homes. As historian Thavolia Glymph explains in her book, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (2003), mistresses were often as violent or even more violent than masters within the home.¹²⁹ Catalysts for mistress' violence included jealousy or displaced anger in the face of powerlessness and defenseless before abusive husbands. Slave girls and women bore the brunt of mistresses' lashes of frustration. Richard Macks shared his observations on the dangerous conditions confronting black women in white homes. "[C]olored women have

Kendricks-Styles. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.043> (accessed by November 1, 2018), 53.

¹²⁹ See Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

had many hard battles to fight to protect themselves from assault by employer, white male servant or by white men, many times not being able to protect, in fear of losing their positions. Then on the other hand they were subjected to many impositions by the women of the household through woman's jealousy," he explained.¹³⁰ Upholding the system of slavery through violence, mistresses (it would seem) betrayed the assumption of delicacy and moral purity that were so heavily associated with middle and upper class white womanhood. Yet, as historian Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers shows in her book, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (2019), slaveholding itself was a fundamental part of southern white female identity.¹³¹ The violence that attended slaveholding was part of the broader ideal of the southern plantation mistress. Slave women and girls sought various ways to realign their lives with their internal desire to control their sexuality and assert their moral agency. In doing so, they activated what can be described as an *active* relationship to notions of purity, Christian chastity and virtue, rather than a passive one – a discussion, in fact, that black and white sex radicals, abolitionist women, and early women's rights activists were debating in the antebellum era.¹³²

Conclusion: On Chastity and the Slave Community

One of the main questions presented to former slaves as part of the WPA interviews was on their thoughts about the 'present condition of the younger generation.'

¹³⁰ Interview with Richard Mack in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.143> (accessed November 1, 2018), 153.

¹³¹ See Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

¹³² For a study of sex radicals and women's rights activists' discussions about "active virtue" versus "passive purity" see April R. Haynes, *Riotous Flesh: Women, Physiology, and the Solitary Vice in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Unsurprisingly, the overwhelming majority of answers by women and men were of a moral nature. Anna Williamson from Holly Grove, Arkansas chastised the younger generation of the 1930s for what appeared to be their indiscriminate choice of multiple lovers without even a desire for marriage. “These darky girls marries [sic] a boy and they get tired of each other. They quit. They ain’t got no sign of divorce! Course they ain’t never been married!” she stated. “They jes’ take up and live together, then they both go on livin’ with some other man an’ woman.”¹³³ Millie Taylor hopelessly described her younger contemporaries as “more heathe’nish” than her generation.¹³⁴ “I just looks at ‘em and I don’t know what to think about this young race. They is a few respects you and theirselves,” she stated in an interview.¹³⁵ Charley Mitchell, a farmer in Panola County, Texas argued that young people were not raised like his generation. “Most of them have no manners or no moral self-respect,” he argued.¹³⁶ And, in the opinion of Charlotte E. Stephens, an eighty-three-year-old who worked as a teacher, young people were “living in an age of confusion” brought on by the forces of modernity and moral laxity.¹³⁷ “I do not like the trend of today; I would like for our young people to become interested in things more worthwhile; in a higher type of amusement. Conditions of morality and a lack of regard for conventions is deplorable.

¹³³ Interview with Anna Williamson in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 7, Vaden-Young*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.027> (accessed November 1, 2018), 195.

¹³⁴ Interview with Millie Taylor in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 6, Quinn-Tuttle*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.026> (accessed November 1, 2018), 270.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Interview with Charley Mitchell in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 3, Lewis-Ryles*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.163> (accessed November 1, 2018), 112.

¹³⁷ Interview with Charlotte E. Stephens in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 6, Quinn-Tuttle*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.026> (accessed November 1, 2018), 232-3.

Smoking among the girls has increased the common use of liquor between the sexes.”¹³⁸ The responses of these informants reflect a common generational tension. At almost any moment in history and the present, nostalgic discussions of ‘better times’ than the present moment can be heard. But the moral emphasis, particularly as it relates to the sexual freedom and behavior of the younger generation of the 1930s, is important to highlight. The attitudes of these informants represent a markedly conservative tone regarding sexual behavior. Their attitudes can be explained by the widespread presence of ideas around Christian chastity and morality in the mainstream conservative Victorian setting of their enslaved upbringing. The blend of concern, hopelessness and anxiety evident in these predominantly female responses reveal their belief that respectable Christian moral behavior was part of an ethic of community progress and survival.

In this chapter, I presented an overview of a topic that has received little scholarly attention in the field of black women’s sexuality. Slave women’s ideals of chastity and feminine virtue offer a window into an aspect of slave women’s sexual lives, from an aspirational perspective. In other words, taking the concept of chastity in the Victorian-era and analyzing its significance and uses in the enslaved female community, this chapter shows how sex factored into slave women’s meanings of freedom. This chapter demonstrates fundamentally that Christian chastity was a valued ideal within the enslaved female community and that slave women weaponized it for their own liberation. Looking at the way that enslaved and former slave women remembered gendered moral standards within the slave community around courtship, marriage, cleanliness and sexual self-protection, I argued that they viewed their moral praxis as a part of ethic of individual and community survival.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

Reminiscences by former slave women of their mothers, grandmothers and slave female authority figures presents crucial insights into the moral influence of these figures.

Whether realized or aspirational, slave women held on to ideals of chastity without the prerequisites of an education, middle or upper class-, or even a free-status. Chastity in the slave community functioned at the intersection of slave women's personal, intimate lives, their moral and sexual values, and their sexual resistance. I have argued that chastity as an ideal and practice, ultimately represented enslaved women's desire and struggle for sexual self-sovereignty in a system that depended on their sexual exploitation for its survival.

Chapter 2: “He did the same thing that married people do... I did not give my consent to have that done”¹: Struggling for Sexual Justice during the Civil War and Reconstruction.

One night in March 1864, John Lewis of the 16th US Colored Troops (USCT) went AWOL.² Stopping in Central Knob, near Chattanooga, TN, he entered the home of Sarrah Benford, a married free woman of color, where “he did by force try to have dealings of a carnal nature.”³ In her testimony before a court-martial, Benford recalled the ruse that Lewis deployed to gain access. In the presence of seven captains serving the Union army, she told the court that Lewis claimed that he was following the orders of his superior. She explained that Lewis stole some meat from a pig that she had killed earlier that Saturday morning. “When I sat down by the fire place I thought he would go away,” she continued, “but he would not go away and came and sat down beside me.”⁴ Benford told the court that Lewis then told her that he thought she “was an old woman,” suggesting that his original intention at theft had evolved into something more sinister. She recalled that Lewis slapped her on her shoulder and asked if she “had nothing else to give him.”⁵ As Benford testified, “I asked what he meant and he said I know what. I asked him about a hundred times what he meant and he said I know.”⁶ Insisting that Lewis name his intentions, Benford bravely made his illicit request explicit. Thus, when Lewis asked her for “some skin” and offered forty dollars for her compliance, Benford told the court that she responded, “Well, that’s a pretty question to ask a married

¹ Court-martial of Lieutenant Andrew J. Smith, 11th Pennsylvania Cavalry, July 25, 1864. National Archives Record Group 153 [RG153], Records of the Judge Advocate General’s Office (Army) [JAG], entry 15, file NN2099, National Archives, Washington, DC.

² Court-martial of John Lewis, 16th US Colored Troops, May 1865. RG153, JAG, entry 15, Court-Martial Case File, file MM2774, National Archives, Washington, DC.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

woman.”⁷ At this point, according to Benford’s testimony, Lewis took hold of his bayonet. “He said I might as well give it to him for thee was thirty of the boys coming along and they would all have some skin from me before they went away,” Benford stated. Though intensely afraid, she resisted. As she expressed: “I told him if they come I would have more Company to go to the Lieutenant with and asked if he had any objection.”⁸ Benford succeeded in scaring Lewis off. She even went beyond denying his advances and made a point to make him pay for his transgression. She followed him back towards the camp, undeterred by Lewis’s attempts to shoot at her, until she got tired. The next day Benford reported Lewis to Lieutenant John Scoot, commander of Company C.⁹

The apparent valor of Benford’s testimony shows the deeply precarious nature of life for a black woman in occupied territory during the Civil War. The violence of Benford’s story emerges not only in the incident itself. We see this violence in the court-environment, where she was compelled to relive this horror before a tribunal of white Union officials tasked with the possibility of convicting a fellow soldier.¹⁰ In 1863, the Union Army introduced a policy to indict soldiers accused of raping and assaulting women, regardless of their race.¹¹ This novel turn, forced by the context of war, conflicted with the existing legal tradition in the United States where there was no federal law on rape, and where most states, particularly in the South, offered little to no recourse for the rape of black women.¹² But this policy did not mean that the culture of the court, including military courts, had shifted. Benford was aware that her credibility as a

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ This was part of the Lieber Code. Soldiers charged with molestation of children, bestiality and homosexuality were also prosecuted.

¹² For example, the Tennessee statute on rape and sexual violence was not introduced until 1871, suggesting that there was an absence of a such a statute prior to this year.

respectable black woman was also on trial. Speaking of Lewis's attempted advances, she professed: "I told him if my husband would not know about it, God would, and that if I had done the like I could not be depended on by my husband." To be sure, she added, "*I was a lady before my husband's face and behind his back.*"¹³ Exhibiting her chastity and Christian faith through an affirmation of her relationship with her husband and God, Benford defied the long-standing cultural stereotype of the immoral, sexually deviant black woman. Despite her position as a free woman of color with limited means in occupied territory, she cast herself as a virtuous woman, invoking the tenets of purity and piety shared by the dominant Victorian feminine ideal of true womanhood. Clearly, she rejected the expectation of submissiveness that was also part of dominant gendered ideology.¹⁴ In a society where *ladies* were upper and middle class white women, Benford's demand for sexual justice on this ground was indeed subversive. Her radical act resulted in a rare success and Lewis was sentenced to a year in prison for his moral misconduct.¹⁵ Quite likely, Lewis's race as a black man was a contributing factor to his conviction.

Sarrah Benford was one of many African American women who brought sexual violation charges before the US army and government during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Like Benford, many framed their victimhood and resistance through active claims to their chastity and moral agency. This chapter explores African American

¹³ Court-martial of Private John Lewis, 16th US Colored Troops, RG153, JAG, entry 15, file MM2774, National Archives, Washington, DC. (emphasis added).

¹⁴ For more on the 'Cult of True Womanhood,' see Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: the American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio, 1976). See also Beryl Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) and Beryl Satter, "The Cult of True Womanhood" in *Gender: Space*, ed., Aimee Meredith Cox (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, a part of Gale, Cengage Learning, 2018).

¹⁵ African American soldiers generally received harsher sentences for the same crime committed by whites. It is important to note that John Lewis was convicted for three charges, the third of which referred to the attempted rape and assault on Sarrah Benford. The first charge was for leaving the camp of the 16th USCT. The second charge was for pillaging, as Lewis had stolen meat from Benford's home. It is likely that the first and second charges heavily contributed to Lewis's guilty verdict and sentencing.

women's struggles for sexual self-sovereignty through the transitional period of the Civil War and Reconstruction.¹⁶ Using the heavily under-researched record of Union court-martials, this chapter breaks new ground by centering the moral subjectivity of black women in their attestations before the State. Mining that archive, the chapter reveals how African American women and girls sought sexual justice from the US army and government in what I define as a struggle for sexual self-sovereignty. Free, enslaved, refugee, contraband and freed women appeared before military court-martials during the Civil War, and the Freedmen's Bureau during Reconstruction with radical claims to bodily protection and consent as a natural right and a necessity. Building on a moral tradition coming out of the enslaved female community, African American women and girls weaponized aspects of conservative ideals of womanhood as they articulated their desire for freedom from sexual violation. They testified in cases of attempted and actual sexual assault, against men that were black and white who were soldiers as well as civilians affiliated with the military. Often foregrounding themselves as moral subjects, poor, working-class and uneducated black women textured their testimonies with descriptors based on their age, their marital-status, their sense of bodily violation and pain, and their individual ideas of what constituted a moral transgression. In doing so, black women and girls advanced a radical women's rights framework around consent, bodily protection and sexual self-sovereignty that the government, due to the context of war and Reconstruction, occasionally acknowledged.

* * *

¹⁶ I join the works of historians Crystal N. Feimster, Kidada E. Williams and Hannah Rosen, among others, who have crucially documented black women's campaigns for sexual justice in the late nineteenth century. See Crystal N. Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Kidada E. Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); and Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

Even by a conservative estimate, two hundred and fifty Union soldiers faced military court-martials on charges of sexual assault during the Civil War, though the numbers could be as high as at least four hundred and fifty.¹⁷ Many of these cases involved white Union servicemen as perpetrators, and poor, uneducated southern black women and girls as victims.¹⁸ In 1863, President Lincoln issued his General Order No. 100, also known as the Lieber Code, outlining the terms of conduct during warfare and further sanctioning the lawfulness of the Emancipation Proclamation issued earlier that year.¹⁹ As Crystal Feimster has noted, Articles 37, 44, and 47 in Section II of the Lieber Code collectively “conceived and defined rape in women-specific terms as a crime against property, as a crime of troop discipline, and a crime against family honor.”²⁰ While the Lieber Code was partially framed to enforce the chastity of Union soldiers, the inclusive language of protection for all women was revolutionary for its time. As E. Susan Barber and Charles F. Ritter highlight, “In a stunning and unprecedented departure from Southern law and custom, [Union court-martials] permitted black females and males to bring charges and testify against white defendants.”²¹ For the first time in

¹⁷ Thomas P. Lowry estimates around two hundred and fifty prosecuted cases, whereas an ongoing project involving scholars E. Susan Barber and Charles F. Ritter have measured at least four hundred and fifty cases. See Lowry, *Sexual Misbehavior in the Civil War: A Compendium* (Xlibris Corporation, 2006) and Barber and Ritter, “Physical Abuse... and Rough Handling: Race, Gender and Sexual Justice in the Occupied South,” in LeeAnn Whites and Alecia P. Long, eds., *Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation and the American Civil War* (LSU Press, 2009), 51.

¹⁸ Acknowledging this point, Barber and Ritter also emphasize that “no woman was safe from wartime sexual predation. The female victims came from all economic and social strata of Southern society.” See Barber and Ritter, “Physical Abuse... and Rough Handling,” 57-58. Black women, however, remained especially vulnerable as they were often the charges of Union soldiers. As contraband, refugees and domestics working and living along Union lines, their vulnerability to assault was heightened – as this chapter reveals.

¹⁹ Historian Crystal Feimster also offers a discussion of the significance of this new legal framework. See Crystal Feimster, “Rape and Justice in the Civil War,” NYTimes.com, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/25/rape-and-justice-in-the-civil-war/> (accessed August 20, 2018).

²⁰ For reference to Section 11, Articles 37, 44, and 47 of the Lieber Code see Feimster, “Rape and Justice in the Civil War.” For the full language, see Yale Law School, The Avalon Project, “General Orders No. 100: The Lieber Code: Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/lieber.asp#sec2 (accessed August 20, 2018).

²¹ Barber and Ritter, “Physical Abuse... and Rough Handling,” 56.

US history, black women and girls, particularly in the South, could seek legal recourse for rape and other forms of sexual violence.

Despite the limits of military court-martials, Union court-martial records give a rare insight into the hostile court-environment that black female rape and sexual violence victims navigated in their struggle for sexual self-sovereignty in the late nineteenth century.²² Union court-martials offer a useful site for investigating the complexity of the interactions between slave, free, refugee and contraband women and the Union Army, especially because black women and girls sought justice from the same entity whose representatives had caused their ill-treatment. Union soldiers were supposed to represent the enforcers of emancipation. But, for many of those who sought to pillage Confederate property, the abuse of enslaved women was part of the performance of warfare. Black women, historian Drew Faust notes, “served as the unfortunate sexual spoils when Union soldiers asserted their traditional right of military conquest.”²³ Others simply abused their power and treated black women with the expectation of their sexual availability as part of their general labor. Challenging these crimes, black women entered all-white courts of Union officers. This was no doubt a strange, scary and daunting experience for these women. In contrast to white female rape victims, black women had to seek sexual justice across a racial divide in an environment that customarily prohibited

²² Rape cases where victims were African American women reflect the arbitrary and racialized nature of record-keeping during this time. In some cases, black women’s names are not identified. Other crucial details are sometimes missing from records. Race appears to be identified often in cases where the male defendant was black, but the race of victims is not always clear. This selective categorization perhaps offers a precursor to the growing racial construction of rampant, uninhibited black male sexuality and the threat that it posed to white womanhood. While this construction grew in popularity after the Civil War, prevailing nineteenth century ideologies about race – particularly the sexual immorality of African American men and women – added a complex layer to the environment, decisions, and that way that cases were recorded in military court-martials. For more on the construction of the black male rapist see Ida B. Wells *Southern Horrors* (1892); Diane Miller Sommerville, *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

²³ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Confederate Women and Yankee Men: A UNC Press Civil War Short Excerpted from Mother of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

black people from testifying against whites. In court-martials, as Barber and Ritter explain, they “were invited to speak candidly, with no dissembling, which was not something they were accustomed to do with whites.”²⁴ In these exceptional circumstances, the testimony of African American women against white and black Union soldier assailants reveals how a new legal framework was utilized by contraband, refugee and freedwomen to resist their sexual subjugation. Despite their status as non-citizens, they mobilized ideals tethered to conservative notions of womanhood as a weapon against rape and a radical assertion of sexual self-sovereignty. This fact that has for too long been overlooked in the extensive literature of the turbulent racial politics of the Reconstruction era.

* * *

Poor, working-class and uneducated black women who were sexual assault victims sought ways to present their moral subjectivity in their testimonies before the State. One key method was through references to their status as married women in testimonies before Union court-martials. In slavery, slaveholders prohibited legal marriage among slaves, while abolitionists pointed to the lack of legitimate marriage as the main cause of sexual immorality in the slave community. For whites on both sides of the slavery debate the idea that African Americans simply didn’t value the covenant of marriage was commonplace. Black women’s self-presentation as wives thus added a moral texture to their accounts: it conveyed their value for chastity and desire to participate in civilized society.²⁵ Denied the sanctity of the marriage contract in slavery, African Americans demonstrated their value for the covenant of marriage in the era of

²⁴ Barber and Ritter, “Physical Abuse... and Rough Handling,” 60.

²⁵ For an analysis of the significance of marriage within freed communities see Tera W. Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

emancipation. For whites as well as African Americans, marriage constituted a crucial institution in a virtuous, industrious, thrifty and productive society.²⁶

When African American female victims explicitly presented themselves as married women in court, they highlighted their husbands' powerlessness in protecting them. The mention of husbands brought attention to the fact that black women were excluded from the expectation of patriarchal protection that was theoretically available to white women. For instance, Mrs. Cornelius Robinson was introduced as the "wife of a loyal colored citizen" when she appeared in court. She was the mother of a five-day-old infant when George Hakes of the 6th Michigan Cavalry raped her at her home, roughly two miles from Winchester, Virginia.²⁷ In her account, Mrs. Robinson stated that Hakes entered her family home and ordered her husband on an errand to buy sheepskin. When Mr. Robinson left, Hakes pushed Mrs. Robinson into the bedroom and assaulted her. "He said if I did not give up to him he would shoot me. I said, 'Then you'll have to shoot me,'" she testified.²⁸ While the horror of the assault was central in Robinson's testimony, her husband's absence augmented both her defenselessness and the magnitude of the crime. Framing her assault as a violation of her individual self and the sanctity of her marriage, Robinson testimony aligned with the Lieber Code's definition of rape as "a crime against family honor."²⁹

Freedpeople demanded respect for the honor of their marriage and families. But, in doing so, they met much contempt from southern whites in occupied territory.

²⁶ Historian Amy Dru Stanley has shown the importance of the marriage contract in the age of emancipation as a crucial tool for construction of virtuous citizenship. See Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For a discussion of the US government's support of, encouragement of, and application of marriage contracts in the newly freed community see Mary Kaiser-Farmer, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen's Bureau: Race, Gender, and Public Policy in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Fordham University, 2010).

²⁷ Lowry, *Sexual Misbehavior*, 126.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Crystal Feimster, "Rape and Justice in the Civil War."

Indeed, freedwomen who brought and insisted on these terms in their rape charges radically upended prevailing southern customs. For example, Mrs. Dilsey Jones, a married freedwoman brought charges after she was raped by Charles Cook, a civilian, in Raleigh, North Carolina. While out shopping for baskets, Mrs. Jones had entered Cook and Upchurch's general store. Cook invited Mrs. Jones upstairs to browse his stock of baskets, and then assaulted her. In her testimony before a court-martial in April 1866, Mrs. Jones shared the warning that she gave to Cook. "He did what he wanted and ravaged me," she stated. "I said I'd tell my husband and he said, 'Go ahead, tell him, Goddamn [sic] you.'"³⁰ Cook's response to Mrs. Jones's threat was emblematic of southern white men's refusal to cede domination over black women's bodies.

As a former slave of the large local Haywood slaveholding family,³¹ Mrs. Jones was likely familiar with her assailant. It is possible that she may have patronized or walked by Cook and Upchurch's general store as a slave. Had Cook assaulted Mrs. Jones while she was enslaved in the time before Union occupation, there would have been few to no mechanisms for her seek sexual justice. It is possible that Cook's crime, if it emerged in court, would have been treated as a crime against Haywood property –where the offense would have been directed at Dilsey Jones's master. Moreover, as a slave woman, Jones's threat to tell her husband would have fallen on deaf ears in a society where slave marriages were not considered legitimate. The expectation of protection by slave husbands was untenable. These factors show the power of Mrs. Jones's self-presentation as a freed married woman. Her status as a married woman suggested that she was a moral woman in a society that simultaneously exploited black women and

³⁰ Lowry, *Sexual Misbehavior*, 131.

³¹ The Haywood family also owned the mother of the renowned educator and activist, Anna Julia Cooper. AJC and her mother was owned by Fabius Haywood, who was also very likely AJC's father. Further research needs to be done to determine which member of the large Haywood family owned Dilsey Jones before she acquired her freedom.

denied their sexual moral agency. Her freed status empowered her to seek sexual justice, with the honor of her family at the center of her claim for justice.³²

Age and the suggestion of a victim's age appeared to sever the suspicion that the possibility of illicit sex was ever on the table. While this was applicable to those aged on both extremes, it was especially true for young victims. In the mid-nineteenth century US, the legal age of sexual consent was set between 10 and 12 across most states, and as young as 7 in Delaware. Thus, ascribing moral meaning to age helped to proclaim innocence and victimhood for African American girls in a racist cultural landscape where they were routinely perceived as deviant. This was especially true for black girls whose enslaved background prevented them from accurately recalling their age. Age and sexual innocence was tightly bound together to challenge the suspicion of illicit sex. In Wilmington, Virginia, a nameless sixteen-year-old described her incident of sexual assault by five men, one of whom was named as John Murray of the 117th New York. She did not testify in court but evidently shared with a nearby witness who did testify that "They tried to take my maidenhead" – an expression that gestured to her age and sexual innocence.³³

On July 16th, 1863, former slaves Harriet and Matilda in Guys Gap, Tennessee appeared in court with rape and attempted rape charges against Perry Pierson and William Lindsey of the 33rd Indiana.³⁴ In each hearing, Pierson objected to the testimonies of Harriet and Matilda on the ground that they were black or 'colored' women and "therefore incompetent to testify against a white person."³⁵ Despite this attempt at legal obstruction – to which the Commission deliberated and ultimately

³² The legal and social custom that respected the property of slaveholders created a sort of veil of protection around enslaved women while there was a presumption that they were sexually available.

³³ Lowry, *Sexual Misbehavior*, 131.

³⁴ Court-martial of Private William Lindsey and Private Perry Pierson, 33rd Indiana Regiment, July 16, 1863. RG153, JAG, entry 15, file MM746, National Archives, Washington, DC.

³⁵ Ibid.

rejected – each woman offered a testimony that emphasized their militant protection of their sexual innocence. For example, Matilda, who charged Pierson with attempted rape, testified that she was prepared to have her throat cut when Pierson threatened that as an alternative to sex.³⁶ Harriet told the Commission that she “was a virgin.”³⁷ She continued to state that “He inserted his private parts into me. I hollered so that you might hear me for two miles.”³⁸ By merely stating the fact that she was a virgin and emphasizing her pain, Harriet defied the mainstream cultural script of slave female promiscuity and availability for illicit sex as well as the common ideological belief that slaves were less susceptible to pain.³⁹ She professed her bodily violation before the Union Army despite her enslaved status, and demonstrated her sense of ownership over her own body.

Jennie Green did not know her age when she was allegedly raped by Lieutenant Andrew J. Smith of the 11th Pennsylvania Cavalry in City Point, Virginia. She was a slave girl who transitioned to fugitivity when she followed Union soldiers to Federal lines sometime in late spring, 1864. But Jennie did have a clear sense of right and wrong. Despite her young age, lack of formal education and liminal legal status in a country in the throes of a Civil War, she sought sexual justice. When she brought charges against Lt. Smith in a court-martial in Fort Monroe, Virginia, Jennie acted in accordance with the moral codes and principles that was instilled in her as a slave.

In her testimony, Jennie told a court of white Union Officers the details of her assault. Along with Nellie Wyatt, an African American woman who testified as a witness for the prosecution, Jennie explained that she had entered Lt. Smith’s quarters to deliver his supper. When she turned to leave, he grabbed her arm and locked the door behind

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Lowry, *Sexual Misbehavior*, 153.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ For more on slavery and discourses of pain see Elizabeth B. Clark, “The Sacred Rights of the Weak’: Pain, Sympathy, and the Culture of Individual Rights in Antebellum America,” *Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (1995): 463-493.

her. She told the court that he forced her on the ground and proceeded to rape her. “He did the same thing that married people do,” she stated. “That was what hurt me. I did not give my consent to have that done.”⁴⁰ The term *consent* belies the assumed consciousness of a slave girl. The notion of power and self-ownership inherent in the language of consent is incongruous to the logic of slavery. But Jennie not only affirmed that she did not consent to have sex. She also defined her understanding of sexual intercourse as a practice that should be reserved for “married people.” In a society where marriage between slaves held no legitimacy under the law, the fact that Jennie viewed sex as part of a sacred union sheds light on an area that has received very little sustained scholarly attention: the sexual ethics, attitudes and morality of slave women and girls.

By the summer of 1864, Jennie Green found herself at the center of a high-profile rape-case during the Civil War. However not much is known about her. The surviving record of her case reveals inconsistencies, suggesting confusion over her age. In one statement, she is described as “a young negro girl” whereas in another, Jennie is presented before the court-martial as a “colored woman.”⁴¹ It is probable that Jennie was visibly a child – though the inaccurate estimation of black girls’ ages by whites as overwhelmingly older is a longstanding problem. Wyatt corroborated Jennie’s youth and sexual innocence by testifying that she was “nothing but a child.”⁴² She also indicated that Lt. Smith was calculated in targeting Jennie, perhaps because of her young age. “I got off by being married,” Wyatt testified.⁴³

General Benjamin Butler was utterly unopposed to the guilty verdict and recommendation of years at hard labor combined the loss of rank and position as Lt.

⁴⁰ Court-martial of Lieutenant Andrew J. Smith, 11th Pennsylvania Cavalry, July 25, 1864. RG153, JAG, entry 15, file NN2099, National Archives, Washington, DC.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

Smith's sentence. A known enforcer of the Lieber Code's policy regarding the conduct of Union soldiers, General Butler expressed his disgust. "A female negro child quits slavery, and comes into the protection of the Federal government, and upon first reaching the limits of the Federal lines receives the brutal treatment from an officer, himself a husband and a father, of violation of her person. Of this the evidence is conclusive."⁴⁴ President Lincoln, however, was unconvinced that Jennie had accurately identified her assailant. After a short period spent in a penitentiary, President issued repeated orders for Lt. Smith's release. While Jennie likely never received full sexual justice, her self-presentation as a moral subject, assertion of sexual sovereignty and insistence upon sexual consent drove the success of the court-martial.

The case of Ann Booze further elucidates the complex cultural, ideological and institutional obstacles that black women and girls navigated in Civil War military courts, giving insight to the power of their moral testimonies. On April 21, 1865 in Port Hudson, Louisiana, an intoxicated Lieutenant Charles Wenz ordered a subordinate to carry Ann Booze, "an aged colored woman" to her cabin.⁴⁵ There, Wenz raped Booze in the presence of another soldier. Wenz received three charges during his trial. The first was for "conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman," the second was for rape, and the third was for "assault and battery, with intent to commit rape."⁴⁶ Admitting to sexual intercourse with Booze, Wenz pleaded 'guilty' to the first charge and 'not guilty' to the second and third charges. He was found guilty of all counts and sentenced "to be dishonorably dismissed the service of the United States, with loss of all pay and allowances now due, or that may become of him; to be stripped of the insignia of his

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ William A. Gladstone, Collector. *William A. Gladstone Afro-American Military Collection: General Orders, No. 43 Court-Martial of Lieutenant Charles Wenz for Rape, 4th United States Colored Cavalry, New Orleans, La., 15 Sept. 1865*. Library of Congress. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/ms011131.mss83434.119> (accessed September 1, 2018).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

rank and profession in the presence of his regiment, and be confined at hard labor for the period of five years at such place as the Commanding General may direct.”⁴⁷ Shortly after Wenz’s sentencing, Major-General E. R. S. Canby ordered that the punishment be rendered “illegal and void” due to a technicality of jurisdiction. Enforcing the order on behalf of the Major-General, Wickman Hoffman, Assistant Adjutant General wrote in letter that “The Act of Congress giving Courts Martial jurisdiction over the crime of rape, in certain cases, provides that in the event of a conviction, the punishment shall never be less than that prescribed by the laws of the State, Territory or District where the offence is committed.”⁴⁸ The order required that Wenz be brought to trial on the same charges before a court that honored Louisiana state law.⁴⁹ Wenz was to be re-tried in Louisiana under the charge of rape; a crime punishable by the death sentence unless the jury, at their own discretion, sought life imprisonment instead. As most states had no law recognizing the rape of black women, Wenz’s case highlighted the arbitrary nature of military court-martials and the struggle that black women faced in seeking sexual justice before a State that was differentiated, multi-tiered and further complicated by wartime and occupation. In many cases, black women navigated the potential for justice through federal laws executed under military occupation, while confronting the possibility of intervention at the individual state level, such as that in Louisiana.

It is likely that the moral presentation of the aged Ann Booze influenced the initial court’s refusal to accept Wenz’s appeal.⁵⁰ By admitting to sexual intercourse with Booze – but not rape, and pleading guilty to “conduct unbecoming an officer and a

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ As Barber and Ritter argue, “In Louisiana, for example, there was no statutory definition either of rape or attempted rape in the 1856 code. The law merely provided the death penalty for those who committed rape. Louisiana’s Black Code provided that a slave or free black person who raped a white woman – but presumably not a black woman – would also be subject to the death penalty.” See Barber and Ritter, “Physical Abuse... and Rough Handling,” 56.

⁵⁰ Lowry, *Sexual Misbehavior*, 161.

gentleman,” Wenz, a white Lieutenant, gestured to the widely-held assumption that black women invited sexual advances. His crime, from this view, was merely a betrayal of self-restraint and honor. But Booze’s moral testimony subverted Wenz’s claim. She told the court that he had made her take off her clothes, “even down to my chimmy.”⁵¹ Her expression of modesty and shame conflicted with the assumption of innate black female promiscuity that rested at the ideological core of Wenz’s appeal. Booze’s testimony was also morally textured by a reference to her age and sense of self. “I’m an old crippled colored woman who can’t walk without a stick. I ain’t no ‘count. I ain’t no ‘count,” she testified.⁵² While it is not fully clear what Booze meant by the expression ‘I ain’t no ‘count,’ it can be interpreted as Booze’s way of defining and distinguishing her womanhood from other kinds of women. Perhaps, she believed that as an older woman with impaired physical ability, her age and health placed her outside of the realm of sexually active or promiscuous women.

African American female rape victims framed their moral selves before the Union Army by differentiating themselves from sex workers in a society where prostitution was in many places publicly visible and not explicitly illegal. Presenting themselves as ‘not that kind of woman’ appeared to emphasize their understanding of a distinction between women who engaged in illicit sex and those who chose the path of chastity, modesty and Christian morality. It appears that the logic followed that the prevalence of the former precluded the victimization of the latter. In early the nineteenth century, prostitutes and other women of so-called ‘lost virtue’ were often removed from

⁵¹ “Chimmy” appears to refer to underwear.

⁵² It is quite possible that Booze was stating that she was not a “no account woman,” meaning that she was not a lazy or ‘good for nothing’ woman but a virtuous woman of good moral character. This expression possibly relates to the notion described in Kate Chopin’s “A No-Account Creole.” See Kate Chopin, *Bayou Folk* (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1894). In *Borrow: The American Way of Debt* by Louis Hyman, ‘no-account’ is described as a person who was too risky or untrustworthy to acquire an account at a store. “It is from this that we get our colorful terms for an untrustworthy person,” writes Hyman. See Louis Hyman, *Borrow: The American Way of Debt* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 26.

consideration as victims of rape and sexual assault. Virtuous women were believed to be the true victims as their lifestyles did not conform to the kind that invited male sexual attention. But the precarious nature of life for African American women meant that their virtue was continuously challenged by men who sought illicit sex. For instance, some black women highlighted their detractors' efforts to redeem an assault through offerings of payments and gifts. Sarrah Benford told the court-martial that she refused John Lewis's offerings of money, gloves and shoes after his attempted assault.⁵³ In a court-martial on March 14, 1865, Laura Ennis likewise testified that Charles Clark attempted to bribe her with coffee and sugar in exchange for her silence.⁵⁴ Other black women explicitly framed solicitations for sex in exchange for payment as an insult to their character. On September 12th, 1863, Mrs. Ellie Farnan and her daughter beat up a drunken Private William Van Buren of Company B, 212th Illinois, after he tried to accost them. Offering money in exchange for "some skin," Mrs. Farnan and her daughter was reported as viewing this as an 'insult and abuse.' In a statement offered by a witness for the prosecution, Mrs. Farnan apparently said to Van Buren: "You god damned old son of a bitch, you had the impudence to offer a decent woman like myself a dollar and my girl, that I'm raising, three [dollars]."⁵⁵

The idea that payment could reframe an incident of sexual assault into consensual sex pointed to the question of rape as power. As many feminist scholars have noted, rape is always more about power than it is about sex.⁵⁶ Attackers often acted on

⁵³ Court-martial of Private John Lewis, 16th US Colored Troops, May 1865. RG153, JAG, entry 15, file MM2774, National Archives, Washington, DC.

⁵⁴ Court-martial of Private Charles Clark, Company D., 20th New York Cavalry, April 20, 1865. RG153, JAG, entry 15, file OO654, National Archives, Washington, DC.

⁵⁵ Court-martial of Private William Van Buren, Company B., 212th Illinois. RG153, JAG, entry 15, file NN854, National Archives, Washington, DC. See also Thomas P. Lowry, *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell: Sex in the Civil War* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2012), 124.

⁵⁶ For more on a historical discussion of rape as power see Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006) and Estelle B. Freedmen, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

the disparaging and racist assumptions about the sexuality and moral character of black women, without regard to individual black women's lifestyles and choices. It is important to note that some African American women did use sex for their own advantage. But the lack of discrimination that white and sometimes black Union soldiers applied in their sexual advances revealed the problematic way in which mainstream society viewed all black women. The appeals of African American women and girls in their testimonies of sexual violence as victims of immorality were thus subversive. They disrupted the association of black womanhood and sexual availability, advanced the notion of active purity, and generated a framework around the question of consent.

The question of consent and a black girl's assertion of her moral subjectivity is captivantly revealed in a case in early March 1865, involving "Rachel, a Negro girl." In Clarksville, Alabama, John Locker of the 2nd Illinois Artillery was charged with "conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline," "absence without leave," and "assault and battery with intent to commit rape."⁵⁷ On March 1, Locker reportedly entered a "Negro shanty, known as a house of ill fame" intoxicated, where he met Rachel. Shortly thereafter, he proceeded to feel Rachel's "bosoms and under her clothes," apparently with little objection from the girl.⁵⁸ However, when he threw her down and attempted to penetrate her, the fourteen-year-old Rachel screamed. Despite having an association with a "known house of ill fame," Rachel brought sexual assault charges against Locker in a court-martial. When the defense asked her, "Why would you not permit the accused to have carnal knowledge of you?" she responded, "Because he is not of my color."⁵⁹ When the defense asked if color was the "only objection" that Rachel had for "not wanting to have carnal knowledge of the accused," she answered

⁵⁷ Court-martial of John Locker, 2nd Illinois Light Artillery, January 23, 1865. RG153, JAG, entry 15, file MM2774, National Archives, Washington, DC.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

affirmatively.⁶⁰ While it is not possible to fully understand the contours of this case, including the problematic and directed questioning from the court, Rachel's response gives a powerful glimpse of her assertion of her moral agency as a girl that was either a sex worker, or, at least, associated with sex workers. The belief that interracial sex was a moral crime was widely shared by whites and blacks. While nineteenth-century racial ideologies framed interracial sex as a moral transgression with so-called biological arguments about the innate inferiority of African Americans, it was widely conceived as a social taboo. Many blacks subscribed to the notion that interracial sex was 'unnatural' at the same that they rejected and rebutted claims of black inferiority.⁶¹ Their views conformed to a widespread belief that races had distinct characteristics and destinies.⁶² Rachel's words demonstrated how of ideas of morality were overlapping and distinct across culture and background. While she did not appeal to the ideal of female chastity and true womanhood, she added a radical contribution to a growing framework around consent used by her more morally conservative black female counterparts. Establishing her moral agency on rare and risky ground as a girl affiliated with a brothel, Rachel demonstrated that sexual self-sovereignty – the right to control the borders around one's body – was essential in the struggle for sexual justice.

The body played a significant role in African American women and girls' testimonies of sexual violence. Visceral descriptions of pain and physical and emotional trauma bore light on the extent of their assault. These types of accounts were arguably like the tradition of former slaves among the abolitionist circuit, where their physical bodies strengthened the moral arguments against slavery. Fugitive and former slaves presenting their bodies offered a form of truth-telling of their physical pain and

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ For more on black responses to white racist doctrine see Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁶² See Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind*.

oppression as well as a demonstration of the moral impact that the institution of slavery had on its proponents.⁶³ In Smithfield, North Carolina, Fanny Simpson told the court about her assault at the hands of Astor Beckwith with a description of her pain. She conveyed that Beckwith had approached her in an area called Buffalo Hill and forced her into the bushes. “I tried to get away and he hit me,” she explained. “He then flung me down and got on top of me.”⁶⁴ In the next part of her testimony, Simpson insisted on fully portraying the sense of pain and violation she experienced. “He threw my clothes over my head and hurt me right here [points to her stomach]. He unbuttoned his pants. He tried to have connection with me and hurt me badly,” she testified.⁶⁵

Eleven-year-old America Virginia Pierman shared a similarly detailed account of the physicality of her rape experience. Following an attack by Thomas Mitchell, a veteran soldier of seventeen years who was in service in the 1st New York Engineers in Fort Harrison, south of Richmond, Virginia, Pierman told her father, Henry, who brought her to the camp the next day to identify her assailant.⁶⁶ She recalled the incident with the innocence of a ten-year-old girl and the precision of a person beyond her years. She exposed that Mitchell had lured her to the ‘old rebel camp’ with the promise of a gray jacket for her brothers.⁶⁷ There, he attempted to cover her face with oilcloth. “I pushed it away from my face and then he caught me and took me into the hut and laid me down again and laid down on me.”⁶⁸ During questioning by the Judge Advocate, the court did not spare the little girl from reliving the horror of her rape. But Pierman responded to

⁶³ See Clark, “The Sacred Rights of the Weak.”

⁶⁴ As quoted in Lowry, *Sexual Misbehavior*, 132. The original source lists the name “Astor Beckwith” not “Aston Beckwith” as noted in Lowry, *Sexual Misbehavior*. See court-martial of Astor Beckwith, Colored, Citizen of Johnston County, in the State of North Carolina, July 24, 1865. RG153, JAG, entry 15, file OO1232, National Archives, Washington, DC.

⁶⁵ As quoted in Lowry, *Sexual Misbehavior*, 132.

⁶⁶ Court-martial of Private Thomas Mitchell, 1st New York Engineers, May 13, 1865. RG153, JAG, entry 15, file OO886, National Archives, Washington, DC.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

the court's questioning with a visceral description of her pain and a qualification of her accuracy in identifying her assailant. The court asked, "Did any part of his person enter you?" to which Pierman responded, "Yes, Sir, the thing he took out."⁶⁹ Like many rape victims, white and black, Pierman was taken for an immediate examination by a medical professional to confirm her injury. This was a measure that many women and girls took as additional evidence in preparation for a court-environment that was habitually hostile to female victims of sexual violence. Pierman was examined by Robert Laughlin, a military surgeon who verified that "the usual evidence of virginity was gone."⁷⁰ Speaking of her own physical abuse, Pierman (and Simpson) connected their struggle for sexual justice to a previous tradition of black corporeal truth-telling.

But the gaze of white Union soldiers towards the black female body also appeared to factor into incidents of rape and sexual violence. In the mid-nineteenth century, the overwhelming majority of African Americans resided in the southern states. Most white Union soldiers, who largely came from small northern towns, had never had contact with African Americans prior to the Civil War. For instance, in the middle of the night of February 27, 1865, in the District of Lancaster, SC, Private Thomas Killgore raped "a woman of African descent" with the assistance of Daniel Kunkle of Company C and three other unnamed men.⁷¹ After raping the woman, Killgore was quoted as saying that "he wanted to see what she had for a thing" before he forced her legs open with his foot, pulled her dress up and threw a [flaming] torch between her legs.⁷² Physically impaired black female bodies, such as in the case of Ann Booze mentioned previously, were neither spared from the gaze of white Union soldiers. In another case, Susan, 'a

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Court-martial of Private Thomas Killgore and Daniel Kunkle, Ohio Volunteers, May 29, 1865. RG153, JAG, entry 15, file MM2471, National Archives, Washington, DC.

⁷² Lowry, *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell*, 124.

woman of color' was pregnant when she was raped by Private Adolph Bork, Company H of the 183rd Ohio.⁷³ Between her stage of pregnancy and the fact that she had a husband, there was no protection available to her.⁷⁴ The torture that accompanied the violence of rape revealed the deep racism that blocked white Union soldiers from fully protecting their black female charges.

The expectation of sexual labor as part of black women's labor constituted a major factor in sexual assault cases. Slave, contraband and free women insisted upon the acknowledgement and protection of their moral agency by speaking about sexual advances and attacks committed without invitation and against their will. When R. H. Vanderhorst, an African American man, raped fourteen-year-old Betsey Jones in Charleston, South Carolina, she explicitly told the court that it was against her will.⁷⁵ In another case, on April 22nd, 1865, at a contraband camp on the south side of Cape Fear river, Julia Jennison told a tribunal that she had explicitly told William McManus of the 33rd New Jersey that she did not want to sleep with him. Working as a laundress or a servant in the officers' quarters, Jennison recalled that she was in one of the officer's rooms making the bed, when McManus accosted her. "He asked me if I would sleep with him. I told him no. He said I got to do it. I told him I wouldn't."⁷⁶ McManus then attacked Jennison, and she fought back. As she tried to protect herself, McManus punched her in the eye and stated, "Jeff Davis had but one eye and why couldn't [she] have?"⁷⁷ As indicated earlier, Jennison's case clearly highlighted the expectation of sexual labor as part of black women's labor. The responses of Betsey Jones, Julia Jennison and

⁷³ Court-martial of Private Adolph Bork, Company H, 183rd Ohio Volunteer Infantry, July 14, 1865. RG 153, JAG, entry 15, file MM2407, National Archives, Washington DC.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ As quoted in Lowry, *Sexual Misbehavior*, 135-6.

⁷⁶ Court-martial of Private William McManus, 33rd New Jersey, April 22, 1865. RG153, JAG, entry 15, file OO1056, National Archives, Washington, DC.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

other young women and girls who were attacked show that they had a clear understanding of the impropriety of sex before marriage. It is possible this they learned this ethos as part of the female community of slaves, where mothers represented moral educators and enforcers.

Black female laundresses and servants working for Union officials were particularly vulnerable to sexual assault. Accessing the private space of officials' quarters made inappropriate contact much easier to execute. Moreover, the threat of losing their jobs offered a compelling reason to remain silent, while the authority of Union officials often masked their predatory behavior. But many black women testified with arguments that not only demonstrated their demands around the question of consent, but also for a safer working environment. For example, on the Milne Plantation on Port Royal Island, South Carolina, multiple sexual assault charges were brought against Assistant Surgeon Charles F. Lauer of the 55th Pennsylvania by four women who were likely former slaves on the plantation. Working as laundresses and servants, Eda, Jane, Sarah Allen and Rebecca Smith all testified in a court-martial as victims of and witnesses to Lauer's violence and sexual harassment.⁷⁸ Eda told the court that Lauer visited her home on three nights trying to 'knock' her. To avoid any further harassment, she told the court that she started sleeping in the cotton fields.⁷⁹ She explained that the doctor punched her when she refused his advances. In Rebecca's testimony, she stated that the doctor approached her as she sat on a bench, asking if she "would do it." "I said no," she testified. "He asked why. I told him I didn't want to do it and then went into the house. He followed me. When I said again I wouldn't do it, he slapped me..."⁸⁰ Rebecca's experience descended into further violence and a failed attempt to get immediate help.

⁷⁸ As quoted in Lowry, *Sexual Misbehavior*, 138.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 139.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

“He kicked me twice in the stomach and boxed me on the face,” she continued.⁸¹ “I went out the door and told Captain Nesbitt, who said he didn’t think the doctor would do such a thing.”⁸² In the moment of terror, the presumed respectability of the doctor as indicated by Nesbitt, overshadowed Rebecca’s claims. It was remarkably courageous of her to bring official charges against the doctor. Corroborating Rebecca’s account, Sarah Allen spoke as a witness. “I am well-acquainted with him [Dr. Lauer]. I used to do his laundry. I heard him trying to get her to go to his tent. She didn’t want to. He slapped her and I said to him. ‘Doctor... when a woman did not give it up to him, he should leave her alone instead of striking her.’”⁸³ A black laundress using formal language to scold a white doctor about sexual consent must have upended so many assumptions about race, class and respectability in that tribunal of Union officials.

“I suppose there is not a chaste black woman, or mulatto, or quadroon, or octaroon... in this city”

If the Civil War’s Lieber Code created an avenue for black female sexual assault victims to seek sexual justice from the State, the period of Reconstruction enabled black women and girls to continue these campaigns as citizens. To be sure, neither citizenship nor education, literacy, or middle class status were ever prerequisites for black women and girls to assert their moral agency, dignity and desire for sexual autonomy. Their struggle for sexual self-sovereignty joined a longstanding tradition of sexual resistance fashioned by enslaved women – the most marginalized and non-traditional political actors. But as citizens, black women were granted access –at least in theory– to the model of female citizenship that upper and middle class white women fully occupied.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

Black women demonstrated their understanding of this new legal framework in many ways. They went immediately to work on building themselves and their communities, establishing schools and churches and other self-help institutions with and without the assistance of Northern missionaries. Through the Freedmen's Bureau, the most visible and accessible agency of the federal government available to freedpeople, black women and men exercised the right to enter a formal contract. They willfully entered the marriage contract, acquiring official marriage licenses with long and short term partners. Black women also petitioned for parental rights and custody over their children who were illegally held by former masters and mistresses. They determined the terms of apprenticeships for their children and negotiated new working contracts. These factors corresponded to the assertion of the honor and sanctity of black families and the black community more broadly.

However, while the period of Reconstruction offered unprecedented opportunities to African Americans, the emancipation of former slaves met widespread white anxieties over a radically changing American society suddenly in moral decay. These ideas surfaced during wartime, with increased attention in the immediate years after. In a letter detailing his experience as provost marshal and military governor for the Union Army in Pensacola, Florida, Brevet-Brigadier General Willoughby M. Babcock Jr. spoke frankly about his concerns over the socialization between free black and contraband women and white Union soldiers. He wrote, "You can hardly realize what a state of society there is here. I suppose there is not a chaste black woman, or mulatto, or quadroon, or octaroon, or even a poor but decent looking white woman in the city. With all the raving passions of these soldiers, brutal enough for anything, there has not yet

been a complaint of rape...”⁸⁴ Babcock’s letter clearly criticized the behavior of soldiers. But he blamed black women for the moral decline he perceived. Listing black women by degrees of African ancestry, General Babcock suggested that Pensacola society had become so morally degraded that even some white women were unchaste. This built on popularly held ideas that associated whiteness with civility, modesty and chastity, and blackness with promiscuity, deviancy and criminality. A woman that had one-eighth African ancestry, an ‘octoroon,’ therefore, appeared more refined than a woman of full African ancestry. As this logic seemed to fail in the city of Pensacola, Babcock shared a common view of blackness as contagion. Even ‘poor but decent looking white women’ were nowhere to be seen, and the absence of reports of rape suggested open promiscuity and consensual illicit sex.

The visibility of freedwomen in public spaces as sovereign individuals participating in leisurely and everyday pursuits incited mockery, contempt and resentment alongside heightened white anxieties over a moral crisis.⁸⁵ This was expressed in varying degrees by southern and northern whites. “If you should come into Pensacola on a Sunday, or at parades,” wrote General Babcock, “you would be struck with the gay costumes of the black belles, but the new dresses, \$15, \$20, \$30, have all been bought with the money of soldiers, and the dresses were brought here by the army sutlers [sic].”⁸⁶ The image of black women dressed in their ‘Sunday best’ likely for church, or gathering for a likely emancipation parade, is soiled by the assumption that their clothing

⁸⁴ Brevet-Brigadier General Willoughby M. Babcock Jr., *Selections from the Letters and Diaries of Brevet-Brigadier General Willoughby Babcock of the Seventy-Fifth New York Volunteers: A Study of Camp life in the Union Armies During the Civil War* (Albany: The University of the State of New York, 1922), 90.

⁸⁵ For more on white responses to freedpeople expressing their freedom and citizenship in public, including tensions over parades and social gatherings see Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) and Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁸⁶ ‘Sutlers’ refers to merchants or peddlers during the Civil War who followed troops and set up stores near camps to sell goods. See Babcock, *Selections from the Letter and Diaries of Brevet-Brigadier General Willoughby Babcock*, 90.

came from illicit sex with white soldiers. This kind of description revealed the deeply rooted cultural stereotype of black female sexual immorality and the lens of contempt and racism through which many whites saw black women living out their freedom in public.

The federal government was equally complicit in reinforcing ideas of black female sexual and moral degeneracy. A Report by the Secretary of War on the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, published on June 27, 1864, reveals how pressing the moral threat of black women was regarded by the federal government. "The vices chiefly apparent in these refugees are such as appertain to their former social condition," noted the report. "In the case of women living under a system in which the conjugal relation is virtually set as naught, the natural result is that the instinct of chastity remains undeveloped or becomes obscured."⁸⁷ Advancing an argument based on nurture and environment, this report was progressive in a society where racialized theories often proposed that the inferiority of African Americans was biological and innate.⁸⁸ The argument that slavery created a degraded, ignorant and immoral class of people was common across whites and blacks. But the report overlooked the many cases of the mostly former slave women and girls who brought sexual violation and harassment charges against soldiers in military court-martials. Instead, it supported the idea that black women's moral behavior was a problem, but treatable. It was an idea that enabled the federal government's northern bourgeois capitalist vision to educate and mold

⁸⁷ *Report of the Secretary of War*, June 27, 1864, U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee on Slavery and Freedmen, *Report of the Secretary of War, communicating, in compliance with a resolution of the Senate of the 26th of May, a copy of the preliminary report, and also of the final report of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission*. June 22, 1864. -- Referred to the Select Committee on Slavery and Freedmen. June 23, 1864. -- Ordered to be printed. June 27, 1864. -- Three thousand additional copies ordered to be printed for the use of the Senate, 38th Cong., 1st Sess., 1864, 3.

⁸⁸ For a discussion of nineteenth-century white ideas about African-descended people, including the notion of black natural inferiority, see George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987). For nineteenth-century African American racial thought, see Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind*.

freedpeople into a moral, viable working class: the very purpose of the Freedmen's Bureau.⁸⁹

The report was published "in compliance with a resolution of the Senate."⁹⁰ The commission argued that the deficiency of chastity among black people could be "in a great measure corrected by bringing practically to the notice of refugees, as soon as they come under the care of the superintendent, the obligations of the married state in civilized life."⁹¹ Again, the commission paid no regard to the formerly enslaved community's rich tradition of rituals around marriage – despite the illegitimacy and tenuous nature of their marriages. Neither did the commission factor long term partnerships and unions that existed among freedpeople. Nor did the many black women who presented themselves as wives in their testimonies of against sexual violence act as proof of chastity and moral agency. "The obligations of the married state in civilized society" was more about organizing a class of laborers through the hierarchical, patriarchal family-structure. "This obligation, and the duties connected with the family relation of civilized life," the report continued, "should be carefully explained to these people, and while they remain under our care should be strictly maintained among them."⁹² Black women were a moral problem because their so-called lack of virtue threatened to crumble a subservient class of viable laborers. Their perceived sexual immorality was an economic problem.

The commission recommended both long- and short-term solutions to the so-called problem of black women's sexual and moral degeneracy. While the long-term solution was anchored in the job of the Freedmen's Bureau to educate freedpeople about

⁸⁹ For more on the gendered presumptions of the Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction, see Mary Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen's Bureau: Race, Gender, and Public Policy in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

⁹⁰ *Report of the Secretary of War*, 3.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

the centrality of marriage in a productive society, the short-term solution sought to tackle immediate concerns over the social interaction between freedwomen and white Union soldiers. The report recommended that freedmen's villages (formerly contraband camps) be kept away from military encampments. Just as General Babcock's letter suggested, the commission's attention to the physical proximity of white Union soldiers to black women in these spaces revealed the idea that mere exposure to freedwomen transmitted and induced immoral conduct. (Although, Babcock was also critical of the conduct of soldiers themselves.) The government gestured to the popular cultural notion of blackness as immoral, and black immorality as contagion – where black women represented enticing sexual criminals. But such anxiety was impractical and problematic in territories under occupation. Union soldiers were stationed at camps to suppress resurgent rebel activity and protect freedpeople as they built their new lives. These soldiers, most of whom were white, also heavily relied on the labor of black women as cooks, laundresses, washerwomen and domestics to service their military encampments.

The commission's recommendation to distance military camps from freedmen's villages was peculiarly argued through a case study involving a biracial woman. The report described how a "mulatto girl" refused to associate with her half-sister, who was fully of African descent. The commission argued that this refusal was due to the biracial girl's high esteem for her white heritage. While this story may appear benign, it presented a subtle threat that was readily understood. Through her esteem for whiteness, as the report suggested, the 'mulatto girl' reflected an eagerness of black women to enter illicit sex or even intermarry with white men. In conclusion, the report noted that:

Such ideas, and the habits thereby engendered, render it highly important that freedmen's villages, particularly when they are inhabited by women and children, should be at a distance from any military encampment, and should be strictly guarded. As there are no sentinel so strict as the negroes themselves, the commission believe, for this and other reasons, that colored guards will be found

the most suitable and efficient for such service; and they recommend that in every case they be substituted for whites.⁹³

The statement that “there are no sentinel so strict as the negroes themselves” implied that black soldiers had a strong sense of morality and did not want white soldiers near their families or compatriots.⁹⁴ Black soldiers standing guard, the recommendation suggested, offered the best prevention of illicit sex between black women and white men. While it is not entirely clear whether black women were being protected from white soldiers, or vice-versa, the story of the ‘mulatto girl’ suggested that black women were culpable. Moreover, in a society where women were idealized as moral custodians that controlled the passions of men, it is quite possible that black women received the blame for illicit sex with white soldiers.

In 1866, a clash between black soldiers and the white Memphis police force that catalyzed a riot. Like many resentful southern whites who struggled to regain unchallenged political dominance, the public visibility of black Union soldiers socializing with wives and friends demonstrated a radically shift from southern white power and politics. The Memphis police and white community’s riot was a collective act of violence, intimidation and revenge. Black homes, schools, and churches were burned down. At least 48 African Americans were killed and between 70 and 80 or more were wounded.⁹⁵ And at least five black women were raped as part of the wholesale violence. The Memphis massacre began on May 1, 1866 and lasted for three days. It gained such national attention and notoriety that a congressional committee was sent to the city to investigate the massacre.

⁹³ Ibid., 3-4.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 62.

Black women in Memphis appeared before the congressional committee with testimonies of sexual violence. Like the slave, free, refugee and contraband women who appeared in military court-martials, these women presented their moral agency and subjectivity in their testimonials. Frances Thompson, a former slave with impaired physical ability described that she was sexually violated and beaten by four men, including Memphis police officers, during the massacre and riot.⁹⁶ She testified that the men entered the home she shared with sixteen-year-old Lucy Tibbs, demanding “some women to sleep with,” to which she stated, “I said we were not that sort of women.” Between her expression of not being ‘that sort of women’ in the moment of terror and recalling this exchange in a congressional hearing, Thompson asserted her moral agency as a ground for legal protection. This kind of statement resonated on a new level as Thompson testified as a citizen.

The new legal framework as well as the culture of sexual violence that black women confronted in the Memphis riot and other incidents of white racial terrorism was unlike the kind that existed during the Civil War. Where most of the perpetrators prosecuted through the Civil War were Union soldiers dispatched to protect black women under their custody, the ‘new’ perpetrators in the Memphis riot were local southern whites in rebel territories – the enemy. Sexual violence took place under the guise of citizenship and federal protection in a society under occupation, but in peacetime, nonetheless. This was significant because as the dynamic of power shifted vastly in a tug of war between blacks and northern and southern white men, the sexual violence against black women was a constant.

⁹⁶ Historian Hannah Rosen has traced the continuation of public attacks against Frances Thompson following this testimony. In 1876, Thompson was arrested for cross-dressing as a ‘man’ in women’s clothing. Reports stated that Thompson was anatomically male or intersexed. But as Thompson identified as a woman, I, along with Rosen, have elected to analyze Thompson according. The ‘truth’ of Thompson’s anatomy does not negate her gender identity nor the fact that she was subjected to sexualized violence as woman. See Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 238.

But black women's struggle for sexual justice and moral resistance was also a constant through the Civil War and Reconstruction. Rebecca Ann Bloom was in bed with her husband, Peter Bloom, when five men broke into their home during the Memphis massacre and riot. The men threatened to arrest Mr. Bloom if he did not pay a fine of twenty-five dollars, so Bloom left his wife to raise the money. This kind of trespassing into black family homes was common in cases of rape during the Civil War also. The threat of arrest or a demand to pay a fine was often staged to remove husbands from their homes, leaving black wives unprotected. Upon Mr. Bloom's departure, one of the men threatened Rebecca with a knife "if she did not let him do as he wished."⁹⁷ Bringing her story to the Freedmen's Bureau, Rebecca engaged in an act that demanded public recognition of her violation as a female citizen and as a moral subject. Like other black women who testified in various cases of sexual violence before the State, Rebecca's marriage-status represented a moral marker, and the forced absence of her husband highlighted the lack of patriarchal protection allowed to black women.

Conclusion

Sexual terrorism and violence against black women did not end with slavery's demise. During the crucial transitional period of Civil War and Reconstruction in the United States, African American women found themselves caught in the midst of a sexual warfare. Whereas many Union Army officials hailed from smaller northern towns with little prior contact with African Americans, they were by no means immune to pervasive stereotypes surrounding the sexual availability of black women. This was most clear in Union encampments, where black domestics and laundresses found themselves

⁹⁷ *Memphis Riots and Massacres*, U.S. Congress, Senate, *Select Committee on the Memphis Riots*, 39th Cong., 1st sess., 1865-66, 13.

especially vulnerable to attack. The assumption, as Feimster has crucially highlighted, was that sexual labor was part of African American women's general labor. It is also clear from other cases that Union soldiers sexually assaulted former slave women as part of their plundering and pillaging of Confederate property. Acts of sexual violence committed by Union soldiers against black women thus revealed attitudes of resentment (likely due to the cause of the war) as well as curiosity and a sheer abuse power.

The introduction of a new legal framework around rape committed on *all* women during the Civil War, marked an unprecedented departure from prevailing southern customs. For the first time, black women could seek sexual justice and protection under the State. That freedwomen, refugees, contraband and even young black girls seized this new development is revolutionary. Under the uncertainty of war, these women did not wait for their new legal status to be defined. As a class of largely poor, uneducated, non-citizens, they launched argument that hinged on their moral authority to compel the State to punish those soldiers who betrayed the ideal of a civil, 'Gentleman's War.' Despite this new legal framework, the moral arguments of freedwomen, refugees, contraband and young children were not, however, new. They built on longstanding values around Christian sexual morality, female purity and chastity that existed in the antebellum female community. With the advent of Reconstruction – the second-half of this radical period of transition – similar classes of black women continued to testify against sexual violence and terrorism before the State, but now as citizens. Focusing on the Civil War and Reconstruction as period of transition enables scholars to understand the persistence of sexual violence against black women. While the perpetrators changed, the violence was constant – and so was black women's resistance.

The long unique history of racism and sexism that formally excluded black women from the traditional white patriarchal protected realm of Victorian true

womanhood, proved to position them as pioneers of radical women's rights in the era of Civil War and Reconstruction. Black women's testimonies against sexual violence were radical in ways that benefitted all women. And they were radical for demanding access to and proposing a redefinition of the ideal of Victorian true womanhood traditionally occupied by upper and middle class white female citizens. Due to the widespread disparaging assumptions of black female sexual immorality that persisted through Reconstruction, the notion of active purity that rested at the nexus of black women's moral claims. Black women's active claims to feminine purity and virtue during the Civil War and Reconstruction era meant speaking out and contesting rape even if it meant articulating the 'unspeakable.' Active purity also meant asserting the right to sexual self-ownership regardless of one circumstances, whether poor, a domestic laborer, a refugee, former slave, or even a worker in a brothel. This kind of organizing principle contrasted with many middle-class white women's rights activists who enlisted traditionally passive claims to their moral authority to justify their entry into politics. While white women's political activism and attitudes around sex were evolving and by no means uniform, the demands of black women on the very margins of society reveal the central importance of sexual self-ownership in their visions of freedom and liberation.

**Chapter 3: “The one-room log cabin is a pestilent menace to decent living”¹:
Sexual Respectability and the Home Life of Poor Rural Freedwomen.**

Rachel Adams from Putman County, Georgia, had chilling memories of sleeping in a one-room log cabin on a large plantation in the slave South. “Us lived in mud-daubed log cabins what had old stack chimblies made out of sticks and mud,” she recalled. “Our home-made bed didn’t have no slats or metal springs neither. Dey used stout cords for springs.”² A rough, makeshift cloth assumed the place of a sort-of sham for “old hay mattresses and pillows.”³ The cloth was “so coarse that it scratched us little chillum most to death,” Rachel remembered.⁴ Though many years had passed since the days of slavery, Rachel could still feel the old hay mattress underneath her. The rustling and creaking of her roughly hewn bed was so loud that whenever she moved at night: “it sounded lak de wind blowing; through dem peach trees and bamboos ‘round de front of de house whar I lives now.”⁵ Sometime after emancipation, Rachel managed to move into a “two-room, frame house” with a small veranda.⁶ “Perched on the side of a steep hill,” the yard also contained an enclosure for chickens in the front, and stalks of corn in the back that were so tall that they almost touched the rooftop.⁷ Although it is unclear exactly how long she waited to move into a multi-room house, Rachel was able to acquire a vision of freedom that many poor freedwomen held in relation to their sense of autonomy and home environment. The moment that she moved from a one-room log

¹ W. J. Edwards, “Uplifting the Submerged Masses” in Booker T. Washington and Emmett J. Scott, eds., *Tuskegee and Its People: Their Ideals and Achievements* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905), 246.

² Interview with Rachel Adams in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 1, Adams-Furr*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.041> (accessed February 27, 2019), 3.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁷ Ibid.

cabin to a two-room, frame house, Rachel also escaped a site that became central to a discussion about the sexual respectability and morality of black women in the years after Reconstruction.

Throughout the late nineteenth century, most black families lived in log cabins under conditions similar to slavery. An average former slave cabin consisted of a 12 by 10 square-foot single apartment construction with a dirt floor. Logs daubed with clay and mud provided a crude veneer of protection against rain and the elements. A small hole in a wall gave way for a glass-less window. In the winter, this hole was often kept closed.⁸ A stick and mud chimney released the smoke of a small fireplace that acted as a stove and kitchen-area. Sometimes there was a wooden table and a few chairs in this room. Beds were nailed against a wall, with bed-legs on the outer-side.⁹ Mothers and other women sometimes pulled grass from the fields and left it to dry-out to fashion a kind of cushion in place of a mattress.¹⁰ They made pillows from scraps of old dirty cotton left around.¹¹ At nights, pallets stored beneath these beds during the day offered an additional resting place for children or other family members and friends. Oftentimes, large families of between eight and twelve lived in these one-room log cabins. “Never had any partitions to make rooms,” recalled Cyrus Bellus decades later. “It was just a straight long house

⁸ Mrs. Booker T. Washington, “The New Negro Woman” in Martha H. Patterson, ed. *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894-1930* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 57.

⁹ Interview with Henry Cheatham in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young* 1936.

Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.010> (accessed February 27, 2019), 66.

¹⁰ Interview with Frank Fikes in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 2, Cannon-Evans*. 1936.

Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.022> (accessed February 27, 2019), 284.

¹¹ Interview with Jasper Battle in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 1, Adams-Furr*. 1936.

Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.041> (accessed February 27, 2019), 63.

with one window and one door.”¹² Within such cramped quarters with dirt floors and a lack of light and ventilation, families suffered a great risk of disease in addition to other perils of poverty.

In the years of Reconstruction, one-room log cabins formerly inhabited by slaves became uniquely symbolic with the founding of freed communities. If the one-room log cabin represented a staple in white American culture for its links to the ‘wilderness’ or the frontier, and the grit and rugged individualism of white men, canonized by presidential figures like Abraham Lincoln; its meaning was starkly different in the African American community.¹³ As historian Alison K. Hoagland notes, “The understanding of the log cabin is interwoven with the American past. The familiar image of intrepid settlers carving homes out of the wilderness, crafting a cabin out of the abundant resources of the land, exhibiting qualities of self-reliance and independence, has been complicated by later, more shaded interpretations of the past.”¹⁴ Black log cabin dwellers were aware of the dominant cultural mythology of the log cabin. Patsy Hyde, a former slave of a mistress who was a relative of Abraham Lincoln, recalled decades later: “I useter y’ar dem talkin’ ‘bout ‘im livin’ in a log cabin en w’en he d’ed she had her house draped in black.”¹⁵ The plantation that she lived on became a Union encampment.¹⁶

¹² Interview with Cyrus Bellus in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 1, Abbott-Byrd*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.041> (accessed February 27, 2019), 142.

¹³ For a discussion of the symbolism of the log cabin in American culture, see Alison K. Hoagland, *The Log Cabin: An American Icon* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2017).

¹⁴ For examples, see Hoagland, *The Log Cabin*, 2-6.

¹⁵ Interview with Patsy Hyde in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project, Vol. 15, Tennessee, Batson-Young*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.150> (accessed February 27, 2019), 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

But the structure and interior of the former slave one-room log cabin told a much different story of the perceived lack of virtue and chastity of poor black women in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction years. The one-room log cabin became a symbol of moral degeneracy as outside observers imagined that with its lack of partitions for privacy, sex between parents took place in front of all family members. The idea of a home occupied by a large family where privacy was deemed impossible also pointed to the notion of open sexual practices, such as orgies and other forms of sex that was considered immoral and unsavory by nineteenth-century standards. Moreover, many believed that all modesty was simply abandoned in a one-room log cabin, meaning that the value of purity fell by the wayside. Mothers who lived in one-room log cabins, many deduced, could not teach their daughters to be chaste and virtuous.

During Reconstruction, government and religious organizations such as the Freedmen's Bureau and the American Missionary Association (AMA) emerged in the occupied South with the goal of assisting former slaves in their transition to freedom and citizenship. In what can be described as the 'bourgeoisification' of the South, these agencies organized freed communities around the northern gender ideology of free labor and domesticity.¹⁷ Though the immensely popularly northern middle class ideology of true womanhood received variant forms of pushback in the late nineteenth century by a burgeoning women's rights movement as well as women who were sex radical activists, its staying power as a dominant gendered ideology should not be understated. Once excluding black women – particularly enslaved women – from its domain, middle class ideas of domesticity and womanhood became a measure of the virtue of freedwomen. Identifying 'woman' and the 'home' as synonymous, the application of true womanhood's ideals of purity, piety, domesticity and submissiveness had complex and

¹⁷ See Mary Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen's Bureau: Race, Gender, and Public Policy in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

detrimental consequences. For example, the ideology of domesticity called for the subordination of black women to black men – a notion that became a source of tension in the confrontations between freedwomen and the Freedmen’s Bureau.¹⁸ Moreover, in applying a traditionally white, middle class notion of passive female purity that was directly tied to domesticity, freedwomen, who were traditionally denied sexual protection and the sanctity of home and family, were framed as immoral sexual deviants in great need of reform. Proponents of true womanhood rarely acknowledged the tradition of enslaved, fugitive, contraband and refugee black women’s concerns with feminine virtue, purity and chastity as shown in previous chapters. The one-room log cabin thus became a symbol of black women’s sexual and moral degeneracy.

Public scrutiny over the sexual and moral character of black women also accompanied a period marked by pervasive sexual violence against black women in the late nineteenth century. While assumptions that black women were sexually available was part of a long trend in nineteenth century America, the emergence of new racial ideologies and stereotypes in the deeply contentious political moment of Reconstruction ushered in a new era of sexual violence. The image of the black male rapist invented by white southerners gave grave warnings against African American citizenship rights and black (male) suffrage. Using the spectre of ‘social equality’ – a euphemism for interracial sex – to forward their political goals, white southerners enlisted tropes of black male sexual criminality in their challenges to Reconstruction and in their later justifications for Jim Crow segregation in the period of Redemption.¹⁹ While southern white men rallied

¹⁸ Consult historian Farmer-Kaiser’s excellent study for an examination of the confrontation between freedwomen and the gendered ideals of the Freedmen’s Bureau. See Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen’s Bureau*.

¹⁹ Scholars have written extensively about the sexual and gendered-nature of the Redemption movement. For one of the major studies, see Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996). For studies on the violent racial and sexual politics of Reconstruction and its aftermath, see Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009) and Crystal

under the banner of protecting the virtue and purity of southern white women from corruption by black men, they unleashed an accompanying image of the loose and lascivious black woman. Denying black women their claims to pure and virtuous womanhood, and the patriarchal protection that this ideology offered, southern white men propelled a campaign of sexual terror and domination over black women's bodies on the premise that black women were impure wanton temptresses. Within these pervasive attacks, white southerners showed their refusal to acknowledge not only the chastity and virtue of black women, but the also the sanctity of black families, homes and the gendered prerogative of black men to protect and defend the honor of black women.

Amid the racial and sexual terror of Redemption, African Americans turned inwards to their own communities. They organized a social movement around racial uplift as a mode of protection, self-help and racial progress. Reaping the benefits of Reconstruction, the previously nominal black middle-class grew exponentially, with many acquiring a normal school or college-education. These new community leaders of men and women built strategies to push back against the Redemptionist politically-charged rhetoric of the so-called 'Negro problem' – a construction that framed discourses around the oversexed nature and moral burden of African American men and women.²⁰ Middle

Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). Of course, one of the essential works documenting the racialized politics of rape is *Southern Horrors* by one of the leading anti-lynching activists of the turn of the twentieth century, Ida B. Wells. See Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors: Lynch-Law in All Its Phases* (New York: New York Age Print, 1892).

²⁰ By the turn of the twentieth-century there was an abundance of literature on the so-called 'Negro Problem.' As white authors produced surveys on the traits and characters of African American as a race, black leaders also used the language of a 'Negro problem' to address problems within their own communities, such as poverty. It is important to emphasize that while the 'Negro problem' was the terminology used by black and white thinkers, their positions on its meaning varied. This was also true among black thinkers. Notable examples of white commentaries that engage the construction of a 'Negro Problem' include Frederick Ludwig Hoffman, *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1896) and Alexander Harvey Shannon, *Racial Integrity and Other Features of the Negro Problem* (Dallas, TX: Publishing House of the M. E. Church, South Nashville, 1907). For responses by black writers as well as examples of their diverse positions on this topic, see Booker T. Washington, ed., *The Negro Problem: Series of Articles by Representative American Negroes of To-Day* (New York: James Pott & Company, 1903) and William Hannibal Thomas, *The American Negro: What He Was, What He Is, And What He May Become* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1901).

class and educated African American women fought back against the charges of the ‘Negro problem’ through social and political networks that intersected with racial uplift in their communities and women’s rights activism more broadly. Joining mainstream moral reform causes such as the Temperance and Social Purity movements, middle class and educated African American women organized in ways that placed the sexual protection and public recognition for the respectability and virtue of black women at the forefront of their political activism.

Indeed, the ascent of the racial ideology of social Darwinism in the late nineteenth century reshaped American racial discourse and assigned a key role for women in the future progress of the race.²¹ As historian Mia Bay writes, social Darwinism counselled that women “played a central role in advancing, or holding back, the evolutionary development of their race.”²² Social Darwinism exposed black women to new scrutiny and insults for this reason, but middle class black women nonetheless assumed their role in uplifting the race. To be sure, the focus on the acquisition of perfection and higher civilization primarily through (white) male desire and competition meant that social Darwinism generally reinforced the concept of separate spheres for the sexes.²³ Social Darwinists saw women’s intellectual development and higher education as “racially devolutionary” and even threatening “race suicide,” as historian Beryl Satter

²¹ Indeed, women’s responses to nineteenth-century evolutionary and social science was by no means universal and scholars have debated the nineteenth-century “woman question” as it related to such thought. Historian Beryl Satter, for example, highlights a distinction between female activists who represented the visions of “reform Darwinists” versus those who were more social Darwinist in their perspectives. See Beryl Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 11. See also Kimberly A. Hamlin, *From Eve to Evolution: Darwin, Science, and Women’s Rights in Gilded Age America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014). For a broader study of race, sex and evolutionary science in the nineteenth century, see Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

²² Mia Bay, “The Battle for Womanhood is the Battle for Race: Black Women and Nineteenth-Century Racial Thought” in Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones and Barbara D. Savage, eds., *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 88.

²³ See Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom*, 11.

explains.²⁴ Instead, (white) women's "role in evolutionary development" focused on their duties as wives and mothers.²⁵ Women's rights activists largely rejected social Darwinism's limitation on female intellectual development and advanced a position of reform Darwinism instead.²⁶ They argued that (white) women's moral and sexual purity and superiority was the key to saving the nation from the moral ruin of male lust and competition.²⁷ As middle-class black and white social purity and women's rights activists subscribed to elements of late nineteenth century evolutionary science, black women seized the message of women's central duty to the race within their own communities.²⁸ Rising in defense of themselves, middle class black women demanded a voice and leadership alongside black men in the project of racial uplift. They called the 1890s the era of the 'New Negro Woman' to mark their uncompromising entry into politics, joining the causes of racial justice and women's rights. The 'New Negro Woman' also distinguished this class of women from the negative stereotypes of sexual and moral degeneracy associated with the legacy of enslaved womanhood. Constructing a 'politics of respectability,' these women made claims to middle-class 'refinement,' manners and morality alongside other forms of protest to undermine white charges of black

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ "They viewed (Anglo-Saxon) woman as rational spirit and man as lustful matter," writes Satter, "While the mind of competitive man was warped by his raging desires, 'advanced' woman lacked destructive desire. Instead, woman's 'mental force' was fueled by her 'heart force' – understood not as irrational emotion, but as high-minded love and spiritual morality." See Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom*, 12.

²⁸ As mentioned earlier, historian Beryl Satter notes that opposed to the male-centered concept of social Darwinism aligned with the thought of "reform Darwinists." This included leaders of the nineteenth-century temperance and women's rights movements, such as Frances Willard and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Satter writes that "As with the social Darwinists, the ultimate goal of the purity-oriented reform Darwinists was to spur the evolution and perfection of 'the race.' They also agreed that scientific law held the key to social and racial improvement. They defined the laws of science differently, however. Truly scientific laws were not the cutthroat, amoral laws of nature, but the unchanging, spiritual law that pure woman, not desirous man, best represented." Satter goes on to note that "Social purity activists and reform Darwinists felt that [...] threats to civilization could only be averted through the leadership or influence of 'woman.' They viewed (Anglo-Saxon) woman as rational spirit and man as lustful matter... As a rational, pure, and deeply moral being, the New Woman could help redeem a race and a nation now threatened with moral dissolution." See Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom*, 11-12.

intellectual, social, cultural and moral inferiority.²⁹ In 1895, following a slanderous editorial and public letter written by the white southern editor, James W. Jacks, about the sexual immorality and impurity of African American women, black clubwomen organized and founded the National Association of Colored Women (NACW).³⁰ Among the urgent resolutions on their agenda was the eradication of the one-room log cabin.

This chapter recovers a movement among middle-class and educated African American clubwomen around one-room log cabins in the late nineteenth century plantation South. It interprets these campaigns as a site of black women's sexual activism in a period of disparaging and pervasive stereotypes around black women's sexuality. These stereotypes gave way to a continuum of widespread sexual violence and abuse

²⁹ In *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church* (1993), historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham outlines the subversive power of the largely conservative strategy of respectability politics in the female Baptist church tradition in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Since its publication, scholars have interrogated the framework of the 'politics of respectability' within the African American female political tradition. For example, feminist scholar Brittney Cooper reminds us of the specific conditions surrounding black women who subscribed to this "troubling... respectability politic." As Cooper writes, "[I]n our contemporary feminist critiques of respectability and elitist class politics, often we do not acknowledge the sexual vulnerability that animated these women's calls for 'refinement.' In a historical moment wherein Black women were forced to adjudicate their moral rectitude in public, the sexual and gender policing at the center of their calls for respectability, conservative as they are, emerge as a reasonable, though not particularly laudable, approach to protecting the sanctity of Black women's bodies." Focusing on the construction and endorsement of respectability politics among educated and elite black women who were fashioning themselves as emerging public intellectuals, Cooper also brings attention to the reasonableness of respectability as a strategy for black women with greater public visibility. Cooper adds that "these calls for respectability were meant to serve as a guard against white male sexual objectification. Part of the work of cultivating the public platform as a site for Black women to stand was making the space as safe as possible for Black women's physical bodies, which would be publicly on display... That required them to put their bodies on the line and to confront the very kinds of troubling discourses about their sexual promiscuity that shaped how public audiences would perceive them." This dissertation builds on the existing scholarship on predominantly middle-class and educated African American women's respectability politics at the turn of the twentieth-century by illuminating the respectability of slave, poor, working-class and uneducated women. It maintains that performances of respectability were part of a longstanding tradition in the black female community, especially as part of their sexual self-protection and resistance. Very few scholars analyze the multiple origins or overlapping traditions of respectability in the black female community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 15.

³⁰ Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 23. See also "Some Information Concerning Jacks, the Letter Writer," *The Woman's Era* 2, no. 9 (January, 1896).

against black women in the era of segregation. Racial uplift reform initiatives around one-room log cabins were driven largely by middle-class clubwomen's concerns about the moral and sexual character of poor black women. Understanding that the public image of black womanhood was often measured by the least visibly respectable components of the race, clubwomen took the lead in teaching poor and uneducated black women notions of bourgeois values. But as chapters one and two have shown, notions of feminine virtue, self-respect and sexual respectability were already established in the black female community.

While middle class black women framed their campaigns as a moral crusade, poor black women who lived in one-room log cabins welcomed reform for different reasons. Their testimonies show concerns related to autonomy, economy, a better quality of life, or even protection from domestic violence. With notions of feminine virtue as an established tradition within the community of poor freedwomen, reforming the one-room log cabin constituted an expansion and further realization of these ideals. The voices and perspectives of poor black women who lived in one-room log cabins in the late nineteenth century South are few in comparison to the record left by educated clubwomen and reformers. Much of what is known about them is mediated by the agenda of those who reported their reform efforts. Other interpretations of the sexual and moral character of women who lived in one-room log cabins came from outsiders who stood at a much farther distance to middle class black clubwomen. The first part of this chapter explores how the one-room log cabin became a symbol of the sexual and moral degeneracy of freedwomen. This chapter then looks to the one-room log cabin as a site of middle class and educated clubwomen's sexual activism, examining what reforming this environment meant to this burgeoning class. The final section of this chapter analyzes the interactions between middle class reformers and women who lived in one-room log cabins to understand the importance of ideas around sex, respectability

and feminine virtue in black women's meanings of liberation in the period of Redemption.

The One-Room Log Cabin as a Symbol of the Sexual Degeneracy of Black Womanhood

Whereas slavery denied African American women the sanctity of marriage, family and domesticity; in the postemancipation years, freedwomen were increasingly demonized for their perceived lack of chastity and feminine virtue in the domestic sphere. Throughout the late nineteenth century, the vast majority of African American families lived on plantation settlements in log cabins that they previously inhabited as slaves. A relic of slavery, the one-room log cabin became a symbol of the moral, sexual and educational health of the race, *especially* black women. It is important to note that one-room log cabins also symbolized some of the first concrete expressions of emancipation. The first contraband and fugitive communities were held together by one-room log cabins along Union lines. "Old, dilapidated, one-room log cabins," to borrow the words of educator, W. J. Edwards, became schoolhouses and churches – sacred institutions of the newly freed black community.³¹ But an onslaught of racist ideologies and myths about the oversexed nature of black men and women took shape during the postwar years. White southerners who sought to block African American claims to full citizenship played a prominent role in defaming black women, men and their families. Moreover, as the federal government and Northern Christian missionaries despatched agents and representatives to the post-war South to assist freedpeople with their transition into freedom and citizenship, they brought with them northern gender

³¹ W. J. Edwards, "Uplifting the Submerged Masses" in *Tuskegee and Its People*, eds. Booker T. Washington and Emmett Jay Scott (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905) 241.

ideologies of free labor and domesticity as the foundation of this social reconstruction.³² Applying the popular and powerful notion that ‘home’ and ‘woman’ was synonymous – a cornerstone of the Northern gender ideology of true womanhood – government officials and missionaries, intentionally or not, set in motion a trend of scrutiny and fierce judgement around the sexual and intimate lives of poor and uneducated freedwomen. Rather than acknowledge freedwomen as members of a community where slave, fugitive, contraband and refugee women asserted their Christian identity and morality; engaged in various forms of sexual resistance; and sought sexual justice from the State, government representatives, missionaries and reformers instead used the impoverished material conditions of poor freedwomen to draw conclusions about their inner character – namely their sexual impurity and immorality. This attitude supported a deeply rooted assumption that morality and respectability was the exclusive property of those with an education and middle- or upper-class status. The one-room log cabin became a symbol of black female sexual and moral degeneracy.

The impact of ideals of womanhood in naturalizing African American sexual immorality has origins in antebellum slavery. Expressions of true womanhood, as well as the ‘Southern Lady’ archetype excluded slave women from its domain. Moreover, as historian Mary Farmer-Kaiser notes, slave women generally “rejected the southern domesticity of their ex-masters,” but this did not mean that ideas of feminine virtue were not valued in the slave community.³³ True womanhood dictated that women’s ideal

³² As historian Mary Farmer-Kaiser writes, “Whether attempting to regulate federal relief, southern labor relations, apprenticeship laws and practices, or the administration of justice, the [Freedmen’s Bureau] endeavored to use the binary northern ideologies of free labor and domesticity to return former slaves to the workforce, to place freedmen at the head of black households, and to ‘teach’ freedwomen to be virtuous women, dutiful wives, and devoted mothers of true womanhood.” See Mary Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen’s Bureau: Race, Gender, and Public Policy in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 34. For an excellent study of the gendered politics and tensions of Reconstruction, see Laura F. Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

³³ In fact, tensions between freedwomen who entered Freedmen’s Bureau offices and Bureau agents also demonstrate black women’s refusal to adopt northernized ideals of domesticity that conflicted

domain was in the home, and many believed that the moral and sexual standing of a woman was reflected in the home environment. The ‘Southern Lady’ was much like the Northernized true woman, except her duty included the management of slaves and a plantation household. As historians have noted, black and white womanhood in the nineteenth century were ‘interdependent,’ meaning that the elevation and presumed purity of white womanhood depended on the subjugation and exploitation of black womanhood.³⁴ The prominent tropes of the Jezebel and Mammy stereotypes portrayed black women as either oversexed or asexual.³⁵ But even as slave women deployed ideals of chastity and feminine virtue as part of their sexual resistance, very few people outside of the slave community recognized the endurance of enslaved women’s moral agency and struggle for sexual self-ownership. Abolitionists who commented on the moral evils of slavery instead emphasized the dehumanizing conditions of slavery. Their attention to slave cabins was one of key ways that popular ideals of womanhood shaped public perceptions of the interiority, sexual lives and moral values of slave women.

For example, as early as the late 1830s, abolitionist accounts tied the home environment of slaves to moral degeneracy. In 1839, the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) published a collection of a thousand testimonies of former slaveholders, abolitionists and observers of the plantation south. Among these testimonies, reports on the ‘dwellings’ of slaves illuminated the AASS’s agenda of exposing the dehumanization of the institution of slavery. Inadvertently, these accounts contributed to racialized ideas about black inferiority and sub-humanness. In one reflection, Rev. Joseph M. Sadd, a

with their own meanings of freedom. Again, this does not diminish the fact that black woman maintained and weaponized ideas around purity and feminine virtue for their own protection and sense of sexual self-ownership in public and within the domestic environment. Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen’s Bureau*, 34.

³⁴ Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South: revised with a new introduction* (1985. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 6.

³⁵ See White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*.

pastor of a Presbyterian church in Greene County, N.Y. recalled his days in Missouri: “The slaves live generally in miserable huts, which are without floors and have a single apartment only, where both sexes are herded promiscuously together.”³⁶ While Sadd sought to elicit empathy, his use of animalistic language (‘herded’) was not unlike the kind found in racial theories that dehumanized slaves and people of African descent more broadly.³⁷ For John Passmore Edwards, the conditions of “men, women, and children” sleeping on “no other floor than the trodden earth” together, “irrespective of chastity or cleanliness,” was “yet...not the severest form of slavery.”³⁸ And Cornelius Johnson, who lived in Mississippi during the 1830s, testified that: “Their houses were commonly built of logs... some of them have two apartments, commonly but one... Sometimes these families consisted of a man and his wife and children, while in other instances persons of both sexes were thrown together without regard to family relationship.”³⁹ Such accounts suggested that slaves themselves lacked moral agency or notions of appropriate relations within a family structure.

But the perspectives of those who lived in one-room log cabins suggests that slave families also attempted to adhere to codes of respectability by Victorian standards within the confines of their home environment. Cora Armstrong from Union County, Arkansas, lived in a one room log cabin with her mother, father and eleven siblings.⁴⁰

³⁶ American Anti-Slavery Society, *American Slavery as it is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839), 43.

³⁷ In his ground-breaking study, George M. Frederickson examines the evolution of white ethnological and racial thought in the nineteenth century, including the theory of polygenesis that argued that races derived from separate origins. See George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1971). See also Britt Rusert, *Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

³⁸ American Anti-Slavery Society, *American Slavery as it is*, 73.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁰ Interview with Cora Armstrong in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 1, Abbott-Byrd*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.021> (accessed November 1, 2018), 75.

“Ma did not allow us to sit around grown folks,” she recalled. “When they were talking she always made us get under the bed.”⁴¹ The limited physical surrounding of the one-room log cabin with its lack of partitions made privacy almost impossible. Yet, Cora’s mother sought alternative means to establish a distance between her children and ‘grown folks.’ Perhaps this was part of Cora’s mother’s Victorian thinking related to the old English proverb that ‘children should be seen and not heard’ in the presence of adult company. Cora’s mother’s instructions might also be interpreted as protecting her daughter and other children from the risk of inappropriate association with adults. The environment in which Cora’s family of fourteen lived was, like most slave cabins, in no way spacious or comfortable. With the children sleeping on pallets on the floor, Cora’s recollection gives an insight into some of the arrangements that slave families created to maintain a level of decency and appropriate interaction within the one-room log cabin. Making the most out of an undesirable, uncomfortable and oppressive circumstance, slave women did not allow their families to be merely ‘herded together.’

Nonetheless, anti-slavery testimonials on the living conditions of slaves fortified an association of black womanhood with sexual and moral depravity that endured into the late nineteenth-century. Interracial sex, for example –a moral crime by nineteenth century standards –was a common theme. Through the language of interracial sex, abolitionists highlighted the normalized sexual abuse of slave women as well as their denial of feminine purity and virtue. Hiram White, a native of North Carolina pointed out that the racial makeup of families demonstrated the pervasiveness of sexual promiscuity. This observation showed how the slave home environment was not treated with the same sanctity as white homes. “Amalgamation was common,” he explained, “There was scarce a family of slaves that had females of mature age where there were not

⁴¹ Ibid.

some mulatto children.”⁴² These testimonies necessarily brought attention to the dehumanizing experience of life under slavery, debunking the arguments of slavery apologists that slaves lived happily on plantations. At the same time, such language in the Victorian-era spoke volumes in its silences and inferences. Sexual promiscuity, lax morals, the moral crime of interracial sex, and inferences to the absence of boundaries of respectability within the family structure in slavery shaped later attitudes about the morality and sexuality of poor freedwomen. These ideas belied the fact that slave women (who became poor freedwomen) nurtured values around feminine virtue, sexual respectability and Christian morality despite their material conditions and lack of education.



Fig. 1. “Slave Cabin, Built Ca. 1830, Photograph,” Library of Virginia.⁴³

⁴² American Anti-Slavery Society, *American Slavery as it is*, 51.

⁴³ This slave cabin was built around 1830. The photo was captured in the 1930s by an employer with the Works Progress Administration for the Virginia Historical Inventory. Library of Virginia, “Slave Cabin, Built Ca. 1830, Photograph,” Education at Library of Virginia, http://edu.lva.virginia.gov/online_classroom/shaping_the_constitution/doc/slavecabin (accessed January 29, 2019).

The tide of representatives of the Freedmen's Bureau, missionaries with the American Missionary Association (AMA), and Northern abolitionist institutions, ministers and reformers travelling to the South to assist freedpeople with their transition to citizenship inadvertently contributed to growing notions that former slave women were in dire need of moral reform and lessons in chastity. These entities created programs based on northernized patriarchal family and work structures.⁴⁴ Indeed, as historian Thomas Holt argues, Bureau agents and missionaries desired more than establishing freedmen and freedwomen as free laborers, but sought "to make them into a working class, that is, a class that would submit to the market because it adhered to the *values* of a bourgeois society: regularity, punctuality, sobriety, frugality, and economic rationality."⁴⁵ They erected and taught schools and churches to help anchor these communities. While these representatives respectively instructed freedmen and freedwomen on the intertwined virtues of the marriage contract, the labor contract, thrift, sobriety and Christianity, they also provided specific rules to freedwomen on female purity, wifhood, motherhood and domesticity.⁴⁶ But in the postbellum "crisis of free labor," as historian Leslie Ann Schwalm adds, frustrated agents resigned to blame freedpeople themselves, rather than the "devastating impact of slavery," for the "obstacles to the ascendancy of a free labor society" in the Reconstruction South.⁴⁷

For example, Susan Walker, an abolitionist from Massachusetts and a freedmen's aid reformer conducted home visits to cabins located on the Jenkins Plantation at Port Royal, South Carolina. Reporting on her observations, she wrote:

⁴⁴ See Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen's Bureau*.

⁴⁵ Thomas Holt, "'An Empire over the Mind': Emancipation, Race, and Ideology in the British West Indies and the American South in *Region, Race and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed., J. Morgan Kousser and James McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 288.

⁴⁶ Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen's Bureau*, 15.

⁴⁷ Leslie Ann Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 237.

Again at the Jenkins' plantation to look into cabins, talk with women and see what can be done to improve them. Katy has 7 ragged, dirty children, what shall be done? No husband and nothing. Some clothes are given for her children – one naked, and must have it at once. Is Katy lazy? Very likely. Does she tell the truth, perhaps not. I must have faith and she must, at least cover her children. She promises to make her cabin and herself clean and to wash her children before putting on new clothes.”⁴⁸

As historian Carol Faulkner writes, “[i]n the aftermath of slavery, abolitionists found illegitimacy, single mother hood, nakedness, and dirt. Though they blamed the slaveholders for this situation, they also chided the victims, accusing them of laziness and deceit, and making charity dependent on black families adopting the minimum standards of Northern domesticity.”⁴⁹ Poverty and the legacy of slavery and Civil War, such as single motherhood, became markers of the inner character of black women in the period of Radical Reconstruction. If the domesticity of true womanhood was antithetical to the logic of enslaved womanhood, the application of Northern bourgeois ideals of domesticity as a measure of morality in the freedwomen's community vilified black women at the same time that it offered a framework for improving the lives of poor freedwomen and their families.

The fact was that freedwomen continued to live in one-room log cabins under conditions similar to slavery because there were no alternatives immediately available to them. As Delia Garlic from Montgomery, Alabama explained, “When we knowed we [were] freed, everybody wanted to git out. De rule [was] dat if you stayed in yo' cabin you could keep it, but if you lef', you los' it.”⁵⁰ “The wild rejoicing on the part of the emancipated coloured [sic] people lasted but for a brief period,” remembered the

⁴⁸ Carol Faulkner, *Women's Radical Reconstruction: The Freedmen's Aid Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 133.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Interview with Delia Garlic in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.010> (accessed November 1, 2018), 132.

prominent southern black leader, Booker T. Washington who was born and reared in a one-room log cabin. “I noticed that by the time they returned to their cabins there was a change in their feelings,” he added.⁵¹ For many former slaves, the will to leave the plantation and build new lives under better conditions was often trumped by the reality that many simply had no money, no place to go and no guarantee of employment. Moreover, on some plantations, former slaveholders allowed freedmen and freedwomen to retain their cabins in exchange of continued cheap labor through the exploitative mortgage, tenancy and crop-lien systems.⁵²

Indeed, most freedpeople detested the one-room log cabin. As one freedman from Tuscumbia, AL., reminded: “dey wasn’t fitten for nobody to lib in. We jes’ had to put up wid ‘em.”⁵³ To prevent the high possibility of homelessness, Delia and her husband, Miles, set up a strategy that enabled him to find work sixteen miles away in the city of Wetumpka while maintaining their former slave cabin. “Miles [was] workin’ at Wetumpka, an’ he slipped in an’ out so us could keep on livin’ in de cabin,” Delia recalled.⁵⁴ Ensuring that the cabin remained occupied while her husband ‘slipped in and out’ to go to work is an example of the way this freedwoman guarded herself and her family from homelessness in the years of uncertainty following emancipation.

⁵¹ Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co, 1901), 21.

⁵² For a brilliant and extensive study, see W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1935). White observers also acknowledge the issues facing freedpeople in the labor system. In an 1891 publication in *Atlantic Monthly*, Samuel J. Barrows, a white Unitarian minister and Republican from New York who was a prominent advocate of prison reform provided a sketch of the exploitative labor conditions in the South. ““The colored race has emerged from civil bondage. The next step will be to come out of a bondage which is financial,” he argued. Samuel J. Barrows, “What the Southern Negro Is Doing for Himself,” *Atlantic Monthly* 67 (June, 1891).

⁵³ Interview with Mary Ella Grandberry in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Digital ID: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.010> (accessed November 1, 2018), 157.

⁵⁴ Interview with Delia Garlic, *Alabama Narratives*, 132.

Former slave women who lived in remote log cabins also faced extreme violence in an era marked by an extreme attack on black womanhood. “Already compromised by a history of slavery and servitude,” as historian Mia Bay notes on nineteenth century black women, “African American women’s claims to true womanhood were further undermined in the postemancipation era.”⁵⁵ Bay adds that, “[b]lack women were the target of the endemic sexual violence that accompanied white southern challenges to Republican Reconstruction and were widely vilified in the name of white supremacy during the Reconstruction era.”⁵⁶ Unprotected due to widowhood from the Civil War, and living in isolated plantation regions, many log cabin women solicited relief from local Bureau agents. On one occasion, a mother and her daughter sought the help of John De Forest, district commander of the Freedmen’s Bureau in Greenville, South Carolina. Both women were widowed by the War. Their log cabin was severely weathered by snow, rain and wind, and their dirt floor was muddy from the exposure.⁵⁷ In addition to fact that their cabin was no longer inhabitable, they were also in need of food and clothing.⁵⁸ “Without the protection of men,” writes Marilyn Mayer Culpepper, “the women were the target of bullies and roughnecks who plagued them day and night.”⁵⁹ No doubt, sexual violence was a feature of many of these events, and was a major factor why freedwomen sought relief.

Only a few idealistic missionaries saw the potential for feminine virtue in former slave women who lived in log cabins. In an 1860s-pamphlet titled, *Friendly Counsels to Freedmen*, Reverend J. B. Waterbury D. D. of the New York American Tract Society

⁵⁵ Bay, “The Battle for Womanhood is the Battle for Race,” 88.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Marilyn Mayer Culpepper, *All Things Altered: Women in the Wake of Civil War and Reconstruction* (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland & Company, 2002), 200.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

emphasized the importance of cleanliness in a civilized Christian society.⁶⁰ “No matter how poor the house is you live, it should be kept clean. The Bible says, ‘Wash you, make you clean.’ Though this means *soul*/washing, yet it shows God loves cleanliness.”⁶¹ Waterbury’s advice to freedpeople reflected the kind of white benevolent language common among missionaries. As a whole the booklet outlined the basics of a ‘civil’ society with the assumption that former slaves, as a rule, lacked these values and practises. But Waterbury’s advice did acknowledge that individual respectability could coexist with poverty. He went on to note that “Industry is one good thing. But there are other habits also we should recommend. Cleanliness is very important. Black or white, a dirty person is a disgusting object. Even a poor person can possess the virtue of cleanliness.”⁶² In its entirety, the pamphlet called on freedmen and freedwomen to pledge themselves to industriousness, chastity and domesticity.

As noted earlier, one-room log cabins also symbolized some of the first concrete expressions of emancipation. The 1893 establishment of the Snow Hill Normal and Industrial Institute located in the Black Belt of the south is one example. With no financial assistance from the state, reflected Edwards, the founder, the school saw success in ten short years. “From the little one-room log cabin, the school has grown so that it now owns 100 acres of land. 14 buildings counting large and small, with property valued at \$37,000.”⁶³ Yet, in the same breath, he also spoke of the need to eradicate one-room log cabins as family homes. “[C]ompetent teachers and preachers, both intellectually and morally, have been employed. Crime and immorality are being uprooted, and virtue and civic righteousness are being planted in their stead,” he

⁶⁰ Specific year is unknown. See Rev. J. B. Waterbury, D. D., *Friendly Counsels for Freedmen* (New York: American Tract Society, n.d).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 8. (Emphasis in original).

⁶² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶³ Edwards, “Uplifting the Submerged Masses,” 242.

announced. “With these things true,” Edwards continued, “the one-room log cabin can not [sic] survive, and it is rapidly giving way to houses having three, four, and, in some places, six and seven rooms.”⁶⁴ One-room log cabins thus took on the dual symbolism of black freedom, self-determination, institutional progress and modernity, as well as a slave past, ignorance, backwardness and black female sexual immorality. Unlike the romanticization of the log cabin of the wilderness, or the frontier in the white American imagination, the former slave cabin rested at the intersection of racial thought and ideology about the sexual and moral degeneracy of African Americans, especially black women.

Missionaries and reformers generally approached the home life of former slaves as an area requiring urgent moral reform. Many treated the one-room log cabin as a representation of the *innate* moral and sexual degeneracy of poor freedwomen. For example, Miss D. E. Emerson, secretary of the AMA was among the many white missionaries who travelled to the southern Black Belt during Reconstruction. In her recollection of her first teaching experience, Emerson’s attitude towards her students reflected the general attitude of paternalism as well as ideas around femininity and domesticity that many such missionaries employed. As a white woman of New England origins and Christian training, she confessed that she “felt perfectly helpless” when she started her missionary work.⁶⁵ She believed that she was ill-equipped to teach the “ninety or one hundred black children, youth, men and women” who were her students because she “had no knowledge of their home life.”⁶⁶ Emerson resolved to follow her students to their homes after lessons. “[A]fter school, many a long walk I took, sometimes

⁶⁴ Ibid., 245.

⁶⁵ Miss. D. E. Emerson, “Home Life of the Negroes” in *First Mobonk Conference on the Negro Question held at Lake Mobonk, Ulster County, New York, 1890*, ed., Isabel C. Barrows (Boston: George H. Ellis, Printer, 1890), 60. (Emphasis added).

⁶⁶ Ibid.

through the trackless sand along the cypress swamp, up embankments where I found the clusters of cabins which they called homes,” she wrote.⁶⁷ Neither wealthy, though having never “felt real want,” Emerson initially reacted to the one-room log cabins that her students lived in with compassion.⁶⁸ “I saw in these Negro cabins only the poverty of the people, the outward lacks. *I saw nothing, at first, of the lack of inward grace,*” Emerson added.⁶⁹

Emerson evidently shifted her position on the character of her students from compassion to negative judgement based on their home life. She claimed to discover “what made their life so barren and poor.”⁷⁰ Young rural black women, she argued, represented the worst in a “mass of corrupted humanity.”⁷¹ Their home environment made teaching qualities like self-respect and “habits of cleanliness, neatness, and order” nearly impossible.⁷² “We found that it was useless to go into the homes and talk about something that they never had seen and could not understand,” she complained.⁷³ “If we spoke of a better way, they would say, ‘Yes, yes’; but we never saw much improvement in them from that alone.”⁷⁴ Young poor rural black women seemed to lack the ability *and will* to live with grace and respectability in a one-room log cabin. Thus, Emerson resolved: “Home and woman are synonymous; and so, if I speak to you this morning of the women of the colored race, you will understand how that touches the life of the colored race.”⁷⁵ For Emerson, and many other missionaries, poor and uneducated women in the Black Belt were central to the community’s problems.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 60-61.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 60.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 60-61.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 60.

Emerson's conclusions about the inner character of poor southern black women who lived in one-room log cabins was by no means an uncommon attitude. In the era of Redemption, white southerners drew on images of the hypersexual black male rapist and the sexually deviant and morally criminal black woman in arguments that romanticized slavery and justified segregation. Many of these arguments about the depraved nature of black womanhood looked to the one-room log cabins of freedwomen as evidence. "Whatever the burden and wrongs of slavery, and they were great an many," wrote Eleanor Tayleur, a southern white woman, "it at least gave the negro woman a home in which she was sure of food and warmth and privacy; and when within the four walls of her cabin... she was truly and completely mistress of her home as the chatelaine of her castle."⁷⁶ Steeped in 'Lost Cause' mythology that romanticized the 'Old South' and slavery as a benevolent institution, Tayleur's flawed memory crystallized in her argument that "[s]o much was the slave's unquestionable right."⁷⁷ The pretence that slave women exercised any rights within the system was a testament to how deeply engrained these mythologies around slavery were in the imagination of white southerners. Tayleur erased the fact that enslaved women were neither protected nor able to exercise full autonomy within the domain of the slave cabin, just as they were denied this privilege in the field or the plantation household.

According to Tayleur, poverty in freedom generated conditions that were worse than slavery. She used the one-room log cabin that most black families lived in to illuminate this point. "[B]ut now, when the negro must pay rent for the roof that shelters him, whole herds of them crowd together in a single room, like rabbits in a warren, without regard to age or sex or consanguinity. Under such conditions all privacy, or even

⁷⁶ Eleanor Tayleur, "The Negro Woman – Social and Moral Decadence," *The Outlook* 30 (January - April, 1904): 267.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

decency, is impossible,” she wrote.⁷⁸ For Tayleur, freedwomen suffered morally because of their economic destitution – an issue, she inferred, that was non-existent under the system of slavery. Moreover, freedwomen were no longer exposed to the ‘moral education’ of southern white mistresses as they were in slavery. Thus, domesticity and feminine virtue among black women, Tayleur believed, could only be acquired under the influence of white women. “Another reason for the decadence of the negro woman is that she no longer has the uplift of close personal association with white women,” she proclaimed.⁷⁹ This was another myth of the Old South that white southern women especially reinforced. It was the kind of myth of affinity between slave women and their mistresses that gave way to the powerful image of the Mammy stereotype.⁸⁰ “The modern negro woman has no such object-lesson in morality or morals or modesty, and she wants none,” Tayleur concluded, “She hates the white woman with a hatred born of hopeless envy, and her most exquisite pleasure is in insulting her with childlike brutality.”⁸¹ By putting southern white women at the epicentre of morality and feminine virtue, Tayleur argued that African American women lost their ability to conform to notions of respectability and domesticity the moment that they assumed freedom and self-determination.

Tayleur’s thought joined a tradition of white southerners who became embroiled in ‘Lost Cause’ mythology and ‘retrogressionist’ ideology in the post-Reconstruction

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Tayleur also wrote, “Gone, also, are the old black mammies on whose broad breasts childish sorrows sobbed themselves to sleep and broken baby hearts were mended.” See Tayleur, “The Negro Woman,” 268. Black feminist historians have debunked the myth of sisterhood between enslaved women and their mistresses, showing mistresses investment in the management of slaves and the violence of slavery. See Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University, 2008) and Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Here Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

⁸¹ Tayleur, “The Negro Woman,” 268.

years.⁸² Fifteen years earlier than Tayleur's article, the historian Philip A. Bruce had argued that slavery was a positive force of moral supervision that suppressed the natural sexual urges of black women and men. "Although the institution of slavery did nothing to raise the dignity of marriage or to improve the relations of the sexes," he wrote, "it restricted illicit commerce among the negroes in some measure, because it restrained their general conduct."⁸³ Without slavery, Bruce argued that freedwomen and freedmen succumbed to their debased and loose sexual inclinations. This was evident in the black family structure, Bruce maintained. "Chastity is a virtue which the parents do not seem anxious to foster and guard in their daughter," Bruce added, "she has no abiding sense of personal purity in consequence, and the anticipation of the possible consequences of indiscretion does not appear to intervene to influence her to be circumspect in her behavior."⁸⁴ As historian Dorothy Roberts explains, this long thread of thought supported the logic of other southern white men, like Howard Odum, who later "attributed Blacks' poor home life partly to the sexual and domestic laxity of Black mothers."⁸⁵

Assessments that connected poor African American women's immorality and sexual impurity to the one-room log cabin in the post-Reconstruction years were not exclusive to white observers. In a travel account titled, 'California Way Gleanings' appearing in *The Christian Recorder* in 1883, Bishop H. M. Turner of the African Methodist Episcopal church, reflected on his observations during a trip west from Atlanta. As his train passed through Kansas, he described the contrasting living conditions of the black

⁸² As historian Dorothy Roberts argues, Bruce's book reflected the "retrogressionist" ideology of time" where the "moral discipline imposed by the slave master" controlled the instinct of African Americans. See Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 11.

⁸³ Phillip A. Bruce, *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman: Observations of His Character, Condition, and Prospects in Virginia* (New York and London: The Knickerbocker Press, 1889), 17.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁵ Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 12.

communities he saw. “Several of their dwellings were really handsome and comfortable, with splendid gardens and beautiful flowers in front,” he wrote, “while ladies and children cleanly attired, graced the front verandas and ornamented civilization.”⁸⁶

Material signs of bourgeois achievements in Turner’s view mirrored the moral and social advancements and upward mobility of African Americans since Emancipation. Yet, he did not hesitate to draw harsh critical attention to those black women who he believed held the black community back. He continued:

But, O, heavens, it would not continue! Yonder site a woman – no, not a woman – a female, rather a she, with dirty face, knotted hair, filthy children, nasty door steps, no fence around the hut, no garden, no flowers, even the weeds trampled down, no chickens, geese, turkeys, ducks, hogs – nothing but a half-starved dog... I am in favor of forming vigilant committees whose business it will be to flog all such specimens of our race.”⁸⁷

Stripping these women from the presumed honor of being referred to as a woman, Turner highlighted what he saw as the moral and sexual failings of this class. Tying their material conditions to their inner qualities, he made an association that was common among middle-class and elite African Americans and whites. Rather than sympathize with their poverty, Turner effectively blamed these women for bringing down the public image of black womanhood. To be sure, he was critical of the fact that white society focused their judgement of all black women on the most impoverished women. But he equally showed his disdain towards poor black women. “[T]hese dirty women would quarrel as hard about their husbands not loving them, as if they were fit for the love of a brute,” he continued. “I do not believe their own dogs love them, yet these are the creatures all our wives and daughters have to be estimated by, especially when we are represented in any of the illustrated papers of the land.”⁸⁸ In Turner’s observation, the

⁸⁶ H. M. Turner, D.D., LL. D., Bishop of the Eighth Episcopal District A.M.E. Church, “California Way Gleanings,” *The Christian Recorder* (October 11, 1885).

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

home environment of the former slave hut and the appearance of children were all markers of the low quality of black womanhood evident among the poor.

Other African American men were more nuanced in their assessment of the perceived sexual problem and moral failings of poor freedwomen. In his 1883 tract, 'Black Woman of the South,' the black leader and clergyman Alexander Crummell lamented the "hereditary degradation" of many African Americans.⁸⁹ He argued that while freedom brought advantages to African American men, it left African American women in a "prostrate" state.⁹⁰ Crummell's point rested in the impact that slavery had on black womanhood. In effect, he juxtaposed the agency of slave women with their victimization. "From her childhood she was the doomed victim of the grossest passions," he wrote. "All the virtues of her sex were utterly ignored. If the instinct of chastity asserted itself, then she had to fight like a tigress for the ownership and possession of her own person; and, oftentimes, had to suffer pains and lacerations for her virtuous self-assertion."⁹¹ For Crummell, the brutality of slavery was ingrained in the social and moral conduct of freedwomen. Thus, it was necessary, he argued, to teach them self-respect, Christian morality and domesticity. Like many African American leaders, Crummell believed that the race's future rested in the vitality of its womanhood – a womanhood that to many of them was submerged in a moral and sexual crisis.

To be sure, African American women from the South pushed back on challenges to their chastity and womanhood. As a young woman, Ida B. Wells made a point to confront a black minister after he questioned her virtue. "I told him that my good name was all that I had in the world, and that I was bound to protect it from attack by those who felt that they could do so with impunity because I had no brother or father to protect it

⁸⁹ Rev. Alexander Crummell D. D., *The Black of the South: Her Neglects and Her Needs* (Cincinnati, OH: Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Episcopal Church, 1883), 106. (Emphasis in original).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

for me,” she stated.⁹² Like other black women, Wells brought attention to the sexual vulnerability of southern black women and the absence of black men as protectors. She was also profoundly concerned with the negative public image of southern black womanhood and was committed to correcting it. “I also wanted him to know that virtue was not at all a matter of the section in which one lived,” she continued, “that many a slave woman had fought and died rather than yield to the pressure and temptations to which she was subjected. I heard many such and I wanted him to know at least one southern girl, born and bred, who had tried to keep herself spotless and morally clean as my slave mother had taught me.”⁹³ Debunking the assumption that middle-class status was the prerequisite of good Christian moral character, Wells highlighted with pride that her sense of respectability, feminine virtue and moral education came from her enslaved mother.

The educator and activist Anna Julia Cooper also called out the observations of leading African American men on the sexual character of southern black women. Like Wells, she shifted attention from the perceived moral failings of southern black women and girls, and instead focused on their vulnerability in the absence of black male protectors. “I have no patience with that chronic complaint among us of dwelling on the horrors of slavery and fostering hatred between the races for no other reason than to play the orator and finger the keys of passion,” she stated.⁹⁴ Instead, she insisted that the “instincts of our girls are not low.”⁹⁵ Acknowledging the perennial threat that southern white men posed on vulnerable black women and girls, Cooper emphasized that general

⁹² Alfreda M. Duster, ed., *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 44.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Anna Julia Cooper, “A Plea for our Girls. --- Read before the Sunday School of the Holy Trinity, at Wilberforce University, on Children’s Day, ’85, By Mrs. A. J. Cooper,” *The Christian Recorder* (July 9, 1885).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

conditions would be better with guidance, respect and protection of black women *and* men. “Yes; we must have men and women workers,” she affirmed. “[M]en who can let their care and protection extend beyond the circle into which they hope to marry or intend to flirt; men who can be a father, a brother, a friend to every weak and struggling girl.”⁹⁶ Cooper intervened in racial discourse with the gendered argument that strong and reputable black womanhood depended on a strong and reputable black manhood, and vice versa. Yet her call downplayed the harsh reality that black men could be killed for retaliating against the sexual abuse of black women.

In the late nineteenth century, freedwomen were increasingly vilified as sexually and morally corrupt. This widespread attack on black womanhood was part of a host of political challenges emerging in the uncertain and violent period of Reconstruction and Redemption. But the emphasis on the home life of poor black families and the ways that this told a story about the inner character of poor former slave women reveals how the gender ideology of true womanhood figured prominently into the public image of black womanhood. Whereas slave women could not be blamed for their home environment and constraining conditions that shaped their family life, freedwomen could not get away from racist charges against their womanhood. By the time African American clubwomen formally focused on one-room log cabins as an organizational agenda in the 1890s, the belief in the moral and sexual criminality of black womanhood had become steeped in the nation’s public consciousness. Gendered ideologies associating ‘woman’ with ‘home’ contributed to mainstream perceptions of formerly enslaved women. Middle class and educated black clubwomen understood that stereotypes about the sexuality and morality of black were not exclusive to poor, southern black women. These were images that affected how the public viewed all black women. Such public images went beyond words.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

They helped provide a justification for sexual terror and assaults against black women. If black women could secure public recognition of their claims to self-respect, chastity and feminine virtue, many hoped, then sexual insults and abuse could no longer be justified by the argument that black women were sexually available and wanton. Thus, middle-class and educated clubwomen entered one-room log cabin with a drive toward racial and sexual vindication. In this respect, the one-room log cabin became a crucial site of these black women's sexual activism.

Middle Class Black Women, the Home Environment and the Sexual Vindication of Black Womanhood: The One-Room Log Cabin as a Sexual Battlefield

In the 1890s, middle class and educated African American clubwomen rose in defense of black womanhood. Their rise took shape and was inspired by the South's Redemption, when a resurgent white supremacy brought segregation and racial and sexual violence and terror. This climate compelled black leaders to turn inwards to their own communities. Marking a new era of black women's political activism and voice and leadership alongside black men in the project of racial uplift, middle class African American women fought on the dual-fronts of racial justice and women's rights. They joined the temperance, social purity, and suffrage causes, embracing all three as part of their racial uplift activism. As 'New Negro Women,' a term popularized in 1895 by the elite southern clubwoman, Margaret Murray Washington, wife of Booker T. Washington, black clubwomen assumed the responsibility of improving the public image of black womanhood as a matter of sexual self-protection as well as their duty to the race. They directed their attention to the one-room log cabin of the remote, rural, plantation South, where most black families lived in the 1890s. Enlisting dominant middle class ideals of womanhood and domesticity, African American clubwomen subscribed to the belief that the entities of the 'home' and 'woman' were synonymous. As stated earlier, their

intellectual approach to the one-room log cabin was influenced by discourses around social Darwinism and a national social purity movement mobilized by women's rights activists. Emerging in the late nineteenth century, social Darwinism assigned black women a central role in the evolutionary progress, or regression, of the race.⁹⁷ Inspired by a strong belief that 'a race can rise no higher than its women,' middle class black clubwomen were convinced that reforming the home environment of the one-room log cabin and the women who inhabited them was essential to the advancement of the race.⁹⁸ Thus, the one-room log cabin became a site of middle class black clubwomen's gender ideological debates and sexual activism. In this respect, middle-class black women's attack on the one-room log cabin was an offensive tactic of sexual self-defense.

But in selecting a bourgeois strategy for self-defense and sexual protection, middle class and educated black women internalized some of the very sexualized charges around black womanhood that they sought to extinguish. Their campaigns around the one-room log cabin chided the perceived lack of respectable practices among poor, rural freedwomen and called for moral reform. In doing so, they failed to recognize a moral tradition in which slave, fugitive, refugee and poor freedwomen with no formal education asserted their sense of respectability and feminine virtue in their struggle for freedom, justice and sexual autonomy. With many reformers themselves of humble or enslaved backgrounds and origins, this failure to acknowledge an existing ethos within the community revealed their focus on class and education as clear qualifications for moral authority. Defining feminine virtue and respectability as the property of the middle class and educated, middle class African American clubwomen overlooked the moral agency of their poor, rural subjects.

⁹⁷ Bay, "The Battle for Womanhood is the Battle for Race," 88.

⁹⁸ This was a widely popular belief. See White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 43; 63; 181.

The era of the 'New Negro Woman' inherited a long black female activist tradition of abolitionism, racial relief and welfare, self-help, temperance and importantly, a women's movement that straddled dominant middle class ideals of domesticity, chastity and feminine virtue alongside politics. Since Reconstruction, the prominent abolitionist, poet, writer, temperance reformer and political activist, Frances E. W. Harper crusaded throughout the occupied South aiding freed families. Born free in Baltimore, Maryland in 1825, Harper long held a vision that the fate of the enslaved and later freedwomen that she helped was tied to her own future. She made home visits into the log cabins of poor freedwomen, "teaching the duties of wife, motherhood and of good citizenship" to poor freedwomen in the years during and after Reconstruction.⁹⁹ "One of the best and strength safeguards of the home," wrote Harper in 1889 in *The Christian Recorder*, is "in the integrity of its women, and he who undermines that, strikes a fearful blow at the highest and best interest of society." Showing her conviction that woman and home was synonymous, and that women were the gatekeepers of racial progress, Harper demand public respect for black womanhood. In doing so, she insisted on the moral duty of poor freedwomen to their race and fiercely critiqued those who got in the way of black feminine virtue.

Harper's critical literary voice addressed white men and women as well as black men. The men who undermined the integrity of black women referred to southern white men who viewed black women as sexually available as much as it sent a message to black men. Harper turned the argument for segregation on its head, showing that white men who disrespected the sexual integrity of black women acted against their own professed interest in a racially pure, civilized society. Combining traditional Victorian ideals of womanhood with a new era of women's political consciousness, Harper asserted,

⁹⁹ Miss Hallie Q. Brown, *Our Women: Past, Present and Future* (Wilberforce, OH: n.p., 1925), 4.

“Society is woman’s realms [sic] and I never could understand how, if a woman really loves purity for its own worth and loveliness, she can socially tolerate men whose lives are a shame, and whose conduct in society is a blasting, withering curse.”¹⁰⁰ In a line, Harper called out the hypocrisy of white women. Fortifying her conviction that the highest moral potential rested in the doctrine of social purity, Harper highlighted the promises of a true black womanhood. The problems among black women, Harper argued, was not because they didn’t possess the virtues that white women were presumably awakened to. It was simply that “They were not conscious of the influence they might exert by being true to their own womanhood.”¹⁰¹

As the leading African American voice of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, with the title of ‘Superintendent of Work Among the Colored People,’ Harper’s work repeatedly drew from the mainstream and powerful temperance and social purity movements. Mobilized by middle-class white women’s rights activists and temperance leaders such as Susan B. Anthony and Frances E. Willard, the social purity movement was a female-focused moral crusade. Purity activists lobbied for increased sexual protection for vulnerable women and girls, fought to banish regulated prostitution, and preached widely about the necessity of establishing a single moral standard between the sexes. The white women of the social purity movement enlisted the language of Victorian womanhood to argue that their moral authority qualified their entry into the masculinized world of politics and the public. They framed the social purity movement – much like its closely linked temperance movement – as an essential social housekeeping movement. African American clubwomen established coalitions with the temperance and social purity movements. Like Harper, they participated in these movements to meet the unique needs of their own communities. The chastity and virtue of black women and

¹⁰⁰ Mrs. F. E. W. Harper, “Trial and Triumph. Chapter XVI,” *The Christian Recorder* (January 24, 1889).

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

girls, as figures like Harper identified, was tied to the future survival, regeneration and destiny of the race.¹⁰²

For African American clubwomen, reforming the one-room log cabin was not just a matter of improving the lives and morals of its inhabitants. It was a strategy for debunking pervasive and demoralizing public charges against the sexuality and virtue of black women. While clubwomen understood the one-room log cabin as an impoverished environment that fostered disease with its unsanitary environment and poor ventilation and light, they particularly emphasized the fact that black families could not conform to the dictates of middle class respectability within the one-room log cabin. With no partitions for privacy, black clubwomen believed the one-room log cabin was a dangerously immoral space.

Accordingly, in a speech delivered in 1895, Washington publically declared a war against the one-room log cabin. “Look for a moment into a log cabin in Alabama,” she implored. “There is only one-room, 12 BY 10, with a little hole in the side for a window, which is winter time is kept tightly closed. In this hut live the father and the mother, and in here eight or ten children are born and reared and die. I draw the curtain.”¹⁰³

Washington’s virtual tour of the living conditions of black families inferred to sexual promiscuity and an inappropriate family structure by middle class standards. Linking the notion that ‘a race can rise no higher than its women’ with dominant gendered ideals of bourgeois respectability, Washington affirmed that “it is with the struggle to uplift the negro woman [that] there is a starting point, and this I believe to be the home. The two words, home and woman, are so closely connected that I could not, even if I desired,

¹⁰² See Frances E. W. Harper, *Enlightened Motherhood: An Address by Mrs. Frances E. W. Harper Before the Brooklyn Literary Society in A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, ed., Frances Smith Foster (New York: Feminist Press, 1990), 285 and “Mrs. Harper’s Report,” *New Haven Register* (21 November 1894), 4.

¹⁰³ Washington, “The New Negro Woman,” 56.

separate one from the other.”¹⁰⁴ For many black clubwomen the site of the one-room log cabin endangered bourgeois, chaste and respectable Christian family life.

The ‘New Negro Woman’ ideal promoted by Washington and other clubwomen during the 1890s signalled a departure from a demoralized image of black womanhood rooted in the legacy of slavery. The figure promised a redefinition of the black womanhood; one that demanded participation in politics and the respect of men in public and intimate affairs.¹⁰⁵ This image was of a self-respecting, dignified, virtuous and sexually-self-sovereign – ideas considered antithetical to an enslaved womanhood. But this figure was not unproblematic in its assessment of women who stood outside this ideals for reasons beyond their control; for Washington and many other middle-class and educated clubwomen, poor women who lived in one-room log cabins were “inferior” and could not be blamed for their “ignorance.”¹⁰⁶ She argued that poor, rural black women needed lessons in “clean and pure habits of everyday life in the home.”¹⁰⁷¹⁰⁸ Self-respect, she added, would earn black women “the respect of others.”¹⁰⁹ Washington urged African American women who had the “opportunity to improve and develop themselves mentally, physically, morally, spiritually, and financially” should teach poor southern women with no formal education “the responsibility of womanhood, wifehood [and] citizenship.”¹¹⁰ In defining respectability and feminine virtue as characteristics that were exclusive to middle-class- and educated-status, Washington’s and other clubwomen’s understanding of the ‘New Negro Woman’ cut ties from a moral tradition

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ See Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹⁰⁶ Washington, “The New Negro Woman,” 56.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

in the community of slave, fugitive, contraband and freedwomen with no formal education.

Washington's position on poor, rural freedwomen and their home environment of the one-room log cabin was dominant in the community of middle class and educated black clubwomen. They agreed that the one-room log cabin symbolized racial subjugation and was a central hindrance to racial progress. Many derided one-room log cabins, an architectural legacy of the living conditions of slaves, with intense, raw emotion. Rosa Morehead Bass, a social purity activist and social researcher described them as "a piece of architecture that soon will be relegated to the barbarous past. Peace be it to ashes!"¹¹¹ Measuring the average cabin's dimensions, she added: "a pine torch illumines the room that serves as a kitchen, dining-room bed and bath-room."¹¹² Like freedmen's aid reformers and missionaries that preceded them, African American clubwomen interpreted a legacy of moral and sexual degeneracy in the material structure of the impoverished one-room log cabin. The major distinction between these clubwomen and their predominantly Northern and white predecessors is that the symbolism of the one-room log cabin left a stamp on their own womanhood.

There were a few clubwomen who pushed back on the implications of vilifying poor black women in the name of racial uplift. At the first annual meeting of the National Federation of Afro-American Women in Washington D.C. in 1896, Rosetta Douglass Sprague was one of the few detractors.¹¹³ She critiqued her contemporaries for

¹¹¹ Mrs Rosa Morehead Bass, "Poverty as a Cause of Mortality" in *Mortality Among Negroes in Cities. Proceedings of the Conference for the Investigation of City Problems held at Atlanta University, May 26-27, 1896*, ed., William Edward Burghart DuBois (Atlanta, GA: Atlanta University Press, 1896). 30. *The Atlanta University Publications, Nos 1, 2, 4, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18*, (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1968), 30.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ This important meeting of elite black community leaders, educators, temperance reformers, ministers and clubwomen at the historic 19th Street Baptist Church set the resolution for the establishment of the National Association for Colored Women, founded in 1896. The NACW was

their dismissal of the moral agency of poor rural black women. “From the log cabins of the South have come forth some of our most heroic women, whose words, acts and deeds are a stimulus to us at this hour,” she stated. “We have such women by the score, women in whose hearts philanthropic impulses have burned with ardor... Women who have suffered death rather than be robbed of their virtue. Women who have endured untold misery for the betterment of the condition of their brothers and sisters.”¹¹⁴ In a tribute to “our most heroic women,” the daughter of the late black leader, Frederick Douglass, critiqued the bourgeois attitudes and methods of her peers, suggesting that ideas of black womanhood itself had become an area of gender and class tension and generational amnesia.

At a conference where Washington served as president, Sprague insisted that her peers acknowledge the formerly enslaved, poor and uneducated black women as their moral forebears. She invoked the names of celebrated, infamous and controversial black women, emphasizing the fact that these women made moral choices within context of their own violation and degradation. “Margaret Garner, Sojourner Truth and our venerable friend, Harriet Tubman,” Sprague argued, “hold no insignificant place in the annals of heroic womanhood.”¹¹⁵ She explicitly honored a lineage of black women whose lives punctured the very conventions of respectable womanhood and motherhood that her fellow clubwomen like Washington idealized. Garner infamously committed infanticide to protect her children from re-enslavement. Abolitionist and suffragist, Truth famously revealed her breast in what can be described as a powerful black feminist corporeal performance. The embodiment of the popular abolitionist slogan, ‘Am I not a

the result of the merger of the National Federation of Afro-American Women and the Colored Women’s League. It was the first and largest national organization of black clubwomen.

¹¹⁴ “Morning Session” in “First Annual Convention of the National Federation of Afro-American Women,” July 20, 1896, *Records of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (1895-1992)*, 36-37. Hereafter referred to as *Records of the NACW*.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

Woman and a Sister,' Truth insisted that justice for black women rested at the intersection of black civil rights and women's rights.¹¹⁶ And Tubman, the iconic and revered conductor on the underground railroad, fearlessly transgressed the line between femininity and masculinity through espionage, gun-toting and militarized struggle. Neither of these women conformed to the conventions of respectable, bourgeois womanhood and motherhood that Washington and her peers swore by.

The fugitive slaves that made up the catalogue of Sprague's heroic womanhood were neither formally educated nor raised in middle-class homes. The physical dimensions of the one-room log cabin did not preclude Sprague's heroines from envisioning themselves as virtuous, moral and sexually self-sovereign. These women were not exceptional either, Sprague maintained. "These and many more than I could name whose strength of character is an example to us, are from the log cabins of the south."¹¹⁷ Seeking solace and inspiration in the moral labor and education of her formerly enslaved female forebears, Sprague criticized her peers for undermining the legitimacy of their moral heritage.

Sprague's attitude regarding the 'New Negro Woman' vis-à-vis poor, uneducated women who lived in one-room log cabin was about approach rather than goal. She spoke to an urgent, concrete need that required a careful and intentional strategy. She listed demands that demonstrated her harmony with the consensus of racial uplift aims that her colleagues aspired towards. "Our wants are numerous," she stated. "We want homes in

¹¹⁶ The 1837 engraving of female slave kneeling with the expression, "Am I Not a Woman and a Sister" became a motto of the abolitionist and women's rights movement. It was a "feminization of the motto 'Am I not a man and a brother' coined by the abolitionist and pottery manufacturer Josiah Wedgwood," as historian Claire Midgley writes. For discussions of the intersection of women's rights and abolitionism, as well as the limits of this movement, see Kathryn Kish Sklar and James Brewer, eds., *Women's Rights and Transatlantic Slavery in the Era of Emancipation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). See also Claire Midgley, "British Abolition and Feminism in Transatlantic Perspective," in *Women's Rights and Transatlantic Slavery in the Era of Emancipation*, 134.

¹¹⁷ *Records of the NACW*, 37.

which purity can be taught, not hovels that are police-feeders.” She spoke with conviction about the dangers of gambling dens and pool rooms and insisted that young girls and boys learn a trade. Committed to carving a space for black women alongside black men at the forefront of the battlefield of antiracism and racial uplift, she commanded: “Our progress depends on the united strength of both men and women – the women alone nor the man alone cannot do the work. We have so fully realized that fact by witnessing the work of our men with the women in the rear. This is indeed woman’s era, and we are coming.”¹¹⁸ For Sprague, empathy for the plight of poor black women that required economic support and social reform could coexist with acknowledging their moral agency and struggle to protect their virtue and dignity as slaves.

For other middle class black clubwomen, the work of reforming the one-room log cabin home environment of former slaves was a ‘Burden of the Educated Colored Woman.’ “There is no greater enemy of the race than these untidy and filthy homes,” wrote the pioneering educator and Atlanta University graduate, Lucy Craft Laney in 1899, “they bring not only physical disease and death, but they are very incubators of sin; they bring intellectual and moral death.”¹¹⁹ Using language that was common in discourses of social Darwinism and eugenics, Laney blamed the institution of slavery for creating a culture of moral and intellectual depravity among African Americans. She identified the origins of this debased culture squarely within the home. “In the old institution there was no attention given to homes and to home-making. Homes were only places in which to sleep, father had neither responsibility nor influence. The character of their children was a matter of no concern to them; surroundings were not

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Lucy Craft Laney, “The Burden of the Educated Colored Woman,” *The Southern Workman and Hampton School Record* 28 (January, 1899): 342.

considered,” she stated.¹²⁰ Ideas of the interlocking influences of race, hereditary and the home environment were common in the largely racial worldview of the turn of the twentieth century.¹²¹ Though Laney believed that the duty before her was a burden, she devoted her life work to the task of educating the black community. Like many middle class black reformers, Laney hoped that teaching black families to conform to the dictates of middle class respectability would reduce white racism. “Ignorance and immorality, if they are not the prime causes, have certainly intensified prejudice” she continued. “The forces to lighten and finally to lift this and all of these burdens are true culture and character.”¹²²

The notion that African Americans could escape racism through the adoption of mainstream middle class practices arose at least in part out of the frustration that middle class black women felt about the widespread vilification of the sexual and moral character of black women. Alongside their strategies of racial uplift, middle class black woman engaged in a ‘politics of respectability’ that subverted white charges of black inferiority in class, intellect, culture and spirituality. Emphasizing class differences was important for middle class and educated African Americans. For, an expanded middle class and educated class showcased racial progress since emancipation.¹²³ As Washington stated, “[Y]ou can no more find the ‘average’ negro woman then you can multiply eggs by their treaties. Just as eggs are different from treaties, so good negro women are different from bad negro women, and no average can be struck.”¹²⁴ Whether successful or a failure, or both, black women’s conservative and subversive strategy of a

¹²⁰ Ibid., 342.

¹²¹ See Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Discontent: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

¹²² Laney, “The Burden of the Educated Colored Woman,” 343.

¹²³ See Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

¹²⁴ Mrs. Booker T. Washington, “The Gain in the Life of Negro Women,” *The Outlook* 76 (January - April, 1904): 271.

‘politics of respectability’ erased previous traditions of feminine virtue and respectability in the poor, uneducated former slave community because of its emphasis on class differences.

The differing attitudes of Washington, Sprague and Laney towards poor, rural freedwomen show the powerful symbolism of the one-room log cabin in African American life by the turn of the twentieth century. These overlapping and varying positions also demonstrate that middle class black women’s thought existed along a spectrum. Nonetheless, they joined in their conviction that reforming the one-room log cabin was an essential duty to improve the public image of black womanhood; protect black women from sexual violence and insults; and position black women at the center of future racial progress.

Entering the One-Room Log Cabin: Interactions Between Middle Class Black Clubwomen and Poor, Rural Black Women in the Turn of the Twentieth Century South

From the 1890s, middle class and educated African American women built campaigns around one-room log cabins through schools, home visits, town-center meetings, and regional major conferences. Middle class educators, such as Cornelia Bowen, erected schools on or near plantation settlements, and offered lessons in domestic science alongside basic literacy for their poor female neighbors. The Tuskegee Women’s Club (TWC) founded in 1895 by Margaret Murray Washington organized reform initiatives across remote, plantation settlements and regions in Alabama. Through home visits and weekly town-center meetings, also known as Mothers’ Meetings, TWC women offered lessons in domesticity, cleanliness, motherhood, wifhood and feminine virtue to poor women who lived in one-room log cabins. The turn of the twentieth

century also saw the emergence of a host ‘Negro conferences’ at black colleges and universities. These conferences brought the poor, predominantly rural and non- and semi-literate black public together with elite community leaders, educators and reformers. The hub and energy of these ‘Negro conferences’ revolved around the Tuskegee Institute, the Hampton Institute, and Atlanta University. Poor black women who lived in one-room log cabins readily travelled far distances to have their voices heard before a segregated black public.

For most middle class and educated clubwomen, campaigns to eradicate the one-room log cabin was at its core a matter of morally uplifting poor black womanhood. This goal was indivisible from the strategy of inculcating what they understood as the distinctly bourgeois values of domesticity, chastity, and virtuous motherhood and wifehood. Poor women who lived in one-room log cabins often sought and welcomed reform from another angle. Like their middle-class counterparts, they valued education and generally seized opportunities to enrol themselves and their children into newly constructed schools. They also attended town meetings and major conferences in large numbers. But poor black women’s desires to enlarge, extend or eradicate the one-room log cabin was more about issues related to autonomy, improving their overall quality of life, and their ability to be thrifty, as well as protection from intimate partner violence. Rather than an urgent moral crusade to scrub sexual degeneracy from uneducated and poor women’s homes, as middle class clubwomen professed, poor black women saw log cabin reform as an opportunity to expand and realize their existing ideals of feminine virtue and autonomy.

Black female college graduates provided the muscle of the one-room log cabin movement. Trained at black Normal Schools and Seminaries – focused on training teachers – their education was directly tied to the gendered project of racial uplift.

Through rigorous studies, college-educated black women conducted sociological surveys and delivered reports that tracked the material and moral progress of Black Belt communities. Through home visits, clubwomen inspected the most intimate environment of their subjects. They determined household-size and drew conclusions about the lifestyle of log cabin dwellers. They assessed the level of sanitation and hygiene in cabins, gathered statistics on child mortality, probed questions about sleeping arrangements and inquired into family relations. Thus, they strategized around best practices, determining the fastest way that poor black families could acquire land.

For example, in the 1890s a *New York Times* article celebrated the ingenuity of “a young colored woman from Atlanta, a graduate of Spelman Seminary” who accomplished “wonderful things” while teaching in a remote rural district in Mississippi.¹²⁵ Written by P. Butler Thomkins, the article conveyed the story in the words of Mrs. William Scott, a black lecturer, reformer and member of the American Baptist Home Missionary.¹²⁶ Upon arrival in this remote district, the unnamed Spelman graduate found poor people living in “wretched shanties, with not enough clothes to cover their nakedness.”¹²⁷ They were steeped in the debt through the crop-lien system. “Their crops and their mules and even their shanties were mortgaged, and they paid 33 per cent interest,” added the article.¹²⁸ The teacher introduced a strategy to help assist her students and their families out of deep debt. First, she instructed that they stop making store orders. Next, she followed up with the introduction of ‘Hog Society’ where the only requirement for members was that they own a hog.¹²⁹ “There was a great hustling among

¹²⁵ P. Butler Thomkins, “Education of Negroes” (1899), reprinted in *Race and Racism in the United States: An Encyclopedia of the American Mosaic*, eds., Charles Gallagher and Cameron D. Lippard (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2014), 396.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

those negroes to get hogs,” described Scott. “After a little they all had hogs, but the teacher gave most honor to the negroes who had the most hogs, and in this way she filled her people with ambition,” she added.¹³⁰ As part of her effort to inspire poor freedwomen and freedmen, the Spelman graduate used comparisons to white society and the customs of middle-class white people. “The white folks are high-toned people and they have all kinds of high-toned societies. You must have a society too,” declared the graduate. Using class-based language and white social customs as a model of success, this graduate revealed how middle-class black reformers adopted mainstream cultural values and applied them to the black community as a measure of success. As a measure of morality and respectability, this very strategy undermined the moral agency and desires for feminine virtue of poor freedwomen.

The work of the Spelman graduate showed that poor black men and women readily seized opportunities to improve their economic condition and home. But her perspective was steeped in middle class assumptions about poor black women’s lives. She noted that poor log cabin women became inspired for “better things” after she visited their homes and “introduced cleanliness and order into their cabins.”¹³¹ “To-day,” continued Scott in conveying the story of the Spelman graduate, “every negro family in that locality owns a three-room house and from twenty to sixty acres of land.”¹³² As middle class clubwomen agreed, the most urgent and central solution to eradicating the one-room log cabin rested in adding an additional room or a partitioned-extension to the structure. While far from ideal, a two-room home greatly raised the moral and sexual respectability of a family.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

“If I have ever been of any service to my people,” recalled Cornelia Bowen, a Tuskegee graduate in an expression of gratitude, “I owe it all to Mr. Washington and to one of the noblest women that ever lived, Mrs. Booker T. Washington, nee Davidson, both of whom indelibly impressed upon me while attending the Tuskegee Institute those lessons which led me to want to spend myself in the helping of my people.”¹³³ Founded in a single-room building, Bowen’s Mount Meigs Colored Institute was the one of the first reform schools of its kind in Alabama. “I found at Mt. Meigs, after studiously investigating conditions, that the outlook for support was far from hopeful,” reported Bowen. “Not one person in the whole community owned a foot of land, and heavy crop mortgages were the burden of every farmer. It became evident at once that pioneer work was very much needed. Homes were neglected, and the sacredness of family life was unknown to most of the people. The prospect was a gloomy one.”¹³⁴ Bowen believed that “a school planted among the people in the rural districts of the South” was crucial to fostering community uplift.¹³⁵ The Mt. Meigs Institute offered lessons in reading, writing, sewing, ironing and other forms of domestic science. Instructing black men and women on farming, the Mt. Meigs Institute showed its commitment to building a class of honest, respectable, thrifty, self-sufficient farmers and small landowners.¹³⁶ In other words, this vision consisted of a class of morally upright, responsible and self-determined Christian citizens. And inculcating gendered notions of respectability, domesticity and virtuous motherhood was essential to this goal. “I am pleased with the progress the people have made. Many now own their own homes, and eight and ten persons are no longer content to sleep in one-room log cabins, as was too true during the earlier years of my work,”

¹³³ Cornelia Bowen, “Woman’s Work” in *Tuskegee and Its People: Their Ideals and Achievements*, ed., Booker T. Washington (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905), 222. For the language of “impressibility” in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, see Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

¹³⁴ Bowen, “Woman’s Work,” 218.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

added Bowen. “I have regularly had “mothers’ meetings,” and these have raised the home life of the people to a higher standard. I know what I am saying when I state that sacred family ties are respected and appreciated as never before in this immediate region.”¹³⁷ Like many of her peers, Bowen approached Mt. Meigs from the assumption that the existing community did not have existing values around sexual respectability and feminine virtue. Identifying these values as distinctly bourgeois, Bowen believed that her educational and missionary work introduced these values to a non-the-wiser poor freed community.

But snippets of evidence of interactions between log cabin dwellers and newly-constructed schools in remote regions show that log cabin women held their own moral values, and sometimes viewed the programs at these schools with suspicion. At the Snow Hill Normal and Industrial Institute in Alabama, Dr. William J. Edwards wrote indignantly about parents who protested the vocational training of these schools, arguing that teachers were putting their children to ‘work’ as opposed to giving them an education. “[T]hese people believed that the end of education was to free their children from manual labor rather than prepare them for more and better work,” a frustrated Edwards wrote. “When the school was started, many of the parents came to the school and forbade out “working” their children, stating as their objection that their children had been working all their lives, and they did not mean to send them to school to learn to work.”¹³⁸ Edwards attributed the actions of poor log cabin parents on ignorance. But their actions might be better interpreted as a desire to protect their children from exploitative labor conditions. This likelihood contradicted the assumption that poor black mothers carelessly neglected their children.¹³⁹ Black mothers and father instead

¹³⁷ Ibid., 221.

¹³⁸ W. J. Edwards, “Uplifting the Submerged Masses” in *Tuskegee and Its People*, 246.

¹³⁹ See Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*.

held a clear vision of freedom for their children that included going to school, not work. As part of their protests, poor black parents withdrew their children from the Snow Hill Institute. “Not only did they forbid our having their children work, but many took their children out of school rather than have them do so,” added Edwards.¹⁴⁰ Like the enslaved women who preceded them, poor women who lived in the debased environment of the one-room log cabin took their role as mothers and protectors seriously.

Like the leader of the Mt. Meigs Institute, educators at the Snow Hill Institute “waged a ceaseless war upon the one-room log-cabin home.”¹⁴¹ They organized community meetings where attendees reported on their progress in saving enough money to buy additional land or build a second room.¹⁴² Edwards proudly announced that at the first community meeting at Snow Hill, the “one-room log-cabin home was the rule; at our last meeting it had become the exception.”¹⁴³ With this, he added that “This war shall never cease until there is not a one-room log cabin left in this section. The one-room log cabin is a pestilent menace to decent living.”¹⁴⁴ The reality was that the meaning of ‘decent living’ was difficult to pin in an impoverished, racially-hierarchical segregated society where white landowners depended on the cheap labor of an inferior black working-class. That white Southern cultural customs expected black subservience and dependency meant that expressions of black self-respect, autonomy, respectability and self-determination – even through the ‘orderly’ presentation of their homes – could quite readily invite white resentment and violence. Again, the belief on many black

¹⁴⁰ Edwards, “Uplifting the Submerged Masses,” 242-243.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

reformers that performances of middle class values and practices would slay the problem of white racial prejudice and abuse, was a fantasy as much as it was a strategy.

Middle class black women who conducted home visits to one-room log cabin also confronted challenges that undermined the meaning of ‘decent living’ in the turn-of-the-century rural segregated South. For example, black Baptist missionary women who went into cabins to “instruct the mother in cutting, sewing, and the rudiments of housekeeping,” found their efforts largely redundant.¹⁴⁵ They taught “young women” how to “wash, iron, cook” among other general housework as if these lessons were not central to most black women’s labor and livelihood.¹⁴⁶ As former slaves, many of these log cabin women were already skilled in everyday domestic practices. Moreover, as most poor black women worked as domestics and washerwomen in white homes, the ‘rudiments of housekeeping’ was the central point of their employment. If knowing how to wash, iron, cook, cut and sew was part of ‘decent living’ and a virtuous womanhood, motherhood and wifehood, the log cabin women were not as dangerous as reformers portrayed them. Much of the problem of log cabin women’s perceived lack of virtue rested in the fact that poverty and white demands for their labor intervened in their ability to maintain middle class ideals of domesticity. By overlooking, rather than celebrating, poor and working-class black women’s values around feminine virtue and purity, middle class black women failed to dismantle the assumption that morality was the property of those of a middle class and educated status.

¹⁴⁵ Mrs. William Scott, “Has It Paid?” *Baptist Home Mission Monthly* 23-24 (New York City: The American Baptist Home Mission Society, 1901), 116.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.



Fig. 3. Home of Emma Crockett in Livingston, Alabama. An example of a one-room log cabin that was converted into a multi-apartment home. Taken in the 1930s as part of the WPA interviews. Library of Congress.¹⁴⁷

In addition to building schools and conducting home visits, middle class black clubwomen also held public meetings or ‘Mothers’ Meetings’ for log cabin women in local town-centers. For example, on Saturdays, clubwomen affiliated with the TWC solicited ‘country women’ during their trips to the market. Margaret Murray Washington observed that many of these women travelled with their husbands who spent the day trading and talking with other men. During these long hours, Washington saw idle women dipping snuff and smoking.¹⁴⁸ A physically dirty habit mainly associated with men, snuff was seen as especially filthy and non-respectable when consumed by women. Washington also saw mothers holding little children in their arms for extended periods of time. Using an old fire-engine house in the center of town, TWC women sent a boy to reach out to the female community about their Mother’s Meetings. Within a few years,

¹⁴⁷ *Emma Crockett’s House*, Alabama, United States, 1936. Photograph. Library of Congress. Washington D.C. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesnp010092b/> (accessed January 29, 2019).

¹⁴⁸ Mrs. Booker Washington, “Negro Women’s Club Work,” *The Club Woman* 10 (September, 1902), 296.

scores of women traveled as much as 10 miles to attend the TWC's weekly Mothers' Meetings in the town-center.¹⁴⁹

Like the work of home visits and black schools, TWC Mothers' meetings for poor women who lived in log cabins were designed to inculcate respectability, chastity, virtuous motherhood and domesticity. The TWC organized the environment to resemble a home with "simple furniture." There was a stove, some dishes, a bedroom area, and a tin bath tub.¹⁵⁰ "I have had a tin bath tub set in the middle of one room... and show them how they can hang a calico curtain from a hoop above it, or curtain off a corner of a room so that those who live in the house, even if it does only have one room, can have an opportunity to bathe," explained Washington.¹⁵¹ Creating a private space to have a bath was deeply important to the respectable sensibilities of the TWC and Tuskegee reformers. The practice went beyond the matter of ensuring bodily hygiene. As Booker T. Washington wrote in his autobiography, daily baths "not only [kept] the body healthy, but inspir[ed] self-respect and promot[ed] virtue."¹⁵² Teaching poor log cabin women the importance of bathing themselves contradicted the memories of many former slaves whose mothers kept them clean, as discussed in Chapter One. With the help of teachers from the Tuskegee Institute, poor black women received practical lessons from domestic cleanliness and personal hygiene to "proper" bed-making and curtain-hanging. All of these factors intended to install a sense of modesty, self-respect and feminine virtue in poor women – values, that many already held.

Activism within the one-room log cabin symbolized the ways that African American women tied their values of sexual purity and protection to the broader project

¹⁴⁹ Max Bennett Thrasher, *Tuskegee: Its Story and Its Work* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1901), 183.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 183-184.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1901), 58.

of racial uplift. While African American clubwomen taught their rural subjects to aspire toward property-ownership – a core value of racial uplift ideology – the simple goal to live in multi-roomed home proved significant for black female autonomy as well as the outward display of sexual morality and self-respect. With its founding in 1896, the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACW) waged a war against one-room log cabins. The literature of its founding resolution stated:

WHEREAS, to this day there are seen in many of our country communities the one-room log cabin where many live together in an unwholesome atmosphere which is detrimental both morally and physically to the best growth and development of the masses,

Resolved, That as a body of women we do urge upon the teachers and leaders of our race the necessity and importance of mother's meetings, social purity talks and such other agencies as shall most forcibly impress upon the mothers of our race the evil influences generated by the admission of frivolous or obscene books or pictures into their homes.¹⁵³

As the first President of the NACW, Mary Church the prominent southern clubwoman and activist based in Washington D.C. passionately elaborated on this agenda. "Against the one-room log cabin so common in the rural settlements in the South, we have inaugurated a vigorous crusade," she declared in her address on "The Progress of Colored Women."¹⁵⁴ "When families of eight or ten, consisting of men, women and children, are all huddled together in a single apartment, a condition of things found not only in the South, but among our poor all over the land, there is little hope of inculcating morality or modesty."¹⁵⁵ Like the abolitionist reporters that preceded them, clubwomen

¹⁵³ "Report: The National Colored Women's Congress," *The Woman's Era* 2, no. 9 (January, 1896).

¹⁵⁴ Mary Church Terrell, "The Progress of Colored Women" (Washington, D.C.: Smith Brothers, Printers, 1898), 11.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

like Terrell used a language that invoked taboo subjects such as incest without explicitly mentioning it.

Annual 'Negro conferences' organized by the Tuskegee Institute, Hampton Institute and Atlanta University were also sites of middle class black women's log cabin activism. The Tuskegee and Hampton conferences focused mainly on agricultural black life, whereas the Atlanta conferences extended its intellectual territory into urban communities. At Tuskegee and Hampton, proceedings, programs and resolutions reflected Washington's firm Victorian bourgeois belief that economic enterprise was strongly tied to an upright Christian moral character and home. The domestic and social activism of the TWC, directly linked to the Washingtonian philosophy, demonstrated black women's active engagement in the self-help and uplift vision of the Tuskegee Institute and its 'Negro conferences.' Through these conferences, middle class and college-educated black women organized women's conferences that spoke directly to the home life of log cabin women and other female-centered issues.

In large numbers, poor and uneducated log cabin women voluntarily attended these conferences, showing that they also had their own uses for these meeting. Their participation at these conferences showed the ways that a black public sphere shaped reform. Their attendance was also a testament to the fact that they welcomed the general doctrine of racial uplift. Reflecting on the hugely successful outcome of the Tuskegee Negro Farmers' conference in 1895, Helen W. Ludlow, a teacher at Hampton Institute wrote that "nothing short of a cyclone or a blizzard" could prevent the black farmers of Alabama from attending. While the "miracle of a four-inch snowball melting with drenching rains" reduced attendance from around 800 to 600 delegates – a small but not unnoticeable reduction by a quarter –over one hundred among these attendees were

black female farmers or domestics in white homes¹⁵⁶ Attendees arrived with updated reports on the progress of their daily lives and living conditions since the previous conference. Most were equally prepared to listen to the advice of community leaders invited to give addresses as well as assist in drafting new resolutions for the next year. By 1895, Mr. Washington grew accustomed to asking conference attendees the veritable question: “How can we remedy the evils that we can control in our own lives?” Although the Tuskegee conferences were firstly segregated by sex, Washington’s question was an important one as it demonstrated the role of black women alongside black men in the project of racial uplift. While ‘evil’ might have been interpreted as traditionally masculine practices such as drinking alcohol or hanging out in gambling dens, the ‘evil’ that black women need to control in their lives was especially interpreted as sexual.

Middle class and educated black clubwomen approached the Negro conferences with the conviction that “this is preeminent the age of woman.” Through Women’s conferences, women such as Washington and Dr. Halle Tanner Johnson, the first black female physician in Alabama, drafted resolutions on all aspects of women’s lives. This included, firstly, improving the home environment. As one Women’s conference outlined: “We believe that much of the immorality which now exists can be traced to the one-room log cabin.”¹⁵⁷ Other resolutions referred to decreasing the rate of infant mortality through the promotion of “cleanliness, pure air, proper clothing and proper food.”¹⁵⁸ Delegates were also advised to hold their ministers and teachers to a high moral standard; dress in “neat calico or gingham dress of modest color” in place of the homespun dress; raise poultry for eggs and butter and can fruit; and fashion close,

¹⁵⁶ Helen W. Ludlow, “The Fourth Tuskegee Negro Conference,” *The Outlook* 51 (March, 1895), 400.

¹⁵⁷ John Quincy Johnson, *Report of the Fifth Tuskegee Negro Conference, 1896* (Baltimore: Published by the Trustees, 1896), 21.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

healthy relationships with sons and daughters. All the advice coincided with middle class black women's ideals of a virtuous black womanhood.

Indeed, demanding respect and reforming the public image of black womanhood was also at the core of these Women's conferences. "We believe that it depends upon the women as to whether or not we receive the respect of men, especially of our men," one resolution stated. Highlighting intraracial tensions between black women and black men over the public image of black womanhood, Women's conferences address these issues in a forum of educated and elite black women and poor and uneducated black women. As the resolution continued:

Some women are too careless as to the loud manner in which they act on the streets and in other public places, such as churches, railways stations, and the like. Some are unduly familiar with men. We urge that each woman see to it that in the street and in other public places she speak in a quiet tone of voice, that she refrain from spitting on the street, and that she does not at any time act familiarly with men.¹⁵⁹

Criminalizing 'loud manners' as non-respectable and unfeminine behavior, middle class black women sought to inculcate notions of feminine modesty and in some form, submissiveness and dependency, as a weapon of sexual self-protection. This was part of middle class black women's strategy of a public 'politics of respectability.'

Yet, poor and semi-literate women took advantage of the Negro conferences for their own concerns and uses. They raised issues related to landownership, renting, and living in one-room log cabins.¹⁶⁰ At one conference, attendees spent the entire morning outlining their family problems, many of which stemmed from the fact that fourth-fifths of them lived in small, crowded, rented one-room log cabins.¹⁶¹ These living conditions

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Allen Jones, "Improving Rural Life for Blacks: The Tuskegee Negro Farmers' Conference, 1892-1915," *Agricultural History* 65, no. 2 (1991): 108.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

were not only the matter of a lack of privacy and poor sanitation, but seemed designed to keep tenants in a cycle of poverty and destitution. One black woman, who was born in a one-room log cabin, raised this point. She stated that she was “kept poor” the entire time she lived in a one-room log cabin. The woman explained that living in a one-room log cabin prevented her from controlling her own living space and domestic economy. Her lack of privacy, in this sense, related to her ability to be thrifty while living in the log-cabin was the main problem. “Jest as long as I cooked in de room whar ev’rybody sot, dey could see jest how much I had in de oven or de skillet, and dey would *set der* till I put ev’y spec on the table,” she explained.¹⁶² It is not clear who the woman was referring too. The woman testified that she eventually moved into a home with four rooms. The moral aspect of living in the one-room log cabin was less of a concern to this woman than the sense of autonomy and control that cooking in a separate kitchen provided. In short, moving into a home with multiple rooms enabled this woman to be thrifty. “Dey doan see how much I cooks and how much I keeps back now, and dey get no mo dan I chooses to put dar. In dat away, I save heaps o’!”¹⁶³ As demonstrated, some women living in one-room log cabins voiced their desires to adhere to traditionally feminine roles, and shared the difficulty of conforming to these ideals while living in this environment.

At a session at a Woman’s conference poor black female farmers complained about their inability to properly take up the care of their children and homes. They relayed much of the blame on the poor work ethic of their presumably black husbands/partners, as well as the violence they received from these men when they tried to assume their duty as mothers and housewives. One woman stated that “the men won’t let you stray from the field,” and another added that “if you don’t work, they won’t

¹⁶² Victoria Earle Matthews, “Tuskegee Negro Conference,” *The Watchman* (April, 1896), 4.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

work.”¹⁶⁴ In the testimony of a third woman, she confessed that “maybe they’ll take a stick to you.”¹⁶⁵ It was clear that these women welcomed the intervention of middle-class and educated reformers as they strove to improve their home lives. This can be attributed to the fact that ideas of feminine virtue were already part of the community of poor black women.

The New York City-based clubwoman, Victoria Earle Matthews recorded the testimony of a black domestic worker at the fifth Tuskegee ‘Negro Conference.’ Speaking in front of an informal mixed-audience, the woman made “one of the saddest confessions” to Mr. Washington when she explained the toil, burden and domestic violence she lived with (presumably because of her husband/partner). “De men ain’t thinkin’ about makin’ our homes eny better, dey’s too sot on pushin’ us inter white folks kitchens,’ so dey kin git all dey wants to eat wid’out workin’ fer it. While we’s bendin’ over de wash-tub, dey’s off dancin’ and dancin’, an ef we say a word, dey’s ready to knock us in de hade.”¹⁶⁶ These testimonies give some indication of the uses of the ‘Negro conferences’ in the minds of southern poor, female attendees with no formal education. For these black women, it was a space and opportunity to speak about the problems in their lives using black middle-class reformers as mediators in their domestic issues. Black women attendees appealed to gendered ideas of domesticity as a matter of egalitarian labor and bodily protection. They were in active pursuit of establishing an environment where respectability would be a feature in their homes. Like domestic violence and poor home care, thematic issues related to ideals of womanhood surfaced throughout these Negro conferences.

¹⁶⁴ Ludlow, “The Fourth Tuskegee Negro Conference,” 400.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Matthews, “Tuskegee Negro Conference,” 4.

By the early twentieth century, attendees at Negro conferences were accustomed to reporting on the rapid disappearance of one-room log cabins in their respective districts. From Mt. Meigs, a husband and wife reported that “few were contented to live in such a house,” even in cases where children, or additional family members or tenants were present.¹⁶⁷ “If they could do no better, they would build a pole house for an additional room,” the report continued.¹⁶⁸ Another delegate from Warrior Stand proudly proclaimed that “where I lives, you can’t give a man a one-room cabin. We jest goin’ right along.”¹⁶⁹ The notion that living in the one-room log cabin was viewed as offensive reflected the success of the middle class black women’s moral crusade against the one-room log cabin. “No one who has visited these Conferences lives in a one-room house,” added Reverend G. W. Jeter from Cowles Station, “I have had fifteen children, fourteen living, and never lived in a one-room house.”¹⁷⁰ Finally, a young woman stated plainly that families in her community simply left in protest of living in a one-room log cabin. “Where people own land they are apt to have a larger house. The average log cabin costs \$10.00 to \$12.00. Many of the colored people in my section moved away because the white folks would not build them better houses.”¹⁷¹

Conclusion

By the 1890s, the one-room log cabin became a site in which middle class and educated black women sought to reform the public image of black womanhood and defend themselves from sexual slander and assault. The symbolic power of the one-room log cabin in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black community was unique. In

¹⁶⁷ Johnson, *Report of the Fifth Tuskegee Conference*, 13-14.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 14-15.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

the post-Emancipation period, they represented symbols of black community and institution-building. The first black contraband communities, freed communities, school houses, churches, etc., were mainly constructed in old one-room log cabins. Yet for black women by the 1890s, log cabins served as reminders of a legacy of slavery, sexual subjugation and sexual and moral degeneracy.

The work of reformers such as Margaret Murray Washington and Cornelia Bowen demonstrated that middle class black women activism in and around one-room log cabins was crucial to their definition of a new bourgeois, virtuous, and sexually respectable Christian womanhood. They were foremost driven by the desire to reform the public image of black womanhood and protect themselves and their sisters from sexual harassment and abuse. Their strategies of racial uplift were also influenced by an intersection of ideologies and racist theories. They subscribed to social Darwinist thought and reinforced the popular notion that ‘a race can rise no higher than its women.’ The central focus on the one-room log cabin derived from the dominant Victorian bourgeois association between womanhood and the home.

By linking the virtue of black womanhood to the home, African American clubwomen justified their intervention into the one-room log cabin environment. As demonstrated in the ‘Negro Conferences,’ this crusade was largely welcomed by poor and uneducated female farmers. The ‘Negro conferences’ thus represented a dynamic sphere of black self-help, protection, regulation and control. They consisted of mutual exchanges between middle-class and poor black women, even if the former ultimately dictated the narrative. Power dynamics always manifested itself in the fact that these black female reformers ultimately controlled the discourse around race, heredity, environment and sexual purity.

What was largely lost in the exchanges in the lessons taught at Mt Meigs, or Baptist women's home visits, TWC Mothers' Meetings and the 'Negro conferences' was the fact that poor and uneducated black women often already held their own values around respectability and domesticity. They attended conferences and Mothers' Meetings with goals of economic self-determination and protection. This defied the popular narrative that middle-class black clubwomen inadvertently reinforced: that poor, rural southern women were a moral problem. The inability of most middle-class clubwomen to defend the moral agency of poor freedwomen was shaped by an over-determination to draw class lines. In doing so, black clubwomen undermined a moral tradition around respectability and feminine virtue fashioned by their enslaved forebears. Only a few lone voices, such as Rosetta Douglass Sprague and Ida B. Wells, defended this fact.

Chapter 4: “Oh, had I known – had I only staid down home”: Urban Migration and Sexual Protection.

Between 1890 and the years of World War I, thousands of African American women and girls migrated out of the South. With humble origins and backgrounds, many from families that once lived in one-room log cabins, these women migrated due to a variety of push and pull factors, from violence and discrimination in the South to greater economic opportunities in Northernized industries.² Many of these migrants were former farm workers – part the majority of African Americans who became the targets of middle class black women’s moral reform, as discussed in the previous chapter. These migrants often traveled first to Southern cities in pursuit of a better living, but the lack of employment prospects and the system of Southern segregation and violence compelled many to seize the increasing opportunities available in rapidly growing Northern cities.

A part of this movement constituted an escape from sexual harassment and violence in the workplace.³ Outside of farm work, domestic service was one of the very few industries available to black women in a racially segregated and sexist Southern labor market. Domestics faced a variety of exploitative, oppressive and violent working conditions in an industry where the employers were overwhelming white Southerners. Of the most denigrating and dangerous was the normalized and widespread sexual violence and abuse that African American women and girls confronted from Southern white men

¹ Victoria Earle Matthews, “Some of the Dangers Confronting Southern Girls in the North,” reprinted in *We Are Coming: The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women*, ed., Shirley Wilson Logan (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 215.

² Historian Darlene Clark Hine’s work on the intersection of African American migrant women and their unique reasons for leaving the South such as greater sexual safety and autonomy offers a central framework for this chapter. See Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance” in *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History*, Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 37-58.

³ Ibid.

in white family homes. The assumption that African American women were sexually available was part of a long attitude among whites. This included the notion that black women's sexual labor was included in their other forms of labor. The continuation of this pervasive belief, combined with the assumption that African American women were sexually lascivious and inviting, meant that African American women were forced into working conditions similar to their exploitation under slavery. For many black women, the dangers that they faced in the environment of a Southern white family home was much worse than the sexual dangers and problems of their log cabin homes. Leaving the South for growing industrial urban centers such as New York, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Chicago and Washington D.C., working-class black women and girls embarked on an act of sexual protest in defense of their sexual respectability and integrity.

The migration of African American women out of the South was part of a broad national trend of female migration in the early twentieth century. The pulling forces of urbanization, industrialization and a growing consumer culture in Northern cities attracted thousands of young, unmarried women from small, rural towns. Forgoing 'traditional American family life,' they traveled to Northern cities in pursuit of greater autonomy, financial independence and leisure.⁴ The growing numbers of young, unmarried women occupying public space in the urban environment became a source of anxiety for moralist middle class reformers such as social purity activists. Journalists, politicians, reformers and other social commentators lamented the moral decline of American society through narratives of the seduction and ruin of vulnerable women and girls. The sentimental tale of the young white maiden in the city who needed rescuing from a predatory older man became a staple of purity literature and urban politics. With the absence of fathers to protect their virtue, white reformers worried that young white

⁴ See John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

independent wage-earning women faced moral ruin in cities where commercialization and vice formed part of the urban landscape. Racism and cultural and ethnic prejudices exacerbated these fears. A resurgence in nativism led by president Theodore Roosevelt posed the threat of ‘race suicide’ in a period of vast immigration from southern and eastern Europe.⁵ By the late 1900s, accusations of immigrant ‘slum politicians’ at Tammany Hall aiding eastern European Jewish and Italian white slave traders figured prominently in articles and accounts, stirring public debate.⁶

Social purity activists campaigned mainly to regulate and protect the chastity of white girls. At a National Purity Congress in 1895, Aaron M. Powell, a New Yorker and president of the American Purity Alliance declared as “our objects” “the repression of vice, the prevention of its regulation by the State, the better protection of the young [and] the rescue of the fallen.”⁷ The conservative protectionist language of this discourse revealed a deep resentment and frustration towards a new form of female autonomy available to young women, especially in urban areas. Their concerns were about policing female agency as much as they were about real or imagined threats of the new urban environment. As part of their campaigns to support, protect and police female migrants, white reformers established settlement houses and Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) chapters.

Fleeing the segregated South at the turn of the twentieth century, working class African American women and girls participated in a national trend of female migration,

⁵ As historian Gail Bederman explains, the term ‘race suicide’ was first coined in 1901 by sociologist Edward A. Ross, but was quickly absorbed into growing nativist campaigns. See Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 199-201.

⁶ A good example of this account can be found in an article by George Kibbe Turner, titled “The Daughter of the Poor” (1903). See George Kibbe Turner, “The Daughters of the Poor, a Plain Story of the Development of New York City as a Leading Center of the White Slave Trade of the World, under Tammany Hall,” *McClure’s Magazine* 34 (November 1909): 45-61. See also Brian Donovan, *White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender, and Anti-Vice Activism, 1887-1917* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 90-91.

⁷ Aaron M. Powell, “The President’s Opening Address,” in *The National Purity Congress, Its Papers, Addresses, Portraits* (New York: American Purity Alliance, 1896), 1-7.

but their position and concerns, and the sexual dangers that they confronted were markedly different from their white counterparts. Unlike many American white women, many black female migrants either left some form employment or had some experience in the labor market. They pursued greater financial autonomy in cities as women who were already accustomed to laboring outside the confines of the domestic sphere.⁸ Historically denied claims to womanhood, feminine virtue and domesticity, working-class African American women's migration was rarely factored into white panic discourses over the threat of traditional American family life.⁹ As domestics in the racist, sexist and sexually abusive landscape of the segregated South, African American women's concerns about sexual violence in white homes was unique to their race and gender. As working-class African American women left the South, they met new sexual dangers in Northern cities. While sexually exploitative conditions in cities affected black and white women alike, black women and girls were especially vulnerable in part due to longstanding stereotypes that depicted black women as sexually criminal. These images contributed to a racial 'empathy gap' in white reformers' responses to migrant female sexual vulnerability in cities.¹⁰ The fact that white social purity activists raised awareness of the growth of prostitution in urban cities using the language of 'white slavery' shed light on the erasure of the plight of African American women and girls from the agenda of

⁸ Indeed, this was also true of working-class white women. For a comparative study of Irish domestic servants and African American domestics, see Danielle T. Phillips, "Global Formations of Race in Close Quarters: Irish and African American Domestic Workers in New York, 1880-1940," (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, October 2010).

⁹ See Donovan, *White Slave Crusades* for a discussion of the racialized language around these crusades.

¹⁰ Racial empathy gap is a contemporary term that I am employing here.

mainstream reformers.¹¹ The white slavery scare, which peaked between 1910 and 1913, was decidedly racially exclusionary in its rhetorical emphasis and reform focus.¹²

In 1910, the Mann Act, which was known as the White-Slave Traffic Act, was passed. Its ratification marked the ascension of white purity and anti-vice crusaders from the margins of US politics to the center of the Progressive-era state power-structure.¹³ The language of the Mann Act declared the transportation of “any woman or girl for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any other immoral purpose” across the US and internationally a federal crime.¹⁴ Directly largely at black (and immigrant) men, the Mann Act revealed the ways that public panics over black male sexuality, especially interracial sex between black men and white women, contributed to the invisibility of black women as sexual victims. This kind of panic was not uncommon to the phenomenon of lynching that swept the South in response to the mythical black male rapist, while sexual violence against black women at the hands of Southern white men constituted a real problem. The racialized designation of ‘white slave’ as a euphemism for prostitute muted the unique vulnerability of African American women and girls. As historian Jessica R. Pliley explains, “[W]hite slavery was a term that evoked racialized understandings of female vulnerability, prompted vigorous debates about prostitution, rampant sexuality, and urban life, and conjured a particular set of conceptions that

¹¹ There were few white reformers who used their efforts to protect African American women and girls. Frances Kellor is one such example. A pioneering social reformer with interests in immigrant and African American migrant women, Kellor founded the National League for the Protection of Colored Women in 1905 – an agency that later merged with the Committee for the Improvement of Industrial Conditions Among Negroes in New York City to become the National Urban League.

¹² Mara L. Keire, “The Vice Trust: A Reinterpretation of the White Slavery Scare in the United States, 1907-1917,” *Journal of Social History* 35, no. 1 (2001): 5.

¹³ For more on the grassroots origins of purity crusaders and their later inclusion into the state, see David J. Pivar, *Purity Crusade: Sexual Morality and Social Control, 1868-1900* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973) and Pivar, *Purity and Hygiene: Women, Prostitution, and the “American Plan,” 1900-1930* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002).

¹⁴ For an excellent study on the Mann Act, federal sexual surveillance and the conservative culture of origins of the FBI, see, Jessica R. Pliley, *Policing Sexuality: The Mann Act and the Making of the FBI* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

rendered women as both victims and as subjects of sexual surveillance.”¹⁵ The rhetoric of saving the ‘white slave’ in the US-context discursively naturalized the sexual exploitability of black women. It reinforced an existing racialized dichotomy in which female virtue was viewed as the exclusive domain of white womanhood. Thus, saving, protecting and preserving the virtue of white women constituted the logic of rescuing ‘white slaves.’ As mainstream society saw black womanhood as inherently sexually criminal, and, ultimately, devoid of purity or virtue, the vulnerability of black women and girls to sexual danger was either marginalized or ignored completely.

Whereas most African American women understood the dearth of protection available to migrating working-class black women and girls, middle-class black women had greater resources to do something about it. In the era of the ‘New Negro Women’ that marked a new black women’s public and political culture, middle class African American women mobilized to create institutions and organizations to support and protect black women and girl travelers. In cities in the South such as Atlanta, and along the Northeast and Midwest, black settlement houses and African American YWCA’s sprouted as a first point of entry for African American and West Indian female urban dwellers.¹⁶ Acutely aware of the sexual dangers that black women and girls especially confronted, middle class black women such as Victoria Earle Matthews in New York City, and Jane Edna Hunter in Cleveland, Ohio, pioneered an urban racial uplift and sexual protection movement. This movement sought to reconcile poor and working class black women with their clear desires to maintain their sexual respectability and integrity

¹⁵ Pliley, *Policing Sexuality*, 2.

¹⁶ For example, in 1908, Lugenia Burns Hope established the Atlanta Neighborhood Union. For an excellent discussion see Tera W. Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). For a discussion of black women’s social and political activism in Washington, D.C., see Treva B. Lindsey, *Colored No More: Reinventing Black Womanhood in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017). And for a broader study of black clubwomen across region see Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999).

in the workplace of white domestic family homes. The pragmatism of women read as middle class and educated black women, such as Matthews and Hunter, shows that middle class interests merged with those of the working class around the subject of sexual self-ownership, purity and protection.

This chapter revisits the migration of African American women and girls out of the segregated South between the 1890s and 1920. It engages the framework offered by historian Darlene Clark Hine in her study “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” and focuses on black women’s desire for greater sexual safety and values around purity as one of the uniquely female motives of this broader movement.¹⁷ It applies what historians such as Cheryl Hicks has framed as working-class respectability – a praxis that was not dictated from middle class African American women to their working-class subjects, but rather part of a longstanding ethos within the poor, working class and predominantly uneducated Southern black female community.¹⁸ As Hicks argues, “The fact that ordinary working-class men and women

¹⁷ Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women”.

¹⁸ As historian Cheryl Hicks aptly notes, to quote at length, “The emphasis in current scholarship on the black elite and middle class’s definition of respectability stems from the effective ways in which they positioned themselves as spokespersons for the race and their near-monopoly of the available sources on urban reform.” Hicks goes on to argue that “such sources” show very little difference in the treatment that middle class African Americans faced in their attempts to live as “respectable citizens” in comparison to the experiences of working class African Americans. Historians such as Victoria Wolcott (as well as Hicks) have respectively argued that studies of working class culture in the US and Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have highlighted “respectable” and “rough” elements within this class. If studies of working-class respectability in non-African American communities offer a framework, historian Michele Mitchell reminds us to be cautious in our assessment of class in African American community. Mitchell’s usage of the terms “aspiring classes” and “better classes” not only emphasize the threat of economic insecurity that always loomed over African Americans, but also shows the ways that non-economic factors such as dress, manners, decorum, social organization, etc., were also class indicators. These terms also reinforce Hick’s point about the similar treatment that African Americans confronted, regardless of their ability to conform to conventions of respectability. In short, this chapter, and, by extension, dissertation, does not attribute respectability to class status but rather treats it as an ethos within the black community. Ideas around sexual purity and feminine virtue were thus taught from the bottom-up as well as vice versa. This dissertation supports Higginbotham’s argument that a ‘politics of respectability’ emerged in the late nineteenth century as a strategy, but it maintains that poor and uneducated black women weaponized notions of sexual respectability for their own protection as early as in the years of slavery. See Cheryl D. Hicks, *Talk With You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 9-10. See also Victoria W. Wolcott, *African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina

embraced “values of hard work, thrift, piety, and sexual restraint” might be overlooked given that the black elite treated them as an undifferentiated mass mired in moral backwardness.”¹⁹ Hicks adds that “Indeed, respectability claimed just as important a place in the lives of working-class and poor black blacks.” This chapter, and, by extension, dissertation, stresses the point that “Black women believed [respectability] “was a foundation of” their “survival strategies and self-definition irrespective of class.””²⁰ Like many ‘middle class’ and respectable clubwomen, ‘middle class’ women such as Matthews and Hunter in fact had humble, working-class and domestic-service, and oftentimes enslaved, backgrounds. But from their relative privilege and access to resources, they launched a pragmatic response to a movement that was underway by working class and poor black women. Understanding that bourgeois ideals of domesticity could not apply to the lives of most black women by virtue of their need to engage to forms of employment, Matthews and Hunter worked to reconcile this ideal with their urban racial uplift by making the profession of domestic service itself respectable.²¹

In 1897 in New York City, Matthews established the White Rose Mission and Industrial Home (Mission). Part settlement-establishment and part-employment agency, Matthews built the Mission at the intersection of an African American self-help tradition, a curriculum of racial pride, and a clear association with African American female chastity and sexual purity. Similarly, the Working Girls Association, later called the Phillis Wheatley Association (PWA), founded by Jane Edna Hunter in 1911, reflected another black women’s organization that sought to protect the sexual integrity of working-class

Press, 2001), 5; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); and Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

¹⁹ Hicks, *Talk With You Like a Woman*, 10.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Historians such as Wolcott have examined how African American women in other regions such as Detroit, sought to make domestic service a respectable profession in the interwar years. See Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*.

black women and girls. As this chapter will show, both Matthews and Hunter came from enslaved or poor working-class backgrounds. Each woman respectively navigated the urban environment as a working-class female migrant. Thus, this chapter also examines how these women represent prototypes of the sexual activism of middle class black women working alongside working class black women in the urban environment. If middle class black women in the rural South taught ideals of domesticity in the home environment of poor black women in the rural south, as shown in Chapter 3, urban middle class black women worked with working class women to make domestic service a safe and respectable industry. As this chapter shows, notions of sexual purity and respectability were central to the formation of black female urban public culture in the early twentieth century.

Leaving the Southern Domestic Service Economy

As in slavery, black women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century South were forced into labor conditions that posed a high risk of sexual danger. In a racially exclusionary and sexist labor market, African American women found very few employment prospects available to them. If they were not sharecropping and farming alongside black men, African American women worked as laundresses, washerwomen and domestics in Southern white family homes. As discussed in Chapters 1-3, sexual violence was a constant feature of African American women's lives from slavery through the Civil War, Reconstruction, and era of segregation. Ideas of the sexual availability of black women drew from existing stereotypes of the Jezebel-figure in antebellum slavery and later images of black women as innately lascivious and wanton after freedom. In the environment of the Southern white family home, these stereotypes continued to shape the labor conditions of black women. In addition, racialized Southern etiquette in which whites demanded deference from African Americans manifested in Southern white

family homes. Southern white men – whether they were the husbands, sons, or other household members – repeatedly treated black female employees with the assumption that sexual labor was part of their general labor. Southern mistresses responded to this problem in a variety of ways that rarely protected black women domestics. Sometimes they turned a blind eye; sometimes they laid blame on their employees and retaliated with violence and/or unreasonable work demands; and sometimes they encouraged illicit sex between their husbands and their domestics as way to preserve their marriages.²² In growing numbers, working-class black women domestics left the South in pursuit of opportunities, most likely in domestic service, in the North. Without the encouragement or intervention of middle class black women, these working class and poor black women migrated out of the South as agents of their own sexual respectability and virtue.

Black women in the south were long accustomed to laboring outside the confines of the domestic sphere. They often worked long hours under the strenuous demands and expectations of their employers. As historian Rebecca Sharpless notes, black domestics in the South “struggled to control their work process, their hours, and their wages, to make their labor more task-oriented and less personal and affective.”²³ Many black domestics were expected to subordinate their family duties and responsibilities to the demands of the white family that they worked for. This included staying overnight in their employers’ homes for long stretches in many cases. One domestic explained that her ‘verbal contract’ required her to live-in with the white family that she worked for.²⁴ She was permitted time off on every other Sunday, during which time she visited her family and

²² A Negro Nurse, “More Slavery at the South,” *The Independent* 72 (January, 1912): 196-200. Electronic edition printed in University of North Carolina, Documenting the American South, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/negnurse/negnurse.html> (accessed January 29, 2019). The author of this article is only signed as “A Negro Nurse.”

²³ Rebecca Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women’s Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 161.

²⁴ A Negro Nurse, “More Slavery at the South,” n. p.

caught up on her domestic duties.²⁵ The limits on black working women's ability to uphold ideals of domesticity that middle class black women proposed as part of their 'politics of respectability' was exposed by the fact that working class black women could not afford to leave the labor market. In many cases, young adolescent girls took on nursing or domestic work to help support their families. Domestics were also often expected to wet nurse and care for white children as part of their services as a maidservant. With the all-consuming demands of domestic service, black women's labor took them outside of their own homes to conduct work that would otherwise be reserved for white women.

In 1912, an article produced by a woman who called herself "Negro Nurse" appeared in the *Independent* depicting the economic and sexualized struggles of domestics in the South. "I should say that more than two-third of the negroes of the town where I live are menial servants of one kind or another, and besides that more than two-third of the negro women here, whether married or single, are compelled to work for a living, -- as nurses, cooks, washerwomen, chambermaids, seamstresses, hucksters, janitresses, and the like," the 'Negro Nurse' explained.²⁶ In her view, the strenuous expectation of labor were so bad for African Americans that she compared it to a continuation of slavery. "Tho today we are enjoying nominal freedom," she stated, "we are literally slaves!"²⁷ The 'Negro Nurses's' testimony provides a window of economic, political and social causes of black female migration out of the south in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

The 'Negro Nurse's' letter also underscores a key motivation for why black women and girls chose to migrate in increasing numbers. As historians Thavolia Glymph and Tera Hunter have shown, the interactions between black domestics and Southern

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

white mistresses often resulted in forms of tension and violence.²⁸ In the absence of written contracts, domestics could not guarantee fair treatment and protection within white homes. They were often subjected to humiliating treatment by mean white women – the ones they tended to liaise most with. This kind of treatment was often exacerbated in cases where white men’s advances on their black female employees were known to white mistresses. Jealousy on the part of the white woman combined with her inability to properly confront her husband, who most likely provided for her, resulted in violence against powerless employees. In some other cases, as the ‘Negro Nurse’ explained, white wives sexually exploited their domestics in order to control their philandering husbands and preserve their marriages. “This moral debasement is not at all times unknown to the white women in these homes,” stated the ‘Negro Nurse.’ “I know of more than one colored woman who was openly importuned by white women to become the mistresses of their white husbands, on the ground that they, the white wives, were afraid that, if their husbands did not associate with colored women, they would certainly do so with outside white women, and the white wives, for reasons which ought to be perfectly obvious, preferred to have their husbands do wrong with colored women in order to keep their husbands straight!”²⁹ In short, black women who worked as domestics in Southern white family homes struggled to keep assumptions about their innate sexuality separate from their labor expectation. As poor and working-class women who long held ideals around chastity and feminine virtue, black women faced an impossible dilemma in the Southern domestic service industry.

Historian Darlene Clark Hine has argued that sexual violence was the key noneconomic motive behind black women’s migration out of the south in the late

²⁸ See Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and Tera W. Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

²⁹ A Negro Nurse, “More Slavery at the South,” n. p.

nineteenth and early twentieth century.³⁰ She writes: “[M]any Black women quit the South out of a desire to achieve personal autonomy and to escape both from sexual exploitation from inside and outside of their families and from the rape and threat of rape by white as well as Black males.” Southern assumptions that black women were non-rapeable and sexually available, and that sexual labor was part of their general labor was a thread that continued from slavery and the Civil War through to the early twentieth-century. Domestic workers developed and shared tactics to “minimize their vulnerability,” as Sharpless notes.³¹ Protecting themselves from rape and sexual harassment was a major part of a longstanding black women’s collective culture around sexual self-ownership and sexual respectability. For example, as Odessa Minnie Barnes remembered: “Nobody was sent out before you was told to be careful of the white man or his sons. They’d tell you the stories of rape... hard too! No lies! You was told to be true, so you’d not get raped. Everyone warned you and told you to ‘be careful.’”³² These kind of warnings and instructions represented the collective nature of working-class black women’s consciousness around issues of sexual safety and respectability.

Another domestic, Nancy White, quit working in a southern white home in Tennessee as an act of sexual self-protection. This act showed the extent that working-class black women went to protect their sexual integrity. The white man who threatened White’s sexual respectability was not the white husband, but a young white son. “In one job I had I could see this young boy who was just about to pee straight making up his mind whether he was going to try me,” she recalled, “I told the woman some lie and got my money and got out fast!”³³ White’s story reveals that domestics were at risk of attack from any man within white households, including husbands and younger sons. White

³⁰ Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women,” 40.

³¹ Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women’s Kitchens*, 170.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 140.

blamed the son's behavior on his mother, who she believed failed to teach him respect. White's story also showed that the decision to leave a job was difficult for a poor, working-class domestic, but she did not regret her decision. "Now, I have lost some money that ways, but that's all right. When you lose control of your body, you have just about lost all you have in this world!" she stated.³⁴ For White, her sexual respectability and virtue was her most important possession. This was not a message that White attributed to lessons from black middle class women. White's values around female purity was part of a long ethos in the working-class and poor black women's community.

In some cases, working-class African American women lost their jobs when they refused sexual access to their white male employers. Like working-class black women who quit in protest of sexual harassment, the risk of losing one's job for refusing to yield to sexual advances shows that ideas of sexual self-ownership and purity were ever-present in the minds of working-class and poor African American women. The "Negro Nurse" was fired when she rejected the advances of the white husband of the household where she worked. "I lost my place because I refused to let the madam's husband kiss me," she testified. "He must have been accustomed to undue familiarity with his servants... because without any love-making at all, soon after I was installed as cook, he walked up to me, threw his arms around me, and was in the act of kissing me..."³⁵ When the white male employer attempted to kiss the 'Negro Nurse' again, she insisted on rejecting his advances. Asserting her sense of innocence, moral subjectivity and self-dignity, she explained her disappointment and fear following the encounter. "I was young then," she added, "and newly married, and didn't know then what has been a burden to my mind and heart ever since: that a colored woman's virtue in this part of the country has no protection."³⁶ As a "burden to [her] mind and heart," the 'Negro Nurse'

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ A Negro Nurse, "More Slavery at the South," n. p.

³⁶ Ibid.

revealed the extent to which ideas of sexual purity and feminine virtue were an ordinary aspect of poor and working-class African American women's lives. In contrast to middle class black women who positioned themselves as spokespersons of the respectability and virtue of African Americans, the 'Negro Nurses' utterance showed that ordinary African American women valued these ideals as part of their everyday lives. In fact, the threat to these ideals, for ordinary black women, was severe enough to spark a "burden" to a working woman's "mind and heart."

Like the poor and uneducated fugitive and refugee women that preceded her, as discussed in Chapter 2, the 'Negro Nurse' sought a form of remedy for the injustice of her white male employer's sexual affront. She told her husband, who confronted the former employer in the name of defending her honor. A typical outcome of segregated southern life, the white man attacked the 'Negro Nurses's' husband and had him arrested. He also had her husband fined for \$25. As a working-class domestic, the 'Negro Nurse's' daily struggles involved protecting and preserving her virtue.³⁷ While it is unclear whether the 'Negro Nurse' chose to migrate to the North, her description of the culture of pervasive sexual abuse and the threat of abuse in southern white home indicates that notions of virtue and respectability were at the core of many working-class black women's choices to leave the South. This movement was thus in part a rejection of the conditions of labor that threatened the sexual respectability of poor, working-class black women with no formal education.

"Some of the Dangers...": Black, Female and Migrating North

When poor and working-class African American women decided that the dangers that they faced as domestics in white Southern family homes was much worse than the sexual risks and problems of their log cabin, they could not fully foresee the sexual

³⁷ Ibid.

dangers that awaited them in Northern and Midwestern cities. Many of these migrant women were from rural and remote regions, with little to no traveling experience. Moreover, with the rapidly growing and shifting urban geography of cities such as New York, Chicago and Cleveland where newcomers from across the United States and internationally arrived in a continuous stream, many Americans viewed the vast and unpredictable urban landscape with wonder, mystery, suspicion, confusion and excitement. Working-class African American women and girls looked to the urban North and Midwest for greater personal and financial autonomy, leisure, and importantly, greater sexual safety as workers. For many, the Southern domestic service industry was tainted by racial prejudice and expectations of racial etiquette that was similar to black/white relations in slavery. Fully aware of the racially-circumscribed and sexist labor market, black women understood that domestic service most likely awaited them at the end of their journeys north. As Hine argues, “Their quest for autonomy, dignity, and access to opportunity to earn an adequate living was (and still is) complicated and frustrated by the antagonisms of race, class, and gender conflict, and by differences in regional economies.”³⁸ This raises the question of the extent to which working in a white family home in the North was preferable to working for a white family in the segregated South. Efforts by Northern middle class black women to establish domestic service as a respectable industry speaks to the fact that race, space and region mattered greatly in their efforts.

But as working class African American women exercised their agency and self-determination through migration, some confronted unforeseen sexual dangers in transit to the North as well as upon arrival. The growth of urban areas were also attended by growing sex-work and vice industries. Single black women and girls who traveled to the

³⁸ Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women,” 41.

North and Midwest without trusted connections were among the majority of black migrants at the turn of the twentieth century. In what the black statistician, Kelly Miller, described as a “surplus” of “Negro women,” this class of migrants was also the most vulnerable to sexual exploitation.³⁹ Thus, many poor and working-class black women embarked on a quest for sexual safety and feminine virtue only to find themselves at greater sexual risk in the strange urban environment.

Middle class African American women quickly noticed the sexual threats surrounding the migration of black women and girls. One of the central and most vocal figures was Victoria Earle Matthews, a well-connected clubwoman based in New York. In 1898, at the Hampton Negro Conference, Matthews delivered a speech on “Some of the Dangers Confronting Southern Girls in the North.” She drew from her sociological observations into urban black communities to describe the pressing and unique need of southern black female migrants arriving in Northern US cities. She revealed a system of entrapment, designed by “unscrupulous” employment agents to sexually exploit young black women who aspired to fashion new lives in growing urban centers such as New York, Philadelphia and Chicago.⁴⁰ “[I]t is reasonable to suppose that self-respect would deter hundreds from rushing into a life that only the strongest physically, spiritually and morally can be [sic] expected to stand,” she opened.⁴¹ Highlighting the apparent incongruity between ‘self-respect’ and taking a risk that exposed oneself to sexual exploitation, Matthews invoked an attitude that was present among her audience of fellow middle-class reformers, educators, and community leaders. This largely Bookerite attitude was hostile to African American migration and suggested that the best prospects for blacks were in the more familiar environment of the rural South. Yet, Matthews also affirmed her rather anomalous position on the migration of women. The threat of

³⁹ See Kelly Miller, “Surplus Negro Women,” *The Southern Workman* 34 (January, 1905): 522-528.

⁴⁰ Matthews, “Some of the Dangers Confronting Southern Girls in the North,” 216.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 215.

seduction and sexual abuse that awaited inexperienced female migrants in the urban environment might have been clear to her middle-class peers, Matthews implied, “But the girls don’t know.”⁴² Legitimizing the agency and motivations of the poor, uneducated and rural black female migrants themselves, she added: “[T]hey feel stifled in the dead country town.”⁴³

Matthews saw a correlation between the racially-segregated labor market of the turn of the twentieth century; enduring racist and demoralizing stereotypes about black women’s sexuality; and the unique conditions of labor for black women. These factors, she maintained, made urban migration especially precarious for young African American women and girls who sought gainful employment in the only industry available to them: domestic service. She broke down the stages of this system, weaving a sophisticated critique of the white and black agents of this “vile scheme” into her analysis.⁴⁴ “Agents are sent throughout the South. Great promises are held out to the people, particularly those too wise to be fooled,” she stated.⁴⁵ By highlighting the length that agents went to convince even the most skeptical potential migrants, Matthews debunked the popular attitude that scam victimized the ‘ignorant’ and ‘naïve’ only.

Matthews showed that the labor agents’ appearance of a legitimate agency was part of the ruse of this “vile scheme.” She underlined the corporate and official language that the agents deployed in their negotiations. “The agent offers to send a certain number off on a certain day,” she relayed. “[H]e tells them that an ‘officer’ from the ‘Society’ will meet them and conduct them to the ‘office’ or lodging house. Another officer will procure service places for them, and all they are to do in return is to sign a paper giving the company the right to collect their wages until traveling expenses are paid back.”⁴⁶ The

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 217.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

reality, Matthews maintained, was that once women arrived in the city they found themselves “huddled” in overcrowded, “dirty ill-smelling apartments” where they slept on the floor.⁴⁷ She argued that these conditions created a cycle of dependency. Sending women to work in “disreputable” homes increased their risk of abuse by predatory men, Matthews added. The migrant hopes of securing alternative employment were undermined by the debt that they incurred from travel expenses, lodging and food. The threat of court-proceedings for broken contracts constrained black migrant women. At this stage of utter desperation, Matthews stressed, young women were coerced into sex work – their ultimate ruin. The descriptive power of Matthews’s speech cannot be overstated. In conveying the detailed stages of this scam, Matthews revealed a new, modernized urban form of exploitation targeting vulnerable black women who sought upward mobility and autonomy. It was a development that mirrored facets of the exploitative contract terms found in the debt peonage and sharecropping systems, not to mention the huge domestic service industry in the South. Most notably, however, Matthews’s analysis exposed the ways that black women consistently confronted employment conditions where their sexual labor was either central to, or expected as part of their labor.

Urban Middle Class Black Women’s Pragmatism: The White Rose Mission and Industrial Home and the Phillis Wheatley Association

By the early twentieth century, middle class African American clubwomen activists demanded that the black community, and white society, acknowledge and respond to the unique conditions facing poor and working-class black female migrants. Middle class black women’s views and attitudes towards poor migrants were not uniform. While some criticized migrants for leaving the South for uncertainty and

⁴⁷ Ibid.

potential danger in Northern and Midwestern cities, others simply directed their energy towards providing support for migrating women and girls. Tying the strongly held notion that ‘a race can rise no higher than its women’ to their visions of racial uplift, and female protection specifically, in the urban environment, middle class black women enlisted pragmatic strategies in their responses. In the era of the social settlement movement, African American women established settlement houses and Y’s that catered specifically to African American women and girls. In 1897, Matthews founded the White Rose Industrial Association and Working Girls’ Home (Mission). In 1911, the South Carolinian migrant, Jane Edna Hunter established the Phillis Wheatley Association (PWA). The PWA was the first of many of its kind that would proliferate across the United States by the 1920s. These two organizations offer examples of the pragmatism of urban, middle class black women’s responses to the migration of working-class black women. It is important to reiterate that both Matthews and Hunter hailed from humble background. Unlike women such as clubwoman Mary Church Terrell and a few others, Matthews and Hunter were not born into wealth or even middle-class status. In this way, there was perhaps a meeting of minds inside the club movement among women who inherited an existing ethos around purity and virtue in the black working-class and poor community. The Mission and PWA reveal the crucial place of notions of sexual purity and respectability in the formation of a black female urban public culture in the early twentieth century.

As white social purity activists and reformers pored over the real and imagined threats that attended the migration of unmarried, young white women to the cities, middle class African American women debated the growing trend of migration among Southern (and Caribbean) black women. While espousing ideals of domesticity as part of the gendered strategy of respectability and racial uplift, middle class African American clubwomen simultaneously acknowledged the fact that most black women could not

attain these bourgeois ideals. They believed that their fate was tied to their poor and working-class counterparts. This belief shaped many of their discussions and research on black urban living conditions as it intersected with popular discourses around racial destiny.

Middle class black women largely defended working-class and poor black women's right to dignity, sexual respectability and sexual self-ownership. Domestic service, many acknowledged, threatened the virtue of black women who merely sought to make an honest living. Converging their mission to improve the public image of black womanhood with their commitment to sexual self-defense, middle class clubwomen expanded their cause to fight on behalf of working-class black women. For example, in 1907, NACW leader Mary Church Terrell explicitly declared that: "No servant is safe in the homes of white people, and no mother who considered her daughter's honor would allow her to become a servant without first requiring references."⁴⁸ In what was conveyed in the *Colored American Magazine* as "furious in her invectives against the Southern people," Terrell frankly discussed the sexual vulnerability of black female domestic workers.⁴⁹ Emphasizing the authority of a black mother 'who considered her daughter's honor,' Terrell highlighted that the Southern labor system threatened the fabric of black family life. Whether intentionally or not, Terrell built on a long tradition where black mothers represented the moral enforcers and protectors of a black girl's virtue. In doing so, Terrell insisted that domestic servants were women with strong familial ties, and that their virtue was tied to the future of the race.

Similarly, the educator and activist, Anna Julia Cooper invoked the sexual danger that black domestics faced in white homes in a general retort to black men who held disparaging attitudes about black womanhood. Problematizing the application of middle

⁴⁸ Mary Church Terrell, *The Evening Statesman* (November 4th, 1907).

⁴⁹ "Southern Views of Mrs. Terrell," *Colored American Magazine* 13, no. 6 (1907), 413.

class ideals of domesticity to the black community, Cooper introduced the fact that the majority of black women worked outside their own homes. Challenging the feasibility of these ideas in the context of working-women's lives, Cooper criticized black men whose focus on their own middle class material achievements ignored the conditions that most black women labored in. In her seminal book, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South*, published in 1892, she stated: "It is absurd to quote statistics showing the Negro's bank account and rent rolls, to point to the hundreds of newspapers edited by colored men and lists of lawyers, doctors, professors... while the source from which the life-blood of the race is to flow is subject to taint and corruption in the enemy's camp."⁵⁰ By using the language of the 'enemy's camp,' Cooper explicitly referenced the sexual abuse of black female domestic workers in white family homes.

Like the studies that middle class and educated black women conducted on one-room log cabins across rural, plantation settlements, African American women also researched the living conditions of African Americans in urban spaces. Black women who considered themselves disciples of Booker T. Washington's model of racial uplift were generally hostile to black migrants. They firmly believed that the best economic, social and eventually political future for African Americans was on the familiar land of the South. For example, Rosa Morehead Bass, an Atlanta University graduate and pioneer of early childhood education, argued that the fresh air of the rural environment, its springs of cool waters, and its fresh fruit naturally improved the health of black living in poverty. She contrasted this position with the plight of their "filthy" urban contemporaries, who lived in poorly built tenement houses located in infected alleyways with stagnant water.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, (Xenia, OH: The Aldine Publishing House, 1892. Reprinted in New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 25.

⁵¹ Rosa Morehead Bass, "Poverty as a Cause of Mortality," in *Mortality Among Negroes in Cities. Proceedings of the Conference for the Investigation of City Problems held at Atlanta University, May 26-27, 1896*, ed., William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (Atlanta, GA: Atlanta University Press, 1896). 30.

Thus, middle-class black women were not uniform in their position over the migration question. Rather, there was a spectrum of thought that ranged from empathy, activism and pragmatism, as evident in Terrell, Cooper, Matthews and Hunter to those who assailed the poor. In a study on “General Conditions of Mortality,” clubwoman Lucy C. Laney argued that African Americans in the urban environment lived in an unwholesome, stagnate state. Sharing Bass’s sentiment, she contended that the “poorest, most untidy and the most ignorant seek each other.”⁵² Drawing on her research findings, Laney added that “Four to six occupy-one room, in which there is little or no furniture. One or two meals a week, with a little food here and there, serve to sustain life and nourish disease, moral and physical.”⁵³ Similarly, temperance reformer Georgia Swift King argued that intemperance was particularly a problem stemming from the urban environment, and was a root cause of high black urban deaths from contagious and infectious diseases.⁵⁴ These black clubwomen’s view of the black urban poor as a pathology suggests that African Americans living in cities were outside of their most suited environment: the rural south. By *choosing* to live in the city, their poverty was, in some way, their own fault. This reflected the general anxiety of social purity activists, black and white, to urban centers with all its vices. If poor women living on rural settlements represented an unsettling reminder of an enslaved past, as discussed in Chapter Three, the migration of poor black women into the urban environment evoked fears of a dangerous and unpredictable future.

Before establishing the White Rose Mission, Matthews conducted social and sociological surveys of the urban living conditions of African American women. Born

⁵² Lucy C. Laney, “General Conditions of Mortality,” in *Mortality Among Negroes in Cities*, 35.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Georgia Swift King, “Intemperance as a Cause of Mortality,” reprinted in *The Atlanta University Publications, Nos 1, 2, 4, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18*, ed., William Loren Katz (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1968), 27-28.

enslaved in Fort Galley, Georgia in 1861, Matthews began her life like many of the poor and working-class black female migrants that she later assisted. Her mother escaped slavery and migrated to the North, leaving Matthews and her siblings “in the care of an old nurse until she returned.”⁵⁵ After emancipation, Matthews’s mother won a legal battle to reclaim her children. She brought Matthews and her sister to Richmond, Virginia, where they settled briefly before settling permanently in New York. The journey that Matthews’s mother made in her escape as a slave, and the subsequent journey that Matthews made with her mother after reunification reflected the trails of thousands of migrant black women. In New York City, Matthews worked as a domestic servant in a white family home where she became self-educated through the use of the family library. Although Matthews was a member of the African American middle class when she established the Mission in 1897, she held values around sexual purity and sexual respectability despite her enslaved, poor, and working-class background. Coming from a community where purity was the ethos, Matthews’s values around female chastity and respectability should be read as an influence of her former slave, poor and working-class identity.

The combination of the death of her son and an unfulfilling marriage inspired Matthews to assume social activism and journalism in the 1890s. She turned to helping other mothers in distress, and traveled extensively through urban black communities in the South and North. From her social studies of communities in Alabama and Tuskegee, Matthews developed a sophisticated understanding of the dangers facing black female travelers and migrants. Considering taking up racial uplift work in these regions, Matthews decided otherwise when a minister wrote to her “begging” for her to return to

⁵⁵ I. Garland Penn, *The Afro-American Press and Its Editors* (Springfield, MA: Wiley & Co., 1981), 375-376.

New York City to “start practical work among my people.”⁵⁶ She returned to the Tenderloin and Harlem neighborhoods “between 59th and 127th streets, from Park to First Avenue” and observed about 6,000 African Americans “who have most been driven away from Bleecker Street by the influx of Italians.”⁵⁷ Identifying this area as her “field,” Matthews started visiting black family homes. “I selected the one I thought needed me most and tried to be a real friend to the mothers.”⁵⁸ This focus merged Matthews’s values around black family life with her investment in the sexual protection of young black women and girls.

Importantly, this work informed Matthews’s commitment to establishing the Mission in New York City. As she reflected: “I began to hold mothers’ meetings at the various homes where I visited... One day at one of these meetings, we prayed especially for a permanent home where we might train boys and girls and make a social center for them where the only influence would be good and true and pure.”⁵⁹ As Matthews’s statement shows, working-class and poor black female attendees called for the creation of a social center where children would be influenced to “be good and true and pure.”⁶⁰ Middle class women did not need to inform poor and working-class black women about purity and feminine virtue. While Matthews modelled the standard of gendered racial uplift conveyed in the motto of the NACW: “Lifting as we climb,” through her life work, it is important to highlight the values of working-class black women who initially encouraged the establishment of the Mission.⁶¹ As historian Cheryl Hicks has argued,

⁵⁶ As quoted in Hallie Q. Brown and Josephine Turpin Washington, *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction* (Re-publication. San Antonio, TX: Historic Publishing, 2017), 244-245. The original publication is Hallie Quinn Brown, *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction* (Xenia, OH: The Aldine Publishing Company, 1926).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Herb Boyd, “Author and dedicated missionary Victoria Earle Matthews,” *Amsterdam News*, <http://amsterdamnews.com/news/2014/aug/21/author-and-dedicated-missionary-victoria-earle-mat/> (accessed January 29, 2019).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ For a discussion of the mission of the NACW and their motto, see White, *Too Heavy a Load*.

urban middle class black women had a “near-monopoly” on resources that allowed them to position themselves as “spokespersons” of feminine respectability.⁶² What Matthews’s statement shows is that working-class black women expressed ideas around sexual purity and respectability that directed how middle class black women’s used their resources. In short, working-class black women’s notions of sexual purity and respectability was central to the formation of black female urban public culture in the early twentieth century.

The Mission was originally located in the predominantly black San Juan neighborhood in New York City. It provided aid to black female migrants arriving in the city from the US South and the Caribbean. The Mission was among the first of a proliferation of similar black female-centered organizations emerging across mainly Northern and Midwestern cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Washington D.C. and Pittsburgh. It offered services that included dock and railway station pick-ups, employment training, lessons on domestic sciences, a kindergarten and a black history curriculum. Through the name, “White Rose” - symbolizing chastity, purity and innocence – Matthews explicitly aligned the Mission with the national temperance and social purity movements, whose members pinned white roses to their lapels. As a Christian non-sectarian organization, the Mission stood as the safeguards and protectors of sexual purity and integrity of working-class black women in New York City.

Matthews was untiring in her critique of a racist and sexist market society, where industrialization, commerce and urbanization held specific consequences for black women workers. Like the cautionary tales of stolen female virtue found in mainstream purity literature, she distributed testimonials of black girls and women brought into the city under deceptive circumstances. Tales of ‘unscrupulous’ employment agents who

⁶² Hicks, *Talk with You Like a Woman*, 9.

literally rode on buggies through rural southern towns, swindling ‘green’ black girls into leaving their plantations with the promise of respectable, gainful employment in the city, abounded. These stories defied the prejudiced assumption that southern black girls chose a life of vice in New York.⁶³ Through these schemes, many black girls paid an upfront fee of \$7 to process their applications. These agents that Matthews identified sent young black women North via train or the Southern Steamship Line, often with faulty tickets that were only valid for part of their journey. Once these female migrants arrived at a Northern dock or train station, they found themselves suddenly stranded. As Matthews cautioned followed, it was a short matter of time before a pimp, presenting themselves as a ‘friendly stranger,’ offered the lonely arrival food and board via a debt agreement. From there, the young woman disappeared into the city, trapped, broke and too ashamed to find her way home.

Matthews and the Mission paved a way for black women and girl migrants to maintain their virtue, regardless of their backstories. Volunteers with the Mission such as Anna Richter, met black women migrants and travelers at the docks or the railway station. Many of these women and girls moved to NYC secure in their plans, as family, friends, and trustworthy connections awaited their arrival at their destination. Yet, there was a considerable proportion of women and girls who travelled either unassisted or under the pretense of one of the “vile schemes.” In providing employment training to residents at the Mission, Matthews and Mission volunteers sought to connect incoming migrants with “reputable” families. In doing so, Matthews showed her commitment to establishing domestic service as a respectable industry for virtuous black working-class women.

⁶³ In addition to Matthews, “Some of the Dangers,” (1898), see also E. M. Rhodes, “The Protection of Colored Girls Who Travel: A National Movement,” *Colored American Magazine* 13 (August 1907): 113-19.

Like Matthews and many other black women, Jane Edna Hunter came from humble origins. Born in Pendleton, South Carolina in 1882, Hunter was the daughter of sharecroppers. Though poor, Hunter's parents were very strict about morality and notions of family, domesticity and respectability. "As a child, I realized Father's stern regard for morality, and his staunch guardianship of our family life," wrote Hunter in her autobiography. "While he lived, we remained together," she added, "he even opposed Mother's going out to work, yielding only when want made it necessary."⁶⁴ Hunter's expressions of her early life show that poor sharecroppers adhered to values around family, domesticity and respectability to the extent that that they could financially afford to. Their poor status did not prohibit Hunter's parents from teaching her notions of morality. In fact, these early lessons became the foundation of Hunter's future missionary work through the PWA. These were not lessons that came from middle class black women.

With the death of her father, Hunter began work as a domestic in white family homes to help support her family. In doing so, she assumed a position of employment of most poor and working-class black women in the late nineteenth century. At the age of ten, she was cooking, cleaning, washing and ironing for a family of six.⁶⁵ She later received training in nursing in South Carolina and Virginia, earning only a tenuous position as a member of the middle class. In 1905, after a brief forced-marriage to a man forty-years her senior, Hunter moved to Cleveland, OH.⁶⁶ When Hunter arrived in Cleveland she fit the profile of most black female migrants: poor, rural background, limited to no connections, and possessing a strong sense of sexual self-ownership and

⁶⁴ Jane Edna Hunter, *A Nickel and a Prayer* (Cleveland, OH: Elli Kani Publishing C., 1940), 25.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁶ According to her testimony, Hunter's mother forced her into this marriage. See Hunter, *A Nickel and a Prayer*, 50.

feminine virtue. Upon arrival in Cleveland, Hunter struggled to find “decent” accommodation.⁶⁷ Although she had friends who offered to help her, she recalled that “[m]y self-respect would not let me depend upon the generous Coleman’s [her friends] whose resources were almost as meagre as my own.”⁶⁸ This principled and prideful notion of self-respect was not acquired through the teachings of middle class African Americans.

Through her search for lodgings, Hunter received “a keen insight into the conditions which confront the Negro girl who, friendless and alone, looks for a decent place to live.”⁶⁹ After spending a few months on Central Avenue, Hunter professed that she became “sharply aware of the great temptations that best a young woman in a large city.” As Hunter continued,

At home on the plantation, I knew that some girls had been seduced. Their families felt the disgrace keenly – the fallen ones had wept and prayed over. In Charleston I was sent by the hospital to give emergency treatments to prostitutes, but they were white women. Until my arrival in Cleveland I was ignorant of the wholesale organized traffic in black flesh.⁷⁰

Hunter’s analysis turns assumptions that many white (and black) middle class elites had about black female migrants, on its head. In contrast to the stereotype of black female sexuality as morally criminal and promiscuous, Hunter’s statement reveals a black female migrant with from a poor background who had a strict understanding of sexual respectability. The plantation in Hunter’s description reflects an environment that was more sheltered and respectable than the sexually permissive environment that middle class black women feared in their campaigns around log cabins. Hunter also references one half of a binary between “virtuous women” and “fallen women,” demonstrating that

⁶⁷ Ibid., 67.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 68.

the community that she came from strictly enforced this notion. This fact is underlined in Hunter's comment about the shame or "disgrace" that her neighbors experienced within the poor sharecropping community. As poor sharecroppers, it's likely that this entire community lived in one-room log cabin. Lastly, Hunter's reference to white women as prostitutes suggests that such practices were, at least, not widely visible in her poor, sharecropping community. Further, distance between Hunter's own sense of sexual virtue against her observations of the "wholesale organized traffic in black flesh" shows that notions of sexual respectability mattered a lot to many migrating black women. Sexual respectability was part of their idea of freedom and autonomy.

In Cleveland, Hunter learned that racial segregation was not limited to the South and that she needed to create an organization to help young black female migrants, like herself, secure respectable accommodations. Hunter saw that white reformers were reluctant to open their settlement houses and Y. W. C. A.'s to large numbers of young black women. Like many black female reformers and activists in Northern cities, Hunter had to navigate the strictures of a society where white alliances were both essential resources as well as a hindrance. As historian Betty Livingston Adams explains, "While it was important for northern black women to maintain contacts with influential white people and to use public space in ways that met with the white community's approval, these contacts attenuated over time."⁷¹ Moreover, Adams adds, "As the visibility of African Americans in the North increased, white tolerance for their presence decreased and [whites] pursued exclusionary goals rather than cooperation."⁷² The reluctance of white reformers in Cleveland to welcome more than a small number of black women and

⁷¹ Betty Livingston Adams, *Black Women's Christian Activism: Seeking Social Justice in a Northern Suburb* (New York and London: New York University Press), 156.

⁷² Ibid.

girls into their institutions reveals the extent to which the availability of white assistance was conditional.

When Hunter reached out to elite black clubwomen in Cleveland for assistance with establishing a settlement home for black women, they resisted. “[S]trangely enough,” wrote Hunter, “the opposition came from Negroes – a small group of club women who blessed with prosperity, has risen from the servant class and now regarded themselves as the arbiters and guardians of colored society.”⁷³ As Hunter continued, these middle class African American women from Cleveland assumed a position of authority in their interaction with Hunter’s plans. “Arriving at the meeting, they took complete charge of proceedings, threw a shadow and attempted to inject discord into all that has been said or done in an effort to start a home,” Hunter added.⁷⁴ On this significant occasion, elite black clubwomen prioritized their class interests over the interests of poor and working-class black women to set up a home for their own sexual integrity and protection. Arguing that a separate establishment for black female migrants was risky and divisive, these middle class black women reflected an attitude of hostility that black elites expressed with the rise of migration.⁷⁵ Many feared that the growth of the black population would stoke racial tensions in a city characterized by racial harmony.⁷⁶ Of course, the idea of racial harmony was a myth.⁷⁷ In this event, elite black clubwomen argued that segregation was not a practice in the city of Cleveland and that black women and girls were welcome to stay at settlement houses alongside white women and girls.⁷⁸ They charged Hunter with trying to introduce racial segregation to the

⁷³ Hunter, *A Nickel and a Prayer*, 90.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 90-91.

⁷⁶ Indeed, African Americans in New York were also divided in this position. For a nuanced reading, see Marcy S. Sacks, *Before Harlem: The Black Experience in New York City Before World War I* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 3.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 3-7.

⁷⁸ Hunter, *A Nickel and a Prayer*, 91.

city.⁷⁹ When Hunter inquired into the truthfulness of statements of the Cleveland black club women, she found that “when Negro girls came to the “Y” building in large numbers and were the majority in any activity, the white girls would withdraw.”⁸⁰ White community leaders concluded that “Negro girls... should be cared for by the Negro race.”⁸¹

The resistance to Hunter’s plans to create a settlement home for young black migrant women to protect their sexual purity and respectability, is important because it demonstrates that working-class black women’s concerns around sexual purity and protection contributed to the construction of black female-centered institutions in the urban environment. As Hunter proudly underscored: “The Phillis Wheatley came into being as the expression of the faith of a group of poor Negro women and their devotion to the poor and homeless of their own people; a nickel and a prayer started it.”⁸² Working-class black women’s commitment to sexual respectability and sexual protection contributed to the formation of a new urban black female public. Hunter’s statement complicates general scholarly assumptions about racial uplift as a movement that was led by predominantly middle-class black women.⁸³ Racial uplift and sexual purity and respectability converged in the founding of the PWA through the efforts of poorer black women.

Conclusion

As middle class and educated African American women built campaigns to reform the one-room log cabins of black families into respectable environments, poor and working-class African American women who were farmers and domestics left the

⁷⁹ Ibid., 90-91.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 93.

⁸¹ Ibid., 93.

⁸² Hunter, *A Nickel and a Prayer*, 104.

⁸³ For example, see White, *Too Heavy a Load*.

South altogether in pursuit of greater personal autonomy, financial autonomy, and sexual safety. As domestics in Southern white homes, black women confronted persistent sexual harassment and abuse. Leaving the South for employment in the North and Midwest constituted an act of protest against the everyday working conditions of the Southern domestic service economy. Black women rarely spoke frankly about rape and the threat of rape in a public setting. Using historian Darlene Clark Hine's theory of a 'culture of dissemblance,' this chapter analyzes the work situations of domestic servants in the South through the few voices of domestics themselves.

While poor and working-class African American women understood the threat that working in Southern white family homes posed to their feminine virtue was worse than the problems they faced in their one-room log cabins, their migration into the North introduced new and unforeseen dangers. Black women were especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation because of longstanding stereotypes and assumptions that framed black women sexual labor as part of their other forms of labor. Working-class black women worked to protect themselves from sexual vulnerability by encouraging and building an urban black women's institutional culture around sexual respectability and protection. This chapter uses Matthews and the Mission, and Hunter and the PWA as examples of this pragmatic tradition. As this chapter showed, both Matthews and Hunter were both from poor, migrant and domestic servant backgrounds. Their activism in New York City and Cleveland, respectively, must take this crucial fact into consideration. Whereas working-class black women encouraged Matthews to build a settlement house to teach 'purity' to and sexually protect young women (and boys), Hunter formed a coalition with fellow working-class black women to establish the PWA. In each example, we find that poor and working-class black women's notions of sexual purity and respectability were central to the formation of black female urban public culture in the early twentieth century.

Epilogue: The Continued Struggle for Sexual Self-Sovereignty in the Twentieth-Century.

African American women's struggle for sexual self-ownership has always been confined by the context of her own oppression. In the antebellum period, enslaved women weaponized notions of chastity and virtue of the Victorian-era as an alternative mode of sexual resistance and an assertion of their desire for sexual self-sovereignty. It may appear contradictory that enslaved women appealed to a traditionally conservative gendered ideal that excluded black women. But it was an ideal that they turned into a weapon. They neutralized the very ideological and cultural tools that white men and women used as a justification for the sexual exploitation of enslaved women. From a position of womanhood that existed in a social deficit, slave women asserted their Christian identity, their respectability and their moral subjectivity. Enslaved women used the sexualized categories of chastity, purity and feminine virtue to fashion a moral tradition within the black community. Sex – its meanings both within the context of violence and beyond – was crucial to slave women's understanding of freedom. Through their values of chastity, purity and feminine virtue, we can understand how slave women navigated sex as a perennial, violent feature of their lives. We can also begin to understand how enslaved women's ideas about sex and their sexuality reflected their visions of freedom, whether this involved marriage and a family or otherwise.

Middle-class status, a formal education or even a free-status were never prerequisites for enslaved women to assert their sense of respectability and virtue. This tradition continued into the transformative period of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Contraband, fugitive and former slave women brought charges before Union Army

court-martials as an act of justice for sexual violence and assault. Despite their liminal status, African American women took advantage of the new legal framework of the 1863 Lieber Code. A provision within the Lieber Code offered protection to women who were assaulted by Union soldiers. The absence of the condition of race meant that for the first time in US history, black women could seek legal recourse for rape and sexual assault. Black laundresses, domestics, former slaves and fugitives on Union encampments testified against black and white soldiers in court-martials. They emphasized their victimization through performances of their moral subjectivity and innocence. This included testimonies that highlighted their married status, old or young age, and importantly, the fact that they did not give consent to bodily harm. Through these testimonies, black women who were marginalized and liminal subjects created a women's rights framework around consent from their marginalized and subaltern position. They struggled for the right to sexual self-ownership in a society that viewed black women's sexual labor as part of their general labor.

If the Lieber Code created a new legal framework for black women who were neither slaves nor citizens, the era of Reconstruction saw black women struggling for sexual protection from the US government as new citizens. The mainly poor and uneducated freedwomen of the Reconstruction period asserted their right to freedom from bodily harm and violation in congressional testimonies. Like their enslaved forebears, they illuminated their moral subjectivity and sexual respectability in their struggles for sexual justice.

The trajectory of African American women's struggle for dignity and sexual self-sovereignty was complicated by the post-Reconstruction era. A vastly expanded educated black middle-class and educated elite drew lines within the community that ignored or underestimated the moral agency and respectability of poor black women with no formal

education – even as they sought to uplift them. Respectability was no longer the expression of the spiritual autonomy of marginalized and subjugated black women, but a public ‘politics’ and strategy of a predominantly black ‘better class.’ Even as reformers reflected the same values of their enslaved forebears in their quest for sexual protection and autonomy, very few recognized the moral tradition that they inherited. Poor women who lived in one-room log cabins became the subjects of moral reform. Their home environment – a product of the conditions of slavery – became a symbol of the sexual degeneracy of the poor, uneducated masses of black women and their families. Thus, efforts to lift the majority of African Americans out of poverty by elite black reformers was inextricably bound to charges of immorality among the poor. This was an unfortunate missed opportunity in the history of racial uplift activism; a moment where black clubwomen and leaders could have diminished the strong association of middle-class status with moral virtue. Only a few black women, such as Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, and Rosetta Douglass Sprague honored the moral education and respectability of their enslaved forebears.

The migration of female former farm workers and domestics from the South into Northern cities was precipitated, at least in part, by a rejection of the racist, sexist and segregated conditions of the Southern labor economy. In Chapter Four of this dissertation, I engaged historian Darlene Clark Hine’s framework for thinking about some of the noneconomic motives for black women’s migration in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Focusing on black women’s long desire to be treated with dignity and respect in all aspects of their lives, this chapter considers the role that this motive, and subsequently, the migration of working-class and poor black women played in shaping some of the urban institutions that we commonly associate with middle-class black clubwomen. The ‘middle-class’ position women such as Victoria Earle Matthews and Jane Edna Hunter, as examples, requires revisiting, as this chapter shows.

Each woman came from enslaved and/or extremely humble backgrounds. While each woman was able to acquire a position that increased their access to resources, they should be thought about as women who shared a lot in common with the working-class women and girls that they strove to sexually protect in the urban space. Moreover, revisiting these women shows that the categories of ‘middle-class’ and ‘working-class’ perhaps fails to fully capture the complexity of class in the African American community. While scholars such as historian Michele Mitchell have engaged the important terms ‘better-classes’ and ‘aspiring-classes,’ the question of appropriate terms remains anything but uniform.

This dissertation has shown that slave, contraband, freed, and poor, working-class and middle-class black women saw the potential for their own liberation in the gendered ideals of chastity, purity, and feminine virtue. These are concepts that are often read as oppressive in contemporary feminist scholarship as well as popular thought. As this project has highlighted, the differing contexts of black and white women’s lives provide grounds for revisiting these terms. In the absence of patriarchal protection in slavery and through much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, chastity was never a condition granted in exchange for dependence and submissiveness on the part of black women. Black women *chose* to appeal to certain expressions of womanhood that suited their idea of freedom. Of course, when black men increasingly asserted their patriarchal ideals, notions of chastity, purity and feminine virtue were complicated. For example, as evident in the Black Nationalist women’s movement, preoccupations with racial purity justified black men’s control over black women’s sexuality. At the same time, Garvey women joined the ranks and leadership of the movement for a variety of race-focused and gender-specific reasons that included the promise of male protection and

freedom from sexual violation.¹ Black women's quest for sexual self-sovereignty was always confined by the racist and patriarchal systems of thought that surrounded them.

Though sexual mores were loosened with the rise of figures like the Modern Woman, New Negroes, and Blues Women of the 1920s, sexual violence against African American women continued throughout the twentieth century. Studies such as Danielle McGuire's *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (2010) reveal that anti-rape and sexual violence activism has almost always been a central part of black women's participation in major movements.² But the history of black women's sexual resistance and struggle for sexual autonomy in US history has been largely forgotten. Yet, it is not possible to understand the histories of sexual violence, women's rights and feminism without featuring the history of black women's sexual resistance as a central thread. This narrative resurfaces and is reiterated and revised in the protests of domestic workers in the Civil Rights movement and the activism of Black Feminists in the Black Power struggles of the mid- to late twentieth century.³ The historic erasure and silencing of black women's struggles for sexual self-sovereignty find its contemporary expression in the 21st #MeToo movement. Originating with the organizing efforts of activist Tarana Burke from as early as 1997, the current trend around the hashtag serves as an example of the ways that the rape and sexual abuse of women is still not taken seriously enough,

¹ The literature on Garvey women is rapidly growing. For example some really excellent examples see Ula Y. Taylor, *The Veiled Garvey: The Life & Times of Amy Jacques* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); Duncan, Natanya Duncan, "The 'Efficient Womanhood' of the Universal Negro Improvement Association: 1919-1930," (Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 2009).

² See Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

³ Ibid. See also Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment: second edition* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

and, in fact, practically ignored when those women and girls are of color.⁴ This dissertation seeks to tell part the long history of the struggle of black women and girls to control the bodies around their own bodies, and to have the sanctity of their marriages and families acknowledged and respected. offers an important step towards. It shows the importance of centering black women's history in the history of sexual violence and resistance in the US.

⁴ See Sandra E. Garcia, "The Woman Who Created #MeToo Long Before Hashtags," NYTimes.com, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html> (accessed March 1, 2019). See also Salamishah Tillet and Scheherazade Tillet, "After the 'Surviving R. Kelly' Documentary, #MeToo Has Finally Returned to Black Girls," NYTimes.com, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/10/opinion/r-kelly-documentary-metoo.html> (accessed March 1, 2019).

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