SHAPING THE BODY: AFRICAN-AMERICAN GIRLHOOD AND HEALTH, 1919-1940

By

SAMANTHA WHITE

A dissertation submitted to the

Graduate School-Camden

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Childhood Studies

Written under the direction of

Susan Miller

And approved by:

_____

Susan Miller

_____

Lynne Vallone

_____

Kate Cairns

_____

Amira Rose Davis

_____

Sarada Balagopalan

Camden, NJ

May 2020

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Shaping the Body: African-American Girlhood and Health, 1919-1940

by SAMANTHA WHITE

Dissertation Director:

Susan Miller

This dissertation examines racialized and gendered discourses of health for African-American adolescent girls and the production of ideal representations of the body during the early twentieth century. This project contributes to a growing field of Black Girlhood Studies by tracing histories of African-American girlhood, health and embodiment. During 1919-1940, informal and formal health education ushered in new practices and knowledges related to the black adolescent female body. Health education included a diverse set of pedagogical practices found in Young Women's Christian Associations, historically black colleges and universities, advice literature, and newspaper columns. African-American girls were encouraged to shape and conduct their bodies and behaviors across four areas of hygiene: physical hygiene, personal hygiene, social hygiene, and mental hygiene. These forms of hygiene, which addressed physical culture and sport, beauty, sexuality, and character, shaped notions of the healthy and respectable African-American adolescent girl. Health also intersected with patterns of urbanization, consumerism, and migration, especially for girls in Northern cities in the United States. African-American girls negotiated guidance and surveillance within urban Northern cities as their bodies represented sources of anxiety and hope during the New Negro Era. Ideologies of racial uplift also permeated black health education, as girls were instructed

to align their actions and bodily representations with the ideals of the black middle class. African-American girls were directed to display qualities of respectability and racialized femininity as they demonstrated their right to claim access to the category of American girlhood.

Acknowledgements

I am who I am because of the people around me. I am so grateful for those who have supported me during this process. I am continually reminded that this work is made possible by the love and care from others.

Thank you to the Department of Childhood Studies at Rutgers University-Camden. I am so lucky to have worked with such an incredible community of scholars. This was always my dream program—it still is. Thank you to my fantastic chair, Susan Miller. Thank you for being my tireless advocate and mentor. Thank you for your wise words, sharp insight, and care. Thank you to the rest of my committee, Lynne Vallone, Kate Cairns, and Amira Rose Davis. I am so grateful for your support, generosity, and guidance. Thank you to the rest of the faculty and staff in Childhood Studies for building a strong community of scholars that I am lucky to be a part of.

To my graduate school friends in Childhood Studies. Thank you for the conversations, the encouragement, and the time spent together that I cherish deeply. Thank you for being bold, brave, and brilliant.

This work has been funded by generous donors including: the David K. Sengstack Foundation, the Gender Studies Department at Rutgers University-Camden, and Smith College Special Collections. Thank you to the archivists at Smith College's Special Collections, Howard University's Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Temple University's Special Collections Research Center, the Social Welfare Archives at the

University of Minnesota, the College of Physicians Medical Library, and the Germantown Historical Society.

Thank you to my family, especially my parents and my brothers Terrell and Max. Thank you for your endless love, encouragement, and understanding. I love you all so much. I could not have done this without you. To my friend who is part of my chosen family- thank you Nick for everything. To my friends, both near and far. Thank you for the check-ins, the laughter, the words of support. Finally, thank you Mike. Thank you for your fervent belief in me, your support, and your care.

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

Introduction

In 1921, a group of young African-American Girl Reserves hiked through Fairmount Park in Philadelphia. The Girl Reserves, a group for adolescents in the Young Women's Christian Association, hosted a conference for the "Colored girls" in their organization. The summer conference offered a chance for girls from the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States to interact with their peers and listen to lectures from Y.W.C.A. leaders and the renowned scholar W.E.B. Du Bois. After the hike, the girls and Miss Crystal Byrd, the National Girls' Work Secretary for Colored Girls, organized a session in which they developed their own "Health Code" consisting of rules targeting bodily care and conduct. Inspired by their hike at Fairmount Park, one of the few integrated recreational spaces in Philadelphia, the girls set regulations regarding ideal health practices. The code addressed specific activities including physical movement ("take one hour's exercise daily"), wearing cosmetics ("use no cosmetics except enough to take the powder off"), how to dance ("distance of one hand between partners"), and how to demonstrate character ("no cheating at all").[1] Published in *The Brownies Book,* a children's magazine by W.E.B. Du Bois and Jessie Fauset, the girls' "Health Code" transmitted advice on the body to readers across the country. The code demonstrated the ways the health and bodies of black adolescent girls warranted attention from national organizations, national print publications, and prominent African-American intellectuals and reformers during the early twentieth century.

[1] Olive Jones, "Girl Reserves Conference," *The Brownies Book,* July 1921, 212-214.

How did conceptions of the healthy body impact representations of African-American girlhood during the early twentieth century? Like their white counterparts, they paid strict attention to their bodies through embracing physical discipline, beauty regimens, and new dating rituals. Through a consumer culture that intersected with health advice and representations, African-American girls were also encouraged to read publications and buy products that could improve their external selves. African-American girls participated in a national girls' culture that heralded the beautiful and healthy body. However, they also faced rampant racism, from segregation at gymnasiums and pools to stereotypes of their bodies in popular culture. Instead, African-American girls often received tailored messages from black reformers, educators, and writers about health and beauty ideals. These messages created idealized forms of black female adolescence through emphasizing the importance of hygiene.

Hygiene, a thread that frames my chapters, provided medical and scientific approaches to female adolescence.[2] While I largely use the word "health" in my dissertation, I frame my chapters with "hygiene" in order to note its definition as a set of practices as well as adhere to the phrases used by reformers and medical professionals during the early twentieth century. However, most manuals and organizations directed at girls used the term health, rather than hygiene. Health included holistic notions of the body that encompassed well-being, aesthetics, conduct, and interpersonal relationships. During the years 1919-1940, African-American girls navigated messages that targeted the health of the body by addressing physical, personal, social, and mental forms of hygiene.

---

[2] Richard A. Meckel addresses hygiene within schools and children in *Classrooms and Clinics: Urban Schools and the Protection and Promotion of Child Health, 1870-1930* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013).

African-American girls across the country received messages regarding the construction of the ideal healthy body from national organizations and publications. However, this advice was often directed at girls who lived in the urban North. During the 1920s and 1930s, as girls moved to urban Northern cities during the first Great Migration, they became targets of guidance and interventions aimed at their body.[3] Escaping the violence of the rural South, African-Americans migrated to urban Northern cities in search of better opportunities. The North also reflected a cosmopolitan, albeit aspirational, ideal of black cultural life. Containing large metropolitan cities such as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C., the North offered a participate in a growing urban consumer culture. While ideal African-American female adolescence represented an urban and Northern cosmopolitan image, its circulation and influence reached African-American girls all over the country.

African-American girls fashioned new aesthetics and new ideologies, actualized by a figure I call the New Negro Girl. The development of New Negro Girlhood included both attention to racial consciousness as well as a strong commitment to the displays of middle-class values. Informal and formal health education identified the bodies of New Negro Girls as symbolic of respectability and racial uplift. African-American girls also used health practices to articulate their own girls' culture, by developing rituals around

[3] For work on girls during the Great Migration, see Marcia Chatelain, *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). For work on adults during the Great Migration, see Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, & Black Urban Life* (Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Farah Griffin, "'*Who Set You Flowin' The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

fitness, beauty, sexuality, and character. Through attention to health and the body, African-American girls became New Negro Girls.

The development of New Negro Girlhood also required intergenerational cooperation. Scholars of African-American girlhood such as Marcia Chatelain argue that during the Great Migration, black "reformers and leaders made a case for the state of black girlhood."[4] Through policies and institutions, black reformers used their resources and power to imagine African-American girls as "vulnerable and in need of investment."[5] Their work pushed for the implementation of educational programs and social clubs. In my study, I examine how African-American girls received health education from reformers interested in articulating the value of black girlhood.

However, as African-American girls moved to urban spaces during the Great Migration, health advice also targeted their bodies through collective monitoring. As girls moved to urban centers and faced an increase of surveillance, the adherence to respectability remained a guiding framework in molding and displaying their bodies. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham states that "the politics of respectability emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations."[6] Health advice to girls dictated how they should shape their appearance and behaviors in order to craft respectable bodies.

The crafting of respectable bodies included attention to scrutiny from black and white communities. African-American girls felt the gaze from their own black

---

[4] Chatelain, *South Side Girls,* 13.
[5] Chatelain, *South Side Girls,* 13.
[6] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 187.

communities as well as whites in urban spaces. LaKisha Simmons notes in her study of African-American girls in 1930s and 1940s New Orleans, girls often faced a "double bind" in which they faced "segregation from whites and felt bound by conditions imposed by the black communities."[7] These constraints impacted girls' relationships to public space as well as their own sense of selfhood. I extend her argument of the double bind to examine similar tensions between physical appearance, public space, and African-American girls' relationships to their own bodies.

The construction and display of healthy respectable bodies demonstrated a commitment to racial uplift. Espoused by the black middle-class, ideologies of uplift identified the individual and collective behaviors of African-Americans as potential forms of self-help and self-determination.[8] African-American girls were also implicated within projects of racial uplift. As African-American girls engaged in health practices within their homes, schools and clubs, they also received messages that their collective health could benefit the African-American race. Through shaping their bodies to display of ideal femininity, their images in print culture could serve as visual forms of racial uplift. Additionally, through attention to sexuality, girls' reproductive futures could also point to their roles in promoting racial uplift through marriage and motherhood.

Health messages were circulated by community organizations such as the Young Women's Christian Association (Y.W.C.A.), historically black colleges and universities as well as the national black press. Founded in 1855, the Y.W.C.A., a civic and social organization, provided young girls and women with social, economic, and recreational

---

[7] LaKisha Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 5.
[8] Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 2.

opportunities.[9] The Y.W.C.A. was a complicated organization, operating racially separate branches until 1946 and yet affording African-American women positions in national leadership.[10] Physical education and health education departments at historically black colleges also aimed to shape images of African-American girlhood. In this project, I primarily focus on Howard University, while occasionally drawing upon records from other institutions. Newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender,* a prominent national publication, offered girls a chance to read about relevant health information.[11]

Messages directed at African-American female adolescents emphasized the necessity of an inclusive category of girlhood, a theme also raised by scholars of Black Girlhood Studies.[12] Who is considered a girl? And how is the category of girlhood racialized? A subfield of Girlhood Studies, the field challenges homogenous constructions of girlhood by centering the lives of black girls who have often been excluded from notions of innocence, vulnerability, and femininity.[13] By studying their

---

[9] Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt, *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and the YWCA in the City* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 6. See also: Nancy Marie Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906-46* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Daphne Spain, *How Women Saved the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

[10] Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905-1945*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1997. For more on African-American women's work at the YWCA, see: "Struggle Among Saints: African-American Women and the YWCA, 1870-1920" by Adrienne Lash Jones (160-187) and To Be Separate or One: The Issue of Race in the History of Pittsburgh and Cleveland YWCAs, 1920-1946" by Margaret Spratt (188-205) in *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and the YWCA in the City* edited by Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

[11] For a comprehensive study on the *Chicago Defender,* see: Ethan Michaeli, *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

[12] For works on the field of Black Girlhood Studies, see: Ruth Nicole Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009); Ruth Nicole Brown, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Tammy C. Owens, Durell M. Callier, Jessica L. Robinson, and Porshé R. Garner, "Towards an Interdisciplinary Field of Black Girlhood Studies," *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 6, no. 3 (2017): 116-132.

[13] On Girlhood Studies, see: Mary Celeste Kearney, "Coalescing: The Development of Girls' Studies," *NWSA Journal* 21, no. 1 (2009): 1-28; Catherine Driscoll, "Girls Today-Girls, Girl Culture and Girl Studies," *Girlhood Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 13-32; Shauna Pomerantz, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Un/Defining the 'Girl,'" *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 1, no. 2 (2009): 147-158; Miriam Forman-Brunell, *Girlhood: A Global History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

lives, I attend to what Saidiya Hartman declared in her study of young urban black women in the early twentieth century as the "love of the black ordinary."[14] The stories of ordinary black girls, the ones who pored over magazines on beauty and swam with their friends during the afternoons, rest at the heart of this dissertation. This study builds on growing histories of black girlhood by tracing the role of discourses of health in the production of young black embodied femininity.[15]

Many American girls of all races reflected upon their bodies and the individual work needed to transform them during the early twentieth century.[16] As Joan Brumberg notes, the shift from Victorian ideals of internal selfhood to external beauty transformed conceptions of the body for American girls.[17] American girls, who previously relied on advice from mothers began to receive information regarding their bodies from doctors and other medical professionals. A growing consumer culture, which encouraged the purchase of new products that altered physical appearance as well as the display of media images that portrayed body ideals, contributed to this change. Even at girls' organizations, as Susan Miller notes, an emphasis on health shifted from a focus on fresh air to modern ideals of "commodities" and "personality," as adults became attentive to

---

[14] Saidiya Hartmann, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2019), 236.

[15] For histories of black girlhood, see: Nazera Sadiq Wright, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Corinne T. Field, Tammy-Charelle Owens, Marcia Chatelain, Lakisha Simmons, Abosede George, and Rhian Keyse, "The History of Black Girlhood: Recent Innovations and Future Directions," *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 9, no. 3 (2016): 383-401; Marcia Chatelain, *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); LaKisha Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

[16] Within this dissertation, I include girls of all races under the category of American. Joan Jacobs Brumberg provides a history of girls and ideas of the body in *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Vintage, 1998).

[17] Brumberg, *The Body Project,* xvii- xxxiii. For studies on eighteenth and nineteenth studies of girlhood, see Lynne Vallone, *Disciplines of Virtue: Girls' Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) and Jane Hunter, *How Young Ladies Became Girls: The Victorian Origins of American Girlhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

girls' modern identities.[18] Additionally, as Kelly Schrum suggests, teenage girls engaged in a "beauty and health" consumer market through magazines and the purchase of cosmetics.[19] With bobbed hair, flapper aesthetics, open sexuality, and carefree attitude, American female adolescents represented both a promise of new visions of girlhood as well as a threat to traditional orders of femininity, represented through the figure of the Modern Girl.

During the 1920s, the image of the Modern Girl materialized as a symbol of feminine identity across the country.[20] Her figure, circulated through visual culture, asserted the value of beauty. The configuration of the Modern Girl also noted the ways in which "beauty and youthfulness are often linked to scientific hygiene."[21] While briefly alluded to in *Modern Girls Around the World*, my work extends this argument and addressees how representations of girlhood are often shaped by discourses of health. African-American girls defined their own versions of modern American girlhood through hygiene. They countered the whiteness of the flapper with their own representations, found new ways to express their romantic and social relationships, and demonstrated the visual aesthetics of modern girls in black magazines and newspapers. Through these actions, health practices also served as a form of joy, self-expression, and a way to facilitate socialization with peers.

---

[18] Susan Miller, *Growing Girls: The Natural Origins of Girls' Organizations in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 192-220.
[19] Kelly Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls' Culture, 1920-1945* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004), 69-71.
[20] Alys Eve Weinbaum, Lynn M. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger, Madeleine Yue Dong, and Tani E. Barlow, *The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
[21] Weinbaum et. al, *Modern Girl Around the World,* 34.

Aligning health with social progress also emerged as a theme for African-American reformers in the early twentieth century. This work built upon the efforts of early nineteenth century black health writers in North America who argued against the scientific racism that marked their bodies as inferior.[22] Additionally, these discourses were used to further perpetuate inequalities regarding access to medical care. [23] As scholars such as Susan Smith argue, early twentieth century African-American women participated in community efforts to address health inequities of black Americans, whether through encouraging observations of Booker T. Washington's National Negro Health Week, instituted in 1915**,** or teaching health education clinics to local groups.[24]

Although African-American girls were also implicated within these projects, their experiences have not received major scholarly attention. Similar to the adults in their community, African-American girls faced inequalities regarding access to health. Black reformers attempted to rectify this situation, providing health education in schools, organizations, and newspapers. However, a focus on adolescence also reveals the significance of the category of age. African-American adolescents were encouraged to craft healthy bodies in order to successfully transition from childhood to adulthood. Whether through exercise or mental fortitude, African-American girls were to view health practices as essential for the development into future women who would help improve and uplift the race. Health transformed African-American girls into symbolic figures, especially poignant during the New Negro Era.

---

[22] Andrea Stone, *Black Well-Being: Health and Selfhood in Antebellum Black Literature* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016).
[23] Stone, *Black Well-Being,* 39-50.
[24] Susan Lynn Smith, *Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: Black Women's Health Activism in America, 1890-1950* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

Proponents of the New Negro Era encouraged redefinitions of black political and cultural identity.[25] While also known as the Harlem Renaissance, the term "New Negro Era" allows for an expansive geographical focus as well as nods to its national influence in cities across the country. The New Negro was also viewed as a symbol of modernity by migrating to new urban cities, creating new cultural works of art and literature, and challenging racist representations. Health also shaped visions of the New Negro. Health practices and representations redefined individual and collective identity, particularly for African-American girls.

Goals for the New Negro included increasing race consciousness and racial pride, outlined by Alain Locke in his 1925 anthology *The New Negro***.**[26] According to Locke, youth proved to be a pivotal time to develop racial consciousness. One such place in which they could build their racial identity included Howard University in Washington D.C., which Locke described as the "national Negro University" in his anthology.[27] In a section titled "Negro Youth Speaks," he argued that youth were part of "a new generation not because of years only, but because of new aesthetics and a new horizon on life."[28] Through the body's physical appearance and conduct, New Negro Girls could also display new aesthetics and ideologies.

---

[25] For New Negro Era scholarship, see: Anne Elizabeth, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Davarian L. Baldwin, and Minkah Makalani, eds. *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance Beyond Harlem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, & Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Henry Louis Gates, "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations* 24 (1988): 129-155.

[26] Alain Locke, *The New Negro* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925, Second Printing 1927). Citations refer to the 1927 edition.

[27] Kelly Miller, "Howard: The National Negro University," in *The New Negro* ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925, Second Printing 1927).

[28] Alain Locke, *The New Negro*, 49.

Scholars have challenged the masculine scope of the New Negro Era by addressing the ways black woman defined their own identities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[29] Drawing upon the role of self-determination as a form of combating racism, Margaret Murray Washington argued in 1895 that New Negro Womanhood was essential for advancing success and racial progress, a mission that required the work of fellow black clubwomen.[30] As Treva Lindsey argues, New Negro Women expressed their rights to "equal citizenship" as well as "sexual freedom as well as freedom from damaging stereotypes."[31] By attuning to lives of these women, Cheryl Wall asserts the New Negro Era allows for a more expansive form of periodization, especially to account for the work of black female writers, such as Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset.[32] She also states that "despite the emphasis on youth, however, many of the New Negroes were not young."[33] My work both draws from her flexible periodization and includes the experiences of young New Negroes. While scholarship continues to trace the role of women during the New Negro Era, few studies center the role of children and youth. Age was, in fact, a salient factor within the development of New Negro Identity. As Katherine Capshaw notes, the New Negro Movement used children's literature to instill values in order to develop future leaders of the race, ideas embraced by Alain Locke.[34]

---

[29] Erin D. Chapman, *Prove It on Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular culture in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Treva B. Lindsey, *Colored No More: Reinventing Black Womanhood in Washington* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Anne Stavney "'Mothers of Tomorrow,' The New Negro Renaissance and the Politics of Maternal Representation," *African American Review* 32, no. 4 (1998): 533-561; Laila Haidarali, *Brown Beauty: Color, Sex, and Race from the Harlem Renaissance to World War II*, (New York: NYU Press, 2018).
[30] Martha H. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915*. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010) 52.
[31] Lindsey, *Colored No More,* 9.
[32] Cheryl A. Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 9-12.
[33] Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance,* 12.
[34] Katharine Capshaw, *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), XVII.

Adolescence symbolized a pivotal period to produce ideal feminine bodies through discourses of health. I primarily focus on the experiences of African-American adolescent girls between the ages of twelve, to reflect the entry into social clubs such as the Girl Reserves at the Y.W.C.A. and twenty-two, in order to account for college girls. As Susan Cahn notes, adolescence does not depend on exact numbers. Instead, adolescence also denotes "physical, emotional, sexual, and psychological changes."[35] These changes also suggest a prime opportunity to study health during the transitory period of adolescence, one in which girls faced changing bodies as well as changing ideals regarding how the body should appear**.**

In analyzing African-American girlhood and the cultural and social production of health and the body, I relied upon materials such as advice manuals, meeting minutes, newspapers, yearbooks, and organizational records. When possible, I have also included girls' voices from letters and scrapbooks. A culture of dissemblance explains the limited amount of girls' voices within this study. As Darlene Clark Hine states, for those studying the lives of African-American women, "the dynamics of dissemblance involved creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining enigmatic."[36] African-American girls, particularly those living in the Jim Crow United States, felt compelled to hide their inner lives—a desire that, while makes historians lives a bit more difficult, also provided the necessary shield for them to feel safer during the early twentieth century.

---

[35] Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 12.
[36] Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 41.

Photographs also offer an important window into early twentieth century African-American girlhood. The visibility of the healthy body within print and visual culture also served to further circulate representations of African-American ideal girlhood. Scholars such as Shawn Michelle have examined the history of visual culture as one tied with middle class notions of visibility. As she notes, photography presented a way to visualize and construct ideas about race, class, gender, and the body.[37] The photographs that I use in this study circulated in daily black national newspapers which identified the healthy adolescent middle-class girl as a visual model of success and beauty. Messages disseminated to African-American girls illuminated how they were instructed to achieve and perform the ideal healthy body—norms that few girls could achieve.

These chapters examine the application of hygiene across four areas. In my first chapter on physical hygiene, I examine the ways in which African-American girls pursued active femininities and were guided towards standardized bodies that embraced femininity and strength. Girls were instructed to pursue the right figure, which relied on bodily discipline and measurement. Girls' balance of femininity also required attention to changing performances of gender, which shifted from the tomboy to the athletic beauty.

In my second chapter, I explore personal hygiene and girls' beauty culture through the lens of visual and print culture. I argue that the black press emerges as a critical space for girls to learn about personal hygiene and beauty, particularly within a media landscape that often ignored their experiences. Through publications such as *The Chicago Defender* and *Half-Century Magazine,* girls participated in black beauty culture through reading columns, sending in photographs of themselves with bobbed hair, and

---

[37] Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 2-10.

taking part in beauty contests sponsored by newspapers. These practices illuminate circulations of black girls' beauty culture in national publications—circulations that sought to encourage bodily surveillance.

In my third chapter, I focus on social hygiene and dance culture. In both dance halls and formal dances, black girls negotiated ideas related to sexuality, marriage, and motherhood. Through dance culture, girls were encouraged to pursue respectable recreation. Girls were dissuaded from dance halls, which were viewed as spaces for delinquent and working-class girls. Through formal dances, which included an emerging prom culture, middle class girls were guided towards respectable recreation. Across dance halls and proms, girls' sexualities were monitored and shaped by peers, adults, and themselves.

In my fourth chapter, I address mental hygiene through the lens of character-building. How did racialized forms of character-building shape African-American girls' internal selves? Character-building encouraged African-American adolescent girls to develop their own racial and national identities. Through developing ideal characteristics, including racial pride and good citizenship, girls' development of their racial and national identities helped them make claims to both New Negro and American girlhood.

Through physical hygiene, personal hygiene, social hygiene, mental hygiene, African-American girls connected health and their body to notions of success and respectability. In defining what it meant to be a New Negro Girl, African-American girls used health to construct new visions of themselves as healthy and beautiful symbols of girlhood in the early twentieth century United States.

Chapter 1-Physical Hygiene: Creating Active Femininities

In 1938, Fay Young, a sportswriter for the *Chicago Defender,* reported on athletic competitions at the Tuskegee Relays. Held at Tuskegee University in Alabama, the relays drew male and female African-American participants from across the country to participate in a track and field meet. In observing the women's events, Young observed: "There is a long period between the girl athlete of yesteryear and the one of today who comes bounding out in her shorts and takes her place at the starting line just like any boy and yet these girls of both periods seem to retain her feminine charm."[1] After observing a female teenage discus thrower, Young stated that while, in earlier times, she may have been labeled a "tomboy," now she was "just another girl."[2] His remarks bring forth several questions: What was feminine charm? And how did athletic girls display various forms of femininity during the 1920s and the 1930s? And how did girls transform from tomboys to ordinary girls—while still exuding a sense of femininity?

In order to represent feminine beauty, girls were encouraged to take up physical activity, sports and exercise. Young's words centered African-American girls in the very sort of projects of bodily discipline and performances of femininity that has historically excluded their experiences. African-American girls were expected to not only shape their bodies through exercise and sports. They were also expected to reflect notions of acceptable athletic femininities. Within institutions such as schools, organizations, and the press, girls engaged with forms of physical movement as a way to shape and mold their bodies. Doctors, reformers, teachers, and other professionals identified the active girl as the healthy girl. However, what types of exercises and sports were appropriate for

[1] Fay Young, "The Stuff is Here," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), May 14, 1938.
[2] Fay Young, "The Stuff is Here," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), May 14, 1938.

girls' health-and how these activities shaped the production and representations of girlhood-often changed during the interwar period.

Girls of all races faced messages that directed them to conform to ideal notions of the physical body—however, the pressures that African-American girls have faced have been generally overlooked. In Margaret Lowe's work on body image during the nineteenth to early twentieth century, she notes that college girls received messages that pointed to "weight, inches, and athletic skills for white women, virtue for black women."[3] By asserting that African-American girls were not subject to these influences, they are seen as immune from bodily pressures—a claim that I counteract by addressing their participation and representation in athletics and exercise culture in the early twentieth century. Through advice dispensed to girls in the black press to physical education instruction at African-American social organizations and schools, the body remained an object to configure through bodily discipline, measurement, and attention to performances of femininity.

Physical health, otherwise known as physical hygiene, centered athletics and exercise as critical for the development of all American girls.[4] Both white and black reformers aimed to shape the physical health of girls in their care. Educators and doctors encouraged girls to participate in physical activity and athletics as debates ranged around which types of movements were appropriate for their social and moral development. During the interwar period, girls' physical health varied between the embrace of

---

[3] Margaret Lowe, *Looking Good: College Women and Body Image, 1875-1930* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2003); 29.

[4] I use athletics to define competitive and casual sports and exercise to define individual activities that targeted the size and the shape of the body such as gymnastics. I also draw upon Mabel E Rugen's definition of physical hygiene in which she defines exercise and physical activity as part of this area of health: "Chapter IX: Physical Hygiene and Health Education," *Review of Educational Research* 10, no. 5 (1940): 464-471.

competitive sports to more restrained forms of exercise. Scholars of women's sport have argued that the growth of compulsory education as well as an increase in community and civic organizations provided a greater availability of "elite sport, school athletics, and public recreation."[5] In addition, the "child saving" movement also spurred a vested interest in the physical and social lives of youth.[6] Reformers and educators, concerned with the development of children and youth, created programs that sought to increase the health and educational outcomes of children in their care. Within these forms of athletics and exercise, black and white girls received messages regarding the ideal size and performance of their bodies.

However, African-American female adolescents' experiences diverged from those of their white peers. They navigated racist and sexist images of black girls and women that shaped how white audiences and the black middle class viewed their bodies. African-American girls were viewed by white audiences as incapable of adopting the discipline needed to shape their bodies into dominant images of femininity. In intraracial contexts, African-American girls faced pressures from their own communities regarding the importance of the ideal active feminine body, an ideal shaped by New Negro ideologies.

---

[5] Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Women's Sport* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 17. For more on the history of women's sport, see Martha H. Verbrugge, *Active Bodies: A History of Women's Physical Education in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Jennifer H. Lansbury, *A Spectacular Leap: Black Women Athletes in Twentieth-Century America* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2014); Amira Rose Davis "On the Courts of Druid Hill: Lucy Diggs Slowe and the Rise of Organized Black Tennis" in *Baltimore Sports History: Stories from Charm City,* ed. Daniel Nathan (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, August 2016), 45-58; Pamela Grundy, *Learning to Win: Sports, Education, and Social Change in Twentieth-Century North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Patricia Vertinsky and Gwendolyn Captain, "More Myth than History: American Culture and Representations of the Black female's Athletic Ability," *Journal of Sport History* 25, no. 3 (1998): 532-561.

[6] Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 17.

During the 1920s and 1930s, sports and athletics contributed to the figure of New Negro. Scholars have noted the ways in which New Negro identity emerged within athletics at historically black colleges and international competitions, as some African-American intellectuals imagined the sporting sphere as one to assert self-definition through accomplishments.[7] After witnessing the feats of athletes such as Jesse Owens at the 1936 Olympics, who had claimed several gold medals, W.E.B. Du Bois envisioned sport as a site to "pave the way for greater cultural achievements."[8] DuBois also argued that sports and active recreation aided in the development of character of youth. Through participation in athletics, youth could connect their physical activities to "expression, advancement...and education."[9] However, most of this scholarship addresses the experiences of men, erasing women and girls from New Negro athletic identity. Even within historically black colleges, "male athletes" were the ones responsible for "carrying the race."[10] Instead, I argue that African-American girls also constructed their own athletic New Negro identity through sporting achievements and the performance of racialized femininities.

Other scholars have countered the assumption that African-American contributions to sports and athletics existed as a solely masculine undertaking. As Ava Purkiss notes, black women participated in physical culture as a way to reflect notions of

---

[7] Daniel Anderson, "'The Discipline of Work and Play': WEB Du Bois, the New Negro Intelligentsia, and the Culture of Sports," *Studies in Popular Culture* 29, no. 2 (2006): 21-38. For more on the New Negro and sports, see: Theresa E. Runstedtler, "In Sports the Best Man Wins," in *In the Game*, ed. Amy Bass (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 47-92; Patrick B. Miller, "To "'Bring the Race Along Rapidly' Sport, Student Culture, and Educational Mission at Historically Black Colleges During the Interwar Years," *History of Education Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (1995): 111-133.
[8] Anderson, "The Discipline of Work and Play," 29.
[9] Anderson, "The Discipline of Work and Play," 37.
[10] Miller, "'To Bring the Race Along Rapidly'", 121.

American citizenship that heralded the thin body as efficient and rational.[11] During the early twentieth century, not only had health writers began to illustrate the "unequivocal connections between slimness, patriotism, and citizenship" but "elite blacks began to stigmatize fatness and encourage black women to slim down, beautify, and improve their bodies through exercise."[12] Her work challenges assumptions that African-American women were immune from bodily pressures, an argument that I also extend by addressing the experiences of girls.

Institutions such as the Y.W.C.A. and historically black colleges and universities as well as the popular black press helped constitute a set of practices that included sports, exercise, and weight control in an effort to produce the ideal athletic girl. First, African-American girls were directed to construct the right figure. Through bodily discipline and measurement, the right figure could be attained through sports and exercise. While these practices aimed to improve physical health, they also encouraged the display of the slender body. Through conduct and the aesthetics of active body, African-American girls negotiated constructions of the ideal athletic girl.

Representations of New Negro athletic girls required careful attention to performances of gender. African-American girls were directed towards figures such as the tomboy and the athletic beauty. While the tomboy has been often read and circulated as a symbol of white girlhood, I trace how newspapers and physical educators encouraged African-American girls to embody the figure of the tomboy. On one hand, the tomboy represented an active female adolescence that sought to prepare girls for

---

[11] Ava Purkiss, "'Beauty Secrets: Fight Fat': Black Women's Aesthetics, Exercise, and Fat Stigma, 1900–1930s," *Journal of Women's History* 29, no. 2 (2017): 16-17.
[12] Purkiss, "Beauty Secrets: Fight Fat," 19.

motherhood. However, this representation also sought to encourage images of strong and competitive femininities. My work troubles the concept of the tomboy and presents her as an important figure in the construction of African-American athletic girlhoods.

While first iterations of the active femininities encouraged girls to embody the figure of the tomboy, later forms heralded the active beauty. The change from the "tomboy" of the early 1920s to the "beauty" of the 1930s pointed to the shifting conception of the ideal athletic girl for both middle-class white and black girls. However, African-American girls, whose bodies were already read as masculine, were increasingly expected to perform normative femininity and embrace middle class standards of beauty. Through these different forms of active femininities, girls faced a difficult tension to achieve both idealized bodies and idealized gender performances. African-American girls' relationship to physical hygiene illustrated the racialized and gendered messages that they received around sport and exercise and how these ideas shaped representations of the athletic American girl.

The Right Figure

Conceptions of femininity often tied to physical size. This reflected a growing consensus that one's weight connected to one's physical and moral health. These messages, circulated by health educators, as well as doctors, identified athletics and exercise as sites to shape physical as well as ideological meanings of bodies[13] However, these norms relied on a construction of the body that heralded "white, middle-class

[13] Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, "Thanks, Gender! An Intellectual History of the Gym," in *American Labyrinth: Intellectual History for Complicated Times,* eds. Raymond Haberski Jr., and Andrew Hartman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 86-103.

heterosexual femininity."[14] Through bodily discipline and measurement, African-American girls also participated in practices that shaped their own physical bodies. Girls were instructed to pursue idealized bodies that were not too thin or too large, reflecting cultural conceptions of the appropriate figure for healthy female adolescents.

Bodily Discipline

During the 1920s, both African-American and white girls consciously worked on slimming their bodies through dieting and physical activity, spurred by changing ideals of the female body which circulated through consumer culture, particularly through the figure of the flapper.[15] In the nineteenth century, the more robust body demonstrated health and vitality. However, during the turn of the twentieth century, exercise and dieting became synonymous with restraint and rationality. The shift from the large body "representing prosperity to now representing ideals of the lower class" affected the ideal body image for girls.[16]

American girls' adherence to bodily discipline represented their commitment to a growing notion that investing in the physical body was part of a healthy adolescence. Bodily discipline emerged as a way of demonstrating restraint and new visions of femininity**.** In order to align with American body projects that argued that weight, diet, and exercise shaped one's commitment to both self-improvement and beauty, girls were guided towards physical health routines that shaped slim bodies. As Amy Farrell suggests, the slim body represented a civilized self as well as the correct adjustment to

[14] Verbrugge, *Active Bodies,* 51.
[15] Brumberg, *The Body Project,* 99-100.
[16] Lowe, *Looking Good*, 147.

modern life, especially poignant in urban settings where fears of laziness and "excess" ran rampant in middle class circles.[17] By persisting with a strict routine, the pursuit of the active and slim body demonstrated discipline and rationality, characteristics that were seen as essential in the development of youth.

While white girls and women who occupied larger bodies felt pressures to slim down, their size did not warrant a moral judgement on their race. As Ava Purkiss notes, "anti-fat bias" impacted perceptions of the black body by whites as well as by middle class African-Americans, further encouraging the production of the thin body.[18] The racialization of thinness and fatness impacted African-American girls, as white audiences viewed their bodies as sites of racial difference. This reflected a deep-seated fear and distrust of the black female body—rhetoric that identified the bodies of African-American girls and young women as deviant.

An anti-fat bias also circulated within popular and material culture. Stereotypes about the black female body came forth from a multitude of places, including physicians, philosophers, and advertisers.[19] Advertisements for items such as health and beauty products as well as grocery items mocked the figure of the large black female body and drew upon themes of minstrelsy.[20] Organizations that African-American girls belonged to, such as the Y.W.C.A., also reproduced these racist forms of representation. At a 1919

---

[17] Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 38-49. See also: Heather Addison, "Capitalizing their Charms: Cinema Stars and Physical Culture in the 1920s," *The Velvet Light Trap-A Critical Journal of Film and Television* (2002): 15-35.
[18] Purkiss, "Beauty Secrets: Fight Fat," 15.
[19] Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York: NYU Press, 2019)
[20] For more on racist imagery and consumer culture, see Doris Witt, "What (N)ever Happened to Aunt Jemima: Eating Disorders, Fetal Rights, and Black Female Appetite in Contemporary American Culture," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture* ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002) and Brian D. Behnken and Gregory D. Smithers. *Racism in American Popular Media: From Aunt Jemima to the Frito Bandito* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2015).

Nashville Y.W.C.A. camp for white girls, ideas of the black female body were embedded in promotional materials about the kitchen and the staff. Racial caricatures of black female kitchen staff come forth through the description of the girls' time at camp by stating that "the colored old mammies, like the one we see on the box of pancake flour are a reality."[21] Rather than interrogate these images, the Y.W.C.A. camp reaffirmed their girls' belief in the staff as replicas of Aunt Jemima. [22] Bodies of white female campers were contrasted in opposition to a larger black body read as subservient.

American girls, both black and white, confronted a consumer culture that heralded the thin body in advertisements and films. The growth of consumer culture, which propagated images of the thin body in advertisements, spurred an interest in slenderizing bodies.[23] However, African-American girls also faced advertisements that also drew upon racist imagery such as the mammy. These representations present within newsletters from organizations that they belonged to such as the Y.W.C.A. crafted their experiences with body image as different from their white counterparts. At the same time, African-American girls also faced competing messages regarding their bodies from the black press that encouraged them to pursue thin, but not too thin, figures.

A 1919 letter from a teenage girl to the "Beauty Hints" column at the *Chicago Defender* illuminated anxieties around body image. She was deeply worried about the size of her body and stated: "I am only 19 years old, weigh 175 pounds, and am only five feet tall. How can I reduce?"[24] Her question regarding reducing was not uncommon.

---

[21] War Work Council of the National Board of the Young Women's Christian Association, "Camps for Every Girl," *War Work Bulletin,* July 25, 1919.
[22] Witt, "What (N)ever Happened to Aunt Jemima," 239-262.
[23] Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat body in American Culture*, 26.
[24] Leila Hubbard, "Beauty Hints," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Dec. 20, 1919.

Reducing, the act of losing weight, had been growing in popularity for girls, particularly due to the growth of consumer culture. Through pursuing this practice, African-American girls embraced a beauty standard that upheld the value of the slim body, a body also seen in advertisements within the *Chicago Defender.* Her letter notes the ways that some black teenage girls in the interwar period internalized notions of the slim body and the pressures to achieve it. In addition, her letter also demonstrates the ways in which girls used the black press to seek advice regarding health matters.

Leila Hubbard, the columnist of *Beauty Hints,* gave an assessment of her weight. She stated that "You weigh far too much."[25] The girl was not asking about the status of her weight; rather, she wanted to know about how to reduce. The author suggested that diet and exercise could help her lose weight and offered to provide a sequence of exercises. The author's advice as well as the young woman's letter noted the growing worries that girls faced around their bodies and the strategies, such as diet and exercise, that others offered to them. While the letter provides no specific markers of her geographic location, the columnist's answer could be read by girls across the country.

At the same time, girls and young women reading the *Chicago Defender* also received advice to gain weight. While not as pervasive as the pressures to lose weight, African-American girls were still instructed to avoid bodies that were too thin. Girls faced advertisements that promised to provide them with the opportunity to gain several pounds. A 1928 advertisement for McCoy's Tablets claimed to improve the health of its recipients noted that after taking it, "a Florida girl gained 20 needed pounds in three months and her hollow chest filled out."[26] Later, in 1938, Marie Downing stated in the

[25] Leila Hubbard, "Beauty Hints," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Dec. 20, 1919.
[26] Display Ad 57, *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), July 14, 1928.

Chicago Defender that her fellow beauty columnists often ignored "the problem of the too slender sister" and offered suggestions for weight gain that included specific exercises. For African-American girls, the tension rested in achieving not just the thin body, but the "ideal" body—one not too small or large. The too thin body could be read as detrimental to girls' physical health as well as their reproductive health. While the thin body could be fine for older women, African-American adolescent girls also needed to display bodies that could demonstrate health, femininity, and the capacity for future reproduction.

Feminist studies of body culture suggest that these practices of corporal discipline are deeply ingrained sites of shaping ideas on race, gender, and the body. As Susan Bordo notes, health advice, advertisements and self-monitoring worked to "homogenize" and "normalize" the size of the body.[27] The process of homogenization encouraged similar bodies through repetitive exercises and weight surveillance. Girls were taught to embrace single body types, types that were not too large or small, in order to fit into bodily conceptions of femininity. Through physical activity and exercise, constant bodily discipline created ideal feminine bodies.

Girls' practices of individual bodily discipline connected to larger collective goals. A 1923 *Chicago Defender* column titled "The Exercise Habit" informed readers that devotion to physical fitness created a strong nation.[28] As the article extolled the virtues of citizenship and bodily fitness, the author accused African-American girls and women of potentially derailing this project. His accusation painted the bodies of black

---

[27] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 24-25.
[28] "The Exercise Habit," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), June 2, 1923.

girls and women as dangerous and deviant—accusations that echoed those from white communities that had viewed their bodies with disdain. Noting the "large percentage of women overweight" in Chicago, the article identified its female readers as in need of engaging with the exercise habit.[29] While this claim of a large percentage of overweight women was not substantiated by any evidence included within the article, the claim tied into ideas about the black female body that circulated in popular culture.

Under the guise of health, girls' bodies were met with increased surveillance in urban spaces by members of their own communities. African-American girls faced particular ire. In 1922, a journalist for the *Chicago Defender* stated that while she observed "strong, healthy, robust looking women " when she visited parks and sporting spaces of "other races," she could not say the same for her own girls. While she does note that this is a problem of access, most of her criticism is geared towards girls who would rather spend their time dancing and "shimmying."[30] Her words, also an attack on the symbol of the young black flapper, directed girls to move their attention away from dances to athletics. In order to guide girls and young women towards achieving bodily discipline, articles encouraged readers to visit various clubs, including the Y.W.C.A.

Programming encouraged girls to tie discipline and self-restriction to physical activity and exercises—messages that were disseminated to girls through health education departments and manuals. Identifying exercise as the key to "looking one's best" and "being efficient," a 1921 Girl Reserves manual directed at adolescent girls in the Y.W.C.A. advised readers to devote themselves to physical fitness.[31] Girls were to

---

[29] "The Exercise Habit," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), June 2, 1923.
[30] "Fay Says," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), October 4, 1922.
[31] National Board of the Young Women's Christian Association, *The Girl Reserve Movement: A Manual for Advisors* (New York: YWCA of the USA, 1921), 334.

spend at least ten minutes every morning and every night participating in exercises. By making exercise a daily habit, girls were reminded of the importance of aesthetics and efficiency, qualities essential for health and beauty.

African-American girls were instructed to pursue a body size that reflected their commitment to self-restraint. At the Y.W.C.A. in Harlem, New York, a newsletter published by the center directed black adolescent girls at the center to "shift from candy to calories"—weight not only reflected the health of the physical self but served as an indictment of character for girls and young women. According to adults who monitored girls' bodies, traits such as fear, a lack of self-control, and unhappiness, could be measured through numbers on the scale. Adults at the Y.W.C.A. in Harlem taught girls to avoid deviations from normal weights which could promote "personality maladjustments" such as "unhappiness, fears, whims, self-indulgence, over-indulgence, and fears of inferiority." [32] By tying into weight into personality, the bodies of girls became indicative of their internal selves. The connection between character and bodily composition reflected what Patricia Vertinsky suggests as "the growing insistence upon proper weight control as a sign of good character" during the beginning of the twentieth century.[33]

The Y.W.C.A. at Harlem also cautioned African-American girls against allowing weight to affect their athletic pursuits. According to their newsletter, weight could potentially make participation in sports difficult. The newsletter included a fictional story

---

[32] YWCA of the City of New York Newsletter, April 1, 1930, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. Accessed at http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b057-i227.

[33] Patricia Vertinsky, "'Weighs and Means': Examining the Surveillance of Fat Bodies through Physical Education Practices in North America in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *Journal of Sport History* 35, no. 3 (2008): 449-468.

of two girls Skinny and Fatty described as: "Skinny or Limpsy…with the vision of becoming an athlete, appearing difficult of fulfillment" and "Fatty or Pokey...in torture because she cannot sprint like her tormentors."[34] Weight and athletic aspirations were interlinked in messages given to African-American girls at the Harlem association. By framing the characters in the language of "Limpsy" and "Pokey" the two body frames emerged as troublesome for aspiring female athletes. In order to pursue the ideal athletic body, girls needed to reflect a normative figure.

Publications such as the *Chicago Defender* addressed the thin body as a contentious representation for female readers. In "Light and Shadows," a column in the *Chicago Defender* focused on creative fiction written by young people, the figure of the flapper was a morally and physically problematic symbol. In a 1925 untitled short story, a young flapper insists that a young man take her out to eat at a local restaurant. The young woman, described as "frail and thin, of very limited dimensions," had "looked like she had been on a diet for four or five years."[35] The title of the short story "Beware of the Flapper" gestured to the perceived dangers in associating with modern women who desired extremely thin physiques. The nameless flapper, described as thin, sullen, and eager to take a young man's money, demonstrated the dangers of embodying the wrong type of figure.[36] Her embrace of sexual freedom and carefree attitudes, illustrated by her association with a strange man, also marked the flapper as transgressive within the short

[34] YWCA of the City of New York, YWCA of the City of New York Newsletter, April 1, 1930, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. Accessed at http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b057-i227.
[35] "Light and Shadows," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), May 16, 1925.
[36] "Light and Shadows," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), May 16, 1925.

story. The thin figure of the flapper in the *Chicago Defender* served as a warning to girls who wished to emulate her.

Bodily discipline also potentially affected girls' economic prospects. A 1936 publication on nutrition from the Y.W.C.A. warned readers that employers would not hire girls "who are so underweight as to appear skinny." However, girls would not be hired if they were "obviously overweight, because she just looks as if she might not be quick and alert."[37] This dichotomy made it difficult for girls as both the thin body and the large body could impede their success. African-American girls arriving to the North from the South were already faced with unequal labor markets that placed them in either factory or domestic work.[38] Already faced with labor inequalities, they confronted the relationship between the presentation of their bodies and their financial futures.

For young black women, athletics and exercise promoted the notion of an ideal body developed by an adherence to bodily discipline. Through physical fitness practices, the ideal black young female body embraced the slim, but not too thin body. The ideal body, crafted through exercise, reflected the work of the black press as well as black physical educators in shaping girls' physical selves as well as the labor of the girls themselves as they worked to fit into this ideal. African-American girls were steered towards bodily discipline as a way to construct their bodies in opposition to representations of the black female body that circulated within popular culture such as the Mammy. These representations were concerned with the size and weight of the body under the guise of health.

---

[37] Marie Harrington, *Nutrition: What Has It to Do With Me?* (1936), Box 591, Folder 3, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, Massachusetts.
[38] Marcia Chatelain, *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 111-116.

Not only were girls required to shape their bodies through bodily discipline—they were also directed to measure and assess their bodies as well. These practices required girls to carefully monitor their bodies in order to achieve the "right figure." The practice of measurement and documentation also constituted the healthy New Negro Girl. Through measuring and documenting their progress within individual and group settings, African-American girls participated in the construction of the idealized figure.

Measurement

In order to fit into bodily standards, African-American girls were directed to measure and document themselves using charts and examinations. Growing in popularity during the early twentieth, health and weight charts sought to both improve health outcomes as well as record the measurements of bodies of children. Height and weight charts, first designed in 1836, pointed to the body mass index as a measure of health.[39] Later, governmental organizations such as the Children's Bureau encouraged mothers, both black and white, to use charts in order to quantify their health of their children. Through meticulous observation and documentation, Rachel Moran states that these charts "*produced* the idea of the healthy modern child as much as they assessed it."[40] These processes were part of an "advisory state" in which government initiatives sought to improve the health and weight of the nation. These initiatives, facilitated by the

[39] Rachel Moran, *Governing Bodies: American Politics and the Shaping of the Modern Physique* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 21. However as Moran notes, this index, made by Lambert Adolphe Jacques Quetelet "was not meant to assess individual health but rather to assess the weight of entire populations and to determine averages." (21)
[40] Moran, *Governing Bodies,* 22.

documentation of heights and weights, affirmed the value of quantitative data that sought to standardize the bodies of children and youth.[41]

The practices of larger organizations such as the Children's Bureau also trickled down into girls' organizations. For example, Susan Miller notes that girls at summer camps during the early twentieth century were encouraged to keep track of their weight, indicating the ways in which the measurement of the physical body showcased one's health.[42] Additionally, charts provided by the Y.W.C.A. existed as part of a larger project of examining the young body within individual organizations, schools, and the home. Together, exercises and charts helped to create an ideal young female body. The Girl Reserves, a group for girls aged twelve to eighteen, asked members to reflect on the question "How does your health line up with the Girl Reserve standard?" within their 1921 manual. A chart included in the manual provided girls with space to provide answers to inquiries such as "What Should I Be" and "What I Am" around categories such as weight.[43]

The questions of "What Should I Be" an "What I am" compelled girls to make a distinction between aspirational and current weights. In addition, these questions suggested the body should be continually improved, maintained, and quantified. An additional health inventory directed girls to ponder the question of "What am I Worth," providing a weight and height chart for girls. Girls were to state their weight as well as "guess the weight of the person on either side of you" and "pick out of the group all of

---

[41] Moran, *Governing Bodies,* 6.
[42] Susan A. Miller, *Growing Girls: The Natural Origins of Girls' Organizations in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 210-218.
[43] National Board of the Young Women's Christian Association, *The Girl Reserve Movement: A Manual for Advisors*, 1921, 334.

the girls of normal weight."[44] For girls who were overweight, "girls in gym clothes" should demonstrate exercises for them. Through the larger organization of the Y.W.C.A., adults encouraged girls to not only assess their own weight, but to assess the weight of others. This sense of surveillance portrayed girls' bodies as sites in need of constant self-monitoring as well as outside examination.

While these manuals targeted girls of all races, manuals targeting African-American girls also reiterated the importance of measurement. Myra Logan, an African-American doctor, published *Beauty and Health* in 1936.[45] Active in the Y.W.C.A., her work provided a medical scope to health and beauty advice. Her advice pointed to the role of visual culture in defining girls' practices of documentation. Girls reading *Beauty and Health* were instructed to take photos of themselves in their bathing suits. This process of photo documentation assumed girls had cameras at home, hinting at the role of class within body projects. These photographs were to be kept in a booklet and updated after a month. Girls were expected to use images as forms of documentation and measurement, paying careful attention to changes in their bodies.

In addition, girls were expected to weigh themselves weekly. While *Beauty and Health* instructed girls to continue exercising, especially with the help of their physical education teacher, they were also expected to complete weekly assessments of their weight. Included was a weight and height chart, informing girls of the "right" weight for their age.[46] By constantly weighing and comparing themselves, girls learned that bodily

---

[44] Emma Knauss, *A Health Project,* n.d., Box 568, Folder 7, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.
[45] Myra Logan, *Beauty and Health,* 1936, Box 617, Folder 2, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.
[46] Logan, *Beauty and Health,* YWCA of the USA, SCSC.

discipline, weight, and measurement were interconnected and that health could be visualized through the size of the body.

Manuals and organizations encouraged the deliberate practice of measuring and documenting one's self. Girls were required to pay attention to the changing nature of their bodies and note the roles of height and weight charts. And yet these messages were incredibly mixed. In *Pudge Grows Up*, a 1936 manual directed at African-American girls, readers were reminded that the duty of every girl was to avoid being too slim. Listing goals for the future, the narrator informed girls that their responsibilities included monitoring their figures, which meant "gaining a few ounces a year as any healthy woman should."[47] Equating health with weight gain may have also suggested a change in the figure of the ideal girl. No longer a thin flapper of the 1920s, the manual suggested that the ideal girl of the 1930s could embrace a slight weight gain.

While other Y.W.C.A.s advised girls to avoid either fatness or thinness, the Y.W.C.A. of Oakland noted the different needs and wants of attendees. At the Y.W.C.A. of Oakland, which served African-American members, a 1939 program assured girls and young women that they could be made "fat or small by giving one hour to stretching, relaxing, limbering, and various rhythmic movements which give grace and poise to the figure."[48] The Y.W.C.A. of Oakland provides a contrast to the health advice offered by other organizations and manuals. Rather than enforcing the figure of the standardized

---

[47] Frances Harriett Williams and Wenonah Bond Logan, *Pudge Grows Up,* 1936, Box 568, Folder 17, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.

[48] Program Offerings, The Phyllis Wheatley Branch of the Y.W.C.A., 1939, Box 1, Folder 3, Oakland Public Library. Accessed at https://oakland.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/digitalFile_2ead6ac0-6c29-42be-8050-a53845cdff90/.

body, this plan suggested girls and young women held the responsibility of choosing the figure that worked best for them.

The varied messages that girls were given were confusing, difficult, and created unattainable standards for them to achieve. The effort to fit into the right figure illuminated African-American girls' experiences with body image as well as the ways in which they faced similar and different pressures than those of their peers. While girls embraced bodily discipline and measurement, these practices were about the physical composition of their body. However, size was not enough. After securing the right figure, African-American girls needed to reflect idealized gendered identities.

Active femininities relied on the performance of gender within the athletic sphere, which were often fluid and complex during the early twentieth century. During the 1920s, a rise in compulsory schooling as well as an increase in American girls attending universities contributed to a greater presence in the field of athletics.[49] Consumer culture and an increase in leisure times and spaces also contributed to the growth of women's sports.[50] Within these spheres, African-American girls navigated their own representations of the athletic girl, shifting from the tomboy to the athletic beauty.

Athletic Girls and Tomboys

Published in the *Chicago Defender,* editorials such as "Girls Need Physical Education" (1921) written by Ruth Arnett encouraged more African-American girls

[49] Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 33. Also, Martha Verbrugge states that "total enrollment at historically black colleges and universities grew from about two thousand in 1920 to fourteen thousand in 1930." Verbrugge, *Active Bodies,* 103.
[50] Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 33.

across the country to participate in sports. Although segregated from schools and other organizations, African-American girls participated in sports within their own communities at junior high and high schools, civic organizations such as the YWCA, and historically black colleges and universities. These spaces, often guided by middle class values, sought to shape and influence girls' athletic identities. However, at the same time, these spaces also allowed girls to play competitive sports such as basketball, travel, perform in front of large audiences, and make a name for themselves in an arena that had been dominated by men.[51] Representations of the athletic New Negro Girl assured girls that they did not need to reconcile athleticism, strength, and femininity.

Arnett, the author and director of girls' work at a local Y.W.C.A in Chicago bemoaned the girls who avoided physical education and sports. In her position as director of girls' work, she presided over the physical and social activities of the girls in her care. Focused on shaping bodies and minds of the young black female citizens in the city, her editorial compelled more girls to embrace physical activity and athletics. Arnett drew upon the words of famed physical culture expert Bernarr McFadden. Citing McFadden, Arnett informed readers that "the right type of girl is a tomboy."[52]

Arnett's words assert black girls' inclusion into physical culture as well as note their potential to fit into the category of "tomboy." McFadden founded *Physical Development*, the "U.S.'s first health and fitness magazine" in 1898.[53] Known as the father of physical culture, McFadden used physical activity, diet, and other health practices to direct readers to pay strict attention to their bodies. Although his magazines

---

[51] Lansbury, *A Spectacular Leap,* 11-42.
[52] Ruth Arnett, "Girls Need Physical Education," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), December 10, 1921.
[53] Eric Chaline, *The Temple of Perfection: A History of the Gym* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 141.

occasionally featured women, most of his work-as well as physical culture at large-was directed at the construction of white masculine bodies. Arnett's words both nod to McFadden's physical culture empire as well as insert African-American girls into the field.

Arnett's words also identified the figure of the tomboy as central to the construction of ideal girlhood. Representations found in girls' literature as well as in movies blended girlhood and modestly transgressive gender norms. Adults used series fiction, as well as other forms of prescriptive literature, to remind girls of the importance of physical play and sports.[54] Often, girls' participation in sports was seen as critical for the formation of the tomboy, a figure central to encouraging the health and vitality of girlhoods in the United States. However, this figure excluded African-American girls in representations within popular culture. The figure of the tomboy remained a product of whiteness—particularly middle-class whiteness. Scholars have addressed the ways tomboys could participate in competitive sports, slyly transgress gender norms, and still "retain their femininity and innocence."[55]

Indeed, images and representations of the tomboy were predominantly white—few areas of scholarship have discussed the role of tomboys of color. The tomboy of the early twentieth century emerged as an extension of white girlhood in mainstream white American culture, particularly in regard to ideas about health and the body. As scholars have argued, the development of the tomboy represented fears around the state of health of white girls and women. Active play and athletics remained central to the figure of the

---

[54] Renée M. Sentilles, *American Tomboys, 1850-1915* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 148-169.
[55] Sentilles, *American Tomboys,* 8-9. See also Allison Miller, "Am I Normal? American Vernacular Psychology and the Tomboy Body, 1900–1940," *Representations* 122, no. 1 (2013): 23-50.

tomboys as these activities were imagined to bolster their physical health.[56] Rather than discourage physicality, the tomboy represented a necessary step before achieving womanhood as athletics provided a foundation for healthy mothers in the future.

Organizations such as the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) circulated materials in the 1920s that reinforced the role of physical activity in preparing strong healthy bodies, prompting educators to identify exercise and athletics as a way to guide girls and young women to develop "maternal vigor."[57] Through active movement, girls could prepare for their futures as mothers by pursuing physical health. While previously certain sports such as bicycling had been deemed as dangerous to girls, physicians and physical educators encouraged the pursuit of athletics in order to develop future mothers. [58] Future reproduction and current physical activity became interlinked through the figure of the tomboy for white girls. By identifying the tomboy as a white figure who could best represent athletic American girlhood, African-American girls were often left out of these representations.

And yet, significantly, in *Chicago Defender,* the tomboy emerged as a powerful figure within constructions of athletic black girlhoods. She could be feminine, athletic, tough, and competitive. Girls reading the editorial were taught to embrace the tomboy as their parents and caretakers received messages that her construction illustrated an essential part of active feminine identities. The call by Arnett in *Chicago Defender* to "Let's encourage our girls to be tomboys" denoted a positive connotation of the term as

---

[56] Michelle Ann Abate, *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 74.
[57] Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 77.
[58]Lisa S. Strange, "The Bicycle, Women's Rights, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton," *Women's Studies* 31, no. 5 (2002): 609-626.

well as envisioned the site of the tomboy as a collective project in which adults and girls worked together to construct.[59] The African-American tomboy served as an intervention into white interpretations of tomboyism.

Arnett reminded readers that girls should not be denied the chance to participate in sports. Instead, she argued that it was important to: "Let them enjoy all of the activities of the boys, let them enter any game or sport that the boy enters."[60] Her words echoed the work of the larger Y.W.C.A. organization who believed that girls' sport participation was essential to their growth. A 1921 Girl Reserves manual advised adults to create a program that focused on cultivating competitive sports within their health education program. Advice suggested that girls needed to embody a sense of sportsmanship and added that "the spirit of team work so conspicuous in boys is lacking in girls."[61] Through this supposed lack, girls were instructed to align themselves with qualities of their male compatriots.

African-American girls were encouraged to take up competitive sports and model good sportsmanship—qualities that shaped the figure of the tomboy. In doing so, they revealed the possibilities of the tomboy to be viewed as a black athletic girl. Rather than viewed as a transgressive figure, the tomboy emerged as central to the construction of New Negro Athletic Girlhood. By constructing the tomboy as a part of black girlhood, the editorial directed young adolescents to also embrace this figure and connect their physical health to this current model of feminine girlhood. While tomboys represented a slightly transgressive figure for white girls during the early twentieth century, the

---

[59] Ruth Arnett, "Girls Need Physical Education," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Dec. 10, 1921.
[60] Ruth Arnett, "Girls Need Physical Education," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Dec. 10, 1921.
[61] Young Women's Christian Association, *The Girl Reserves Manual,* 356.

portrayal of female masculinity for African-American girls, who were already masculinized, could be detrimental. However, the embrace of the tomboy did not evoke a sense of transgressive gender and racial boundaries, but instead focused on securing the health of the nation, an argument central to the ideologies of the black middle class.

In Arnett's observance of a lack of interest in sports by some girls of the era, she expressed fears that they would not rise to become the ideal mothers of the future, an ideal that could be promised through the figure of the tomboy:

> "It is amazing to find the large numbers of teen-age girls in the high schools who have been excused from gym for some trivial excuse. She can't run, she can't hike, she can't play tennis, captain ball, or basketball because 'the doctor says her heart is weak.' If this round-shouldered, flat chested girl is the mother of tomorrow, what will her children be?"[62]

Her observations, which also marked the emerging category of teenager, emphasized the reproductive potential of the athletic girl of the early 1920s. In order for girls to, as Arnett argues, keep the African-American race "physically and morally healthy," the author encourages girls to embody the figure of the tomboy. [63] Thus, the push towards tomboyism was also rooted in arguments about racial health, arguments more in line with eugenicist ideas rather than sport for recreation's sake.[64] These arguments constructed the physical health of young women as central to the future of childrearing. The author pointed to the figure of the tomboy as one which middle-class girls could draw upon in order to advance the reproduction of the race.

Adults instructed African-American girls to remember that sport not only produced healthy bodies but also produced healthy future children. The relationship

---

[62] Ruth Arnett, "Girls Need Physical Education," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Dec. 10, 1921.
[63] Ruth Arnett, "Girls Need Physical Education," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Dec. 10, 1921.
[64] Kenneth E. Mobily, "Eugenics and the Playground Movement," *Annals of Leisure Research* 21, no. 2 (2018): 145-160.

between physical education, sport, and reproduction posited the bodies of young women as essential for the success of future children. These messages were directly addressed to adolescent girls as they occupied an age group that was viewed as critical for securing the foundations of the future of their race. However, while the tomboy sought to improve the physical and reproductive health of girls, her figure also allowed girls to occupy more varied forms of femininity, forms that aligned with new conceptions of modern athletic girlhood.

The figure of the tomboy encouraged African-American girls to embrace alternative forms of femininity. Sports such as basketball and track allowed girls to embrace sweat, competition, and speed—qualities consistent with representations of tomboys. The larger landscape of African-American sports history traces how athletes used sports "as a source of racial pride and a means to upward mobility."[65] African-American girls' participation in sports such as basketball and track illustrated their sense of racial pride through successes in local, national, and international sporting competitions. Their participation challenged the dominant construction of the male New Negro athlete. Instead, black adolescent girls used athletics as a space for self-expression and self-definition, establishing their own New Negro identities.

Emma Tillery, of Orange, New Jersey, represented the type of tomboy highlighted in the *Chicago Defender.* In 1921, Tillery participated in the first inter-association track meet for Y.W.C.A. girls which occurred in New Jersey. The girls competed on behalf of associations located in the tri-state area including Brooklyn, New York, and Montclair and Orange, New Jersey. Events included the 50 and 100-yard dashes, 440- and 880-yard

[65] Scott N. Brooks and Dexter Blackman, "Introduction: African Americans and the History of Sport—New Perspectives," *The Journal of African American History* 96, no. 4 (2011): 442.

relays; 440 yard and ⅛ mile runs; running broad and high jumps.[66] Tillery, whose accomplishments were mentioned in the African-American children's magazine *The Brownies Book* received the most points.

Tillery, who dominated the New Jersey track meet, was a strong basketball player as well. On the court, *The Brownies Book* viewed her as "a tower of strength."[67] Her position as a tower of strength alluded to the ways in which girls were applauded for displays of physical fortitude in sporting spaces. Emma's success in sports as well as her embrace of strength served as a representation of the tomboy for young readers of the magazine, especially poignant in a magazine such as *The Brownies Book* read by younger adolescent readers.

The figure of the tomboy also extended to historically black colleges and institutions such as Howard University. "Athletics and the Modern Girl Pals," a 1924 article in the student newspaper *Hilltop,* traced the rising image of the young female athlete. "Tomboy is no longer the scapegoat of the century," pronounced the Howard University student newspaper in its discussion of the merits of sports for young women at the institution.[68] According to the paper, the figure of the tomboy was no longer incompatible with black femininity. Instead, the rise of sports provided an arena for black girls, such as the ones at Howard University, to take up new forms of active femininities. The cultural figure of the tomboy, circulated among young college women, encouraged them to embrace sports and athletics within their institutions.

---

[66] Annie Laurie McCary, "Inter-Association Track and Field Meet Y.W.C.A. Girls," *The Brownies Book,* September 1921, 262-263.
[67] McCary, "Inter-Association Track and Field Meet Y.W.C.A. Girls," *The Brownies Book,* September 1921, 262-263.
[68] "Athletics and the Modern Girl," *The Hilltop* (Washington D.C.), February 15, 1924.

The "athletic modern girl," or tomboys, of the 1920s benefitted from an increased profile on women's sports. The student newspaper noted that women had "their own baseball, basketball teams, tennis teams, soccer teams, wrestling teams, and Olympic teams."[69] The article also gestured to women who fared better than their male counterparts in sports such as skating, diving, and swimming. Increased public attention on girls' participation in sports had shaped conceptions of the modern girl as one who engaged in sports while wearing "knickerbockers" and "bobbed hair."[70] The clothing and hair, markers of the new athletic modern girl, illustrated the social and material changes that brought forth new understandings of female identity during the 1920s.[71]

On campus at Howard University, activities such as "aesthetic dancing, drill exercises, hiking, basketball, tennis, and field hockey" in addition to sports such as swimming and diving all shaped the modern black tomboy. She benefitted from competitive forms of sports such as basketball and recreational activities such as hiking. The construction of the black modern tomboy balanced race, gender, femininity, and physical activity in the public sphere. As the article suggests, although girls' sport participation increased, the figure of the athletic girl in mainstream American society often remained white. Instead, at places such as historically black colleges and universities as well as certain Y.W.C.A.s, African-American girls embodied visions of the ideal athletic black girl who embraced tomboysim.

---

[69] "Athletics and the Modern Girl," *The Hilltop* (Washington D.C.), February 15, 1924.
[70] "Athletics and the Modern Girl," *The Hilltop* (Washington D.C.), February 15, 1924.
[71] Nancy G. Rosoff, "A Glow of Pleasurable Excitement: Images of the New Athletic Woman in American Popular Culture, 1880-1920" in ed. Linda K. Fuller, *Sport, Rhetoric, and Gender: Historical Perspectives and Media Representations* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 55-64.

During the early days of athletics at Howard, girls' basketball represented a source of pride for the university. While girls' basketball could be found as early as 1916, under the arrival of Helen Tuck girls competitive sports grew. Tuck, trained as a physical educator at the Young Women's Christian Association, arrived at Howard in 1919. Under her tutelage, "athletics for girls received a decided boom."[72] In her role as both physical educator and dean of female students, Tuck helped grow sports such as basketball, volleyball, and track, expanding the possibilities for young college women. These sports sought to develop girls' sense of self and create a collective culture of physically active female students on campus.

Competitive sports such as basketball could display the performances of black athletic femininity. Described by the Howard student yearbook in 1920 as "swift and aggressive," the girls' basketball team were seen as formidable competitors as well as emblematic of the qualities found in tomboys.[73] Girls' basketball gave room to active femininities that encompassed strength and speed. As girls' athletics grew during the next few years, girls played against other schools in the area including Miner Hall and City University Girls. Both institutions serving African-American students in Washington D.C., basketball helped form connections with other black female athletes throughout the city. In 1921, the girls' basketball program continued to flourish, placing importance on developing star performers. During the upcoming school year, the athletics department believed "with more coaching, girls will become second to none."[74]

---

[72] Howard University, *The Echo* (Washington, D.C.: 1920), "Athletics Among Girls," Moorland Spingarn Research Center.
[73] Howard University, *The Echo* (Washington D.C.: 1920), "Athletics Among Girls," MSRC.
[74] Howard University, *The Enopron* (Washington, D.C.: 1921), "Girls in Athletics," MSRC.

The arrival of physical educator Gertrude Curtis in 1923 also brought forth a girls' track and field team to Howard University. The track team was deemed successful, although the historical record is not clear if the team competed only with other girls at the school. Still, the emergence of track and field and basketball pointed to the modern girl as one who could be speedy, muscular, and athletic. These girls, who embodied sportsmanship and competition, represented the sort of tomboy heralded in the *Chicago Defender*. The athletics program at Howard University shaped the figure of the early 1920s college athletic girl by encouraging competitive sports and displays of strength.

However, despite athletic successes, college women's experiences illuminated gendered inequalities within the institution. While college men's athletics at Howard University continued to receive financial and social support, girls' sports received less coverage in the Howard student newspapers and yearbooks. In 1923, the basketball team had only played two games due to a lack of teams to play as well "suitable courts" for players.[75] In 1924, Howard University continued to operate "inadequate facilities for the physical training of girls."[76] Although girls' basketball received a bit of coverage in the 1927 yearbook, the sport was still on the decline at the institution.[77]

Outside of the university, the black press contributed to an increased public attention towards black female athletes.[78] Beginning in 1925, a "Woman in Athletics" column printed in the *Chicago Defender* began to document the sporting lives of African-American girls and young women. This page, found on the sports page, rather than relegated to the "women's pages" provided attention to the experiences of young female

---

[75] Howard University, *The Bison* (Washington, D.C.: 1923), "Girls' Team," MSRC.
[76] "Athletics and the Modern Girl," *The Hilltop* (Washington D.C.), February 15, 1924.
[77] Howard University, *The Bison* (Washington, D.C.: 1923), "Athletics," MSRC.
[78] Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 36-40.

athletes for readers across the country. Their sporting successes were heralded as the column noted competitions across schools and organizations, highlighted individual athletes, and included quotes from physical educators.[79]

What had been described as an athletics boom started to fall. As the years progressed the Y.W.C.A. national board prioritized individual exercise and swimming, rather than competitive sports. In 1930, the director of the National Y.W.C.A. Health Education Program, Edith Gates, debated the appropriateness of athletics for girls. She deemed athletics as "one of the biggest problems."[80] Athletics, in her opinion, promoted a mentality in which "girls naturally desire to follow men in extreme competition." [81] Gates applauded sports such as tennis and archery that could develop feminine and active girls. As the national director, Gates views trickled down to local associations as health educators mirrored her perspectives.

Girls under the tutelage of white and black middle class female physical educators increasingly learned that physical activity should focus on the construction of health, beauty, and conduct rather than the development of skills and ability. Shifting notions of the athletic woman had also affected other white colleges. Although track and field for women emerged at colleges during the early part of the twentieth century, by the end of the 1920s, colleges began to view the sports as too masculine. Similarly, while basketball was encouraged during the 1920s, the sport was diminishing by the 1930s.[82] Once

---

[79] For examples of the column, see: "Women in Athletics: "Dakota Dick, the Girl Record Breaker," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), June 19, 1926; Fannie M. Scott, "Women in Athletics: Women Have Ability as Athletes Says Miss Scott, "*The Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Feb 19, 1927; "Women in Athletics: Tuskegee Girls Victors," *The Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Feb 15, 1930.
[80] Edith Gates, "The Director of Physical Education Says," 1930, Box 591, Folder 3, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.
[81] Edith Gates, "The Director of Physical Education Says," 1930, Box 591, Folder 3, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.
[82] Grundy, *Learning to Win,* 237.

revered as important sports for girls, track and field also started to fade away from college programs in the 1930s. Fears of masculinization as well as muscularity affected perceptions of the sport. The figure of the tomboy, while once embraced, was now viewed with suspicion as well as a threat to ideas of proper femininity.

The descent of competitive sports for girls during the early 1930s can be attributed to several factors. Organizations, from local women's athletic associations to national governing bodies of female educators, increasingly vocalized their discontent with girls' competitive sports. Educators feared that girls would be exploited by national organizations such as the American Athletic Union, which had taken over women's track and field. Central to these worries included a fear of male encroachment onto physical education departments and teams if they folded into co-ed organizations and sporting associations.[83] Instead of competitive sports, which female educators rightfully feared would be taken over by male coaches, women encouraged girls to participate in gender segregated intramural play days, which promoted a "sport for all" mentality. [84]

Fears also emerged over the physical and reproductive health of young women. While originally the tomboy represented a desire to bolster reproductive health, physicians and educators feared that athletic participation could be dangerous for girls. During the 1928, several female competitors collapsed during an 800-meter track event at the Olympics. While some male competitors also fared the same fate, organizers focused on the performance of the women and banned the 800-meter event at the Olympics until

---

[83] Ying Wushanley, *Playing Nice and Losing: The Struggle for Control of Women's Intercollegiate Athletics, 1960-2000* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 154.
[84] Lynn E. Couturier, "'Play With Us, Not Against Us': The Debate About Play Days in the Regulation of Women's Sport," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 25, no. 4 (2008): 421-442.

1960.[85] Additionally, unsubstantiated fears circulated that girls' participation in competitive sports could harm their reproductive organs. [86] Sports such as basketball and track were viewed as unconducive for the preparation for the mothers of tomorrow.

During the 1930s, women's sports organizations such as the national Women's Athletic Association (WAA) circulated ideologies that sought to reiterate norms of womanhood that relied on beauty and femininity, rather than competitive sports.[87] However, as Martha Verbrugge notes, these norms encouraged the production of "heterosexual femininity."[88] An association between muscularity, athleticism, and lesbianism had been growing during the 1930s. While the athletic tomboy had been a fairly innocuous figure, the display of gender non-conformity which carried an assumption of lesbian activity, now pointed to "deviant" behavior.[89]

African-American girls negotiated these notions of athletic femininity across different contexts. The bodies of black female athletes held a contested position both within and outside of their community. Through the DuBoisian lens of double-consciousness, black female athletes negotiated both the black gaze and the white gaze.[90] Through the white gaze, the black female body was viewed with suspicion. Not only were black athletic female bodies seen as "masculinizing," "stereotypes of sexuality" also worked to subjugate them.[91] The figure of the tomboy became incompatible with visions of appropriate black middle-class femininity and girls were directed to move away from

---

[85] David B. Welky, "Viking Girls, Mermaids, and Little Brown Men: US Journalism and the 1932 Olympics," *Journal of Sport History* 24, no. 1 (1997): 29.
[86] Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 129-130
[87] Verbrugge, *Active Bodies,* 108-110.
[88] Verbrugge, *Active Bodies,* 107.
[89] Susan K. Cahn, "From the 'Muscle Moll' to the 'Butch' Ballplayer: Mannishness, Lesbianism, and Homophobia in US Women's Sport," *Feminist Studies* 19, no. 2 (1993): 348-350.
[90] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & co, 1903).
[91] Vertinsky and Captain, "More Myth than History," 546.

vigorous sports. Black schools and organizations, aware that their girls' bodies could be scrutinized, guided them towards ideal displays of girlhood. At Y.W.C.A.s, who were under the direction of national leadership, black educators encouraged girls to pursue gentle sports. Historically black colleges such as Howard University increasingly directed its female students to engage in activities that would reflect refined femininity.

At black educational institutions focused on agricultural and vocational training, female students continued to participate in track and field.[92] Schools such as Tuskegee University and Tennessee State University developed their track programs in the late 1920s and 1930s. Their schools prided themselves on developing fierce athletic competitors. African-American girls were allowed to participate in track and field and demonstrate strength and speed—as long as their bodies still exhibited a sense of hyper femininity. While this suggests a slightly more inclusive version of the athletic girl than their white counterparts, this figure was also classed as these institutions primarily served working class students. The muscular and speedy athletic girl was not available to black middle-class girls, who needed to display strict images of respectable femininity.

Despite the focus on athleticism, coaches nevertheless encouraged their athletes to perform normative femininity. Edward Temple, who coached Wilma Rudolph and Wyomia Tyus at Tennessee State, asserted that his athletes still needed to maintain their hair, makeup, and dress. Temple assured spectators that "None of my girls have any trouble getting boyfriends. I tell them that they are young ladies first, track girls second"[93] At Tuskegee University, the girls' track team, "won six consecutive titles"

[92] Verbrugge, *Active Bodies,* 150.
[93] Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 133.

starting in 1937 and eventually sent several girls to the Olympic Games.[94] However, girls were still expected to be "feminine and heterosexual," pointing to the ways in which the body was a gendered and sexualized space under surveillance within the sporting sphere.[95]

While the black tomboy had emerged as a symbol of self-expression and achievement in the 1920s, by the 1930s, positive associations with her figure had diminished. Adults steered girls away from the figure of the tomboy, now associated with masculinity and lesbianism. The New Negro athletic girl was changing. Instead, she needed to represent femininity and beauty, essential characteristics that reflected both consumer culture as well as the potential to become ideal New Negro wives.

By 1932, the tone on tomboys in the *Chicago Defender* had changed. Instead of viewing tomboys as models of athletic girlhood, they were viewed with suspicion as figures that could disrupt images of femininity. In advising young women on etiquette in the *Chicago Defender*, a writer warned men could "watch her ruin the whole effect by acting like a tomboy." [96] Rather than serve as an exemplary model of girlhood, the tomboy now represented transgressive femininity—an image that African-American girls were taught to avoid at great lengths. Instead, girls were encouraged to pursue a different type of girlhood: one that embraced refined femininity and beauty. Black female physical educators, trained at national organizations that asserted the value of beauty and health, disseminated those ideas to their female students in order to shape new conceptions of active femininities.

---

[94] Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 140.
[95] Cahn, *Coming on Strong,* 141
[96] "The Woman Who Makes Good," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), November 26, 1932.

Athletic Beauties

While the tomboy shaped girls' relationship to sports in the early 1920s, by the 1930s, the figure of the athletic beauty dominated representations of active femininities. Often these active femininities were constructed through exercises and gentler sports. African-American girls' and women's participation in these forms of physical activity during the early twentieth century reflected an investment in the physical body as representative of beauty, health and racial identity. African-American middle class girls were instructed to align with more normative expressions of femininity by embracing the figure of the athletic beauty.

These expressions of femininity required recalibrations of what it meant to be a young college athlete at black middle-class institutions. At historically black colleges and universities, administrators struggled with the purpose and meaning of sports for students. Rather than focus on athletics, certain colleges emphasized the importance of academics as a way to achieve success and progress. Administrators at colleges such as Howard University believed "it was the library and laboratory, not the playing field, that should feature the highest demonstrations of African-American potential."[97] In the eyes of presidents at these institutions, sports represented both a distraction as well as a potential site for the exploitation of young athletes. Male and female students were taught to draw careful boundaries around athletics to secure their academic futures. However, female students were taught that these boundaries were also connected to their

[97] Miller, "To Bring the Race Along Rapidly," 125.

representations of appropriate femininity--a burden that their male peers did not necessarily have to bear.

African-American girls, under the careful tutelage of physical educators, learned to embrace these new forms of gendered expressions in the gymnasium. The change from tomboy to athletic beauty did not occur on an individual level. Rather, these changes reflected the training and teachings of African-American physical educators who sought to shape the bodies and femininities of their female students.[98] This is not to suggest that African-American girls accepted these pedagogies unquestioningly. The archival data is not clear on the extent to which girls joyously or begrudgingly accepted these ideas. Instead, this work suggests that this was an intergenerational educational project in which girls learned from other adult women that the presentation of their bodies within active spaces required an embrace of beauty.

Girls at Howard University received messages regarding health, athletics, and beauty with the arrival of Maryrose Reeves Allen. Allen, who arrived at Howard University in 1925 served as director of health and physical education for women at Howard University. Educated at Sargent School for Physical Educators in Boston, Massachusetts, the best known school for physical culture and sport in the country, her presence at Howard University represented the school's desire to recruit nationally trained professionals for their health education program.[99] Founded by Dudley Sargent, the school emphasized the role of gymnastics and other individual activities. Through teaching the importance repetitive exercises, as well as bodily measurements, Sargent's

---

[98] Verbrugge, *Active Bodies,* 124.

[99] Diploma, Maryrose Reeves Allen Papers, Box 160-3, Folder 2, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

school trained educators to dispense similar ideas to their students.[100] Allen received several degrees from the Sargent School: a diploma in 1923, a bachelors in 1933, and a masters in 1938.

During her time at the Sargent School, Allen spent time developing an educational philosophy regarding girls' physical education. As part of her master's thesis, "The Development of Beauty in College Women through Health and Physical Education" she traced the importance of aesthetics and physical presentation. Allen wrote: "Why shouldn't, then, our knowledge of health and physical education plus other phases of education teach the place of beauty in the lives of young women?"[101] This question, which echoed sentiments circulated by other physical educators, would inform her work with girls.

Girls under Allen's instruction demonstrated the transformation of black active femininity from tomboy to athletic beauty. Rather than emphasize sport for competition, Allen believed in fitness for the development of beauty in her black female college students. Her curriculum encouraged girls to view the gymnasium as one that developed both physical health and beauty. She instructed her students to pursue physical activity that reflected "bounding health, grace of motion, and dignity of bearing."[102] She prioritized exercises that centered strength, endurance, posture, poise, and discipline. Girls' physical education under her tenure did not rest on weight loss or gain. Rather, her focus remained on crafting strong and feminine female bodies.

---

[100] Debbie Mauldin Cottrell, "The Sargent School for Physical Education," *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* 65, no. 3 (1994): 32-37.
[101] Thesis, Maryrose Reeves Allen Papers, Box 160-3, Folder 4, MSRC.
[102] Howard University, *The Bison* (Washington, D.C.: 1928), "Physical Education for Women," MSRC.

The production of strong bodies lay central to the mission of Allen. One of her former students, Mary Oglesby, who would later become a physical educator with Indianapolis Public Schools, remembered her sister's introduction to Maryrose Allen. Her sister also wished to take physical education classes. Allen, after taking a look at her sister, noted that she would be better suited for home economics, because of her "small and dainty" frame.[103] Other white physical educators may have welcomed the small and dainty image, an image representative of ideal forms of femininity. Instead, Allen's words suggested that black athletic girls could be strong, as long as they still displayed a sense of beauty.

Femininity, strength, and beauty were not incompatible with new conceptions of the athletic New Negro Girl. The athletic beauty was required to engage in gentler activities that did not require competition or sweat. However, her body was still expected to exude strength, shaped by targeted exercises. It was in this pursuit of health that girls learned that their bodies needed to reflect a variety of qualities: beauty, strength, discipline, and restraint. Allen's instruction sought to uplift her girls while still illustrating the difficult expectations African-American girls faced in physical education and athletics.

Girls at Howard were taught to establish a connection between beauty and physical activity through advice that instructed them to avoid "heavier sports" which Allen believed "have no place in a woman's life: they rob her of her feminine charm and often of her good health."[104] Instead of "heavier sports," such as basketball or track and

---

[103] Letter written by Mary Oglesby, "The Greatest Friend I Will Ever Have," n.d., Maryrose Reeves Allen Papers, Box 160-1, Folder 1, MSRC.
[104] "An Outline of the Problem," n.d., Maryrose Reeves Allen Papers, Box 164-4, Folder 4, MSRC.

field, Allen encouraged female students to embrace exercise, dance, tennis, swimming, and golf.[105] According to Allen, intercollegiate sport could bring forth "physical and emotional strain."[106] While the figure of the tomboy embraced physical exertion, a quality envisioned to strengthen improve future mothers, Allen embraced gentle exercises that could prepare girls for motherhood, an ideology embraced by other physical educators.[107]

While tomboy and the athletic beauty engaged in similar arguments about how to achieve racial health, these figures deviated when addressing the best methods to prepare young women as mothers. Through gentle physical fitness exercise, which highlighted the beauty of her students, Allen believed that the figure of the athletic beauty was central in securing the future of African-Americans across the country. Girls at Howard University, reflecting W.E.B. DuBois' vision, were instructed to carry the future of the race as a part of the Talented Tenth.[108] Their athletic practices remained connected to their racial and gendered identities as current students and future mothers.

Not all sports were incompatible with athletic beauty. While intercollegiate sports could interfere with the image of the athletic beauty, intramural sports were acceptable. In a letter to the athletics department, Allen listed the successful intramural sports at Howard University which included tennis, archery, field hockey. Allen believed in intramural sports that encouraged a wider participation of girls in sports. Her vision of sport moved away from the individual stars and winning team records of the early 1920s.

---

[105] "Excerpts from the Life of Maryrose Reeves Allen," Maryrose Reeves Allen Papers, Box 160-1, Folder 1, MSRC.
[106] "Recommendations for Athletics," 1939, Maryrose Reeves Allen Papers, Box 160-8, Folder 9, MSRC.
[107] Laura Azzarito, Petra Munro, and Melinda A. Solmon, "Unsettling the Body: The Institutionalization of Physical Activity at the Turn of the 20th Century," *Quest* 56, no. 4 (2004): 377-396.
[108] Lauren A. Wendling, "Higher Education as a Means of Communal Uplift: The Educational Philosophy of W.E.B. Du Bois." *The Journal of Negro Education* 87, no. 3 (2018): 285-293.

Instead, she was interested in developing a sporting program that focused on female inclusion. This inclusion spread to other black colleges as she worked with other black female educators to create a Negro Women's Intercollegiate Athletic Association in 1938.[109] Despite the word intercollegiate, the association primarily promoted play days in which girls would come together, socialize, and play sports such as tennis, field hockey, and golf with other students.[110]

After developing her body by drawing upon the bodily discipline of physical activity, the athletic New Negro Girl focused on her outer beauty. At Howard University, a beauty parlor located in the gymnasium prompted girls to reflect deeply on the relationship between appearance, femininity, and physical activity. In line with black middle-class respectability, Allen's work identified the pursuit of beauty as central to establishing visions of success for athletic New Negro girls. The beauty parlor did not exist merely for vanity's sake. Instead, Allen desired to emphasize the beauty of her black female students. This is particularly an important project in the face of stereotypes that circulated in the popular press that demonized muscularity and relied upon racist tropes. Instead, physical educators such as Allen used the practice of highlighting one's beauty as a method to counter stereotypes about the bodies of black female athletes.

These practices of femininity demonstrated the ways in which the black middle class encouraged girls to adopt beauty culture as a form of visible racial uplift. Although Howard University is one college campus, the athletic beauty could be seen at other historically black colleges as well as at organizations such as the Y.W.C.A. African-

---

[109] "Recommendations for Athletics," 1939, Maryrose Reeves Allen Papers, Box 160-8, Folder 9, MSRC.
[110] Lynn E. Couturier, "'Play With Us, Not Against Us': The Debate About Play Days in the Regulation of Women's Sport." *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 25, no. 4 (2008): 421-442.

American female educators encouraged girls to use their bodies to display normative forms of femininity as a shield, particularly in public urban spaces. The practices of the black athletic beauty spoke to the extra labor girls needed to perform to display the healthy body in order to dispel racist narratives around their corporeal selves. Another area that this practice emerged was the pool.

As African-Americans migrated to the North, their presence created more potential opportunities for intermingling in city pools. Segregation and violence occurred at pools across the United States as whites drew social and legislative boundaries around who belonged in the pools.[111] As Jeff Wiltse notes, the bodies of African-Americans were assumed to be unclean and fueled "race based fears" about disease and cleanliness.[112] African-American girls navigated these assumptions, revealing the ways in which their experiences with physical activity differed from those of their white female peers who could swim without being subjected to racism.

African-American girls faced a great amount of racism at pools during the interwar era. Dorothy Guinn, a Y.W.C.A. secretary, noted the lack of available pools in the city in her 1933 study of recreation and opportunities for black girls and women in Philadelphia. In her report, she stated "of 39 swimming pools in this city open, 5 are open to Negroes and 2 of these 5 girls would not care to use."[113] Guinn tied the unavailability of proper swimming facilities to the economic, racial, and gender disparities faced by black girls in the city and the effect these disparities could have on health outcomes. For

---

[111] Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
[112] Wiltse, *Contested Waters,* 124.
[113] "Concerning a Minimum Program for its Work with the Negro Girls and Women of the City," 1933, Box 3, Folder 27, YWCA Southwest Belmont, SCRC.

Guinn, access to health education, such as recreational facilities, connected to "improving the health conditions of Negroes in Philadelphia."[114] The *Chicago Defender* also reported on instances in which black girls were denied access to the pools, noting the ways racism restricted the recreational activities of young girls.[115] For African-American communities, swimming illuminated spatial inequalities as well as health inequalities due to the restriction of recreational spaces for black children.

Adults still encouraged girls to maintain a decorum of respectability through the aesthetics of their physical body, particularly through their hair. [116] By asserting the healthy and beautiful body, African-American girls' bodies could serve as a form of racial uplift within public pool spaces. Rather than ignore the relationship between hair and the presentation of self, staff at the Y.W.C.A. Southwest Belmont in Philadelphia encouraged the figure of athletic beauty. In 1932, staff approved the use of an electric comb that would be available for girls to use after swimming for a fee of five cents.[117] Gentle exercises such as gymnastics and dance could prevent sweat from interfering with hairstyles. However, the mere act of swimming could cause hair to revert from straight to curly instantly. The electric comb, a device that would straighten hair with high heat, could transform African-American girls' hair from curly to straight, made possible by advances in African-American hair care made by women such as Madame C.J. Walker. Items such as the hot comb, electric comb, and the relaxer all provided girls with the ability to possess hair that could be read as presentable visions of black middle-class

---

[114] "Concerning a Minimum Program for its Work with the Negro Girls and Women of the City," 1933, Box 3, Folder 27, YWCA Southwest Belmont, SCRC.
[115] "Race Barred from Swimming Pool," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), April 13, 1935.
[116] For a discussion on hair and physical activity, see: Patricia O'Brien-Richardson, "Hair Harassment in Urban Schools and How It Shapes the Physical Activity of Black Adolescent Girls," *The Urban Review* 51, no. 3 (2019): 523-534.
[117] Health Education Report, March 8, 1932, Box 1, Folder 3, YWCA Southwest Belmont, SCRC.

femininity.[118] This allowed girls the opportunity to engage in physical activity and leave the center with a hairstyle that would appear as if they had not devoted hours exercising. The athletic beauty, as one who not only exercised but maintained her hair, could still retain an aura of respectability after she finished swimming.

Later, the health education staff at the Y.W.C.A. Southwest Belmont hired a hairdresser who would style girls' hair after swimming sessions.[119] Beauty culture and physical health were intertwined within the organization of the Y.W.C.A.. Black female swimmers did not have to choose between maintaining their hair and their figure. Girls swam frequently at the center and utilized electric combs and stylists. Staff at the Y.W.C.A. cultivated a sense of athletic femininity through the pool rooted in a desire to adhere to socially acceptable standards of beauty. The project of constructing the athletic beauty was also intergenerational—the women at the center understood how imperative it was to equip the girls with a sense of respectable femininity, particularly when girls left the Y.W.C.A. after swimming.

The Southwest Belmont Y.W.C.A. served girls who lived all over the city of Philadelphia and had to walk a fair distance to get home. The availability of hair care could provide girls the opportunity to maintain an air of respectability as they traversed various neighborhoods. A girl at the Y.W.C.A. could walk several blocks, take the bus, or train in order to reach her home. Therefore, girls had to maintain a respectable feminine presentation after spending time in the pool. The electric comb and hair stylist allowed girls to engage in physical activity while also being aware of the ways in which they

---

[118] The presence of the electric comb near the pool does raise the question of safety. The record is not clear on how close or far away the comb was from the pool.
[119] Health Education Annual Report, 1937, Box 3, Folder 36, YWCA Southwest Belmont, SCRC.

needed to cultivate their physical appearance. The practice of self-monitoring provided girls with the ability to navigate public urban space as well as adhere to standards of beauty.

The figure of the athletic beauty emerged as a salient figure for girls. Jessie Abbott, who assisted her husband with athletics teams at Tuskegee University in the 1920s and 1930s and would later join the Y.W.C.A. as an industrial secretary, reflected on the relationship between physical activity and beauty during her adolescence. When discussing her adolescent experiences of swimming, Abbot recalled:

> "In my gym class I was the only Negro in the swimming class. I had waist long hair and when it got wet, it was slightly curly. The white girls would come out of the pool and get in front of the hair dryers and shake their hair and dry it. I kept mine braided. Finally, I went to a hairdresser and had her put some oil on my hair, so when I came out of the pool, I could do like they did. I could turn it loose and shake it dry."[120]

Abbot's description noted the relationship between athletics and the performance of beauty rituals. These beauty rituals were deeply racialized. Physical beauty and physical activity for African-American girls included negotiating respectable notions of hair and body presentations. Abbot reflected upon her relationship to her hair, particularly as the only African-American member in her class. Within the physical education class, which also encouraged the surveillance of bodies both in and out of motion, Abbot examined her white classmates and realized her racial difference. Rather than continue to feel like an outsider, Abbot also participated in the post-swim ritual of shaking her hair dry.

---

[120] Black Women Oral History Project. Interviews, 1976-1981. Jessie Abbott, OH-31, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Accessed at https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:RAD.SCHL:10039841.

Girls also demonstrated their physical appearance on a public stage, encouraging a wider circulation of the athletic beauty. Water pageants encouraged girls to connect exercise and appearance. These pageants, also known as water carnivals, were choreographed productions in the pool that were open to the public, such as a 1937 water pageant titled "Holly Wood in the Water" hosted at the Y.W.C.A Southwest Belmont in Philadelphia.[121] The Y.W.C.A. in Harlem also offered weekly water pageants for girls to participate in on Thursdays.[122] Different than traditional stage pageants, these water pageants combined stunts, acting, and lifesaving activities.

In 1937, girls from the Y.M.C.A. Wabash performed at the "Bud Billiken" water carnival hosted by the *Chicago Defender* at the Washington Park in Chicago in which thousands of people were expected.[123] The Bud Billiken page, which ran in *The Chicago Defender*, served as a junior version of the paper for young readers. Originally written by a young boy who assumed the name "Bud Billiken," the authorship changed over the course of its publication.[124] Similar to *The Crisis'* children's pages, Bud Billiken emerged as a site to instruct the behaviors of black children.[125] Later, Bud Billiken clubs developed from the newspaper and operated as youth social organizations across the United States. By 1930, a Bud Billiken parade was founded in Chicago during the

---

[121] "Health Education Report," 1937, Box 3, Folder 36. YWCA Southwest Belmont, SCRC.
[122] "Holds Water Carnival," *The Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), December 17, 1938.
[123] "Stars Set for Bud's Water Carnival," *Chicago Defender,* (Chicago, IL), August 7, 1937.
[124] Hayumi Higuchi, "The Billiken Club: 'Race leaders' Educating Children (1921-1940)," *Transforming Anthropology* 13, no. 2 (2005): 154-159.
[125] Katharine Capshaw, "Childhood, the Body, and Race Performance: Early 20th-Century Etiquette Books for Black Children," *African American Review* 40, no. 4 (2006): 795-811.

summer, providing a public gathering for black families who travelled from around the country to congregate every year.[126]

The photograph of the Wabash girls published in the *Chicago Defender* demonstrated the possibilities and impact of the athletic beauty. The girls, all wearing the letter "Y" on their swimsuits, connected the organization to their bodies. Their swim caps protected their hair which girls and their caretakers cared for at great lengths. The smiling faces of the swim team assured the readers that these girls, as well as others interested in participating in water carnivals, could engage in active sports and still retain a sense of health, vitality, and femininity. Through these events, black female adolescents could display idealized forms of girlhood for their communities through the figure of the athletic beauty.

A far cry from the active femininity of the tomboy, the athletic beauty defined African-American girls' images of physicality during the 1930s. Physical educators encouraged girls to shape their bodies, refine their beauty, and participate in events that showcased the healthy and respectable body. The ideal of the New Negro Athletic Girl as a beauty queen, seen at institutions such as Howard and spaces such as the Y.W.C.A., provided a stark contrast to the claim "the right type of girl is a tomboy," a claim that would be viewed as unfeminine, transgressive, and deviant.

Conclusion

As a microcosm of the world of the middle class, New Negro Athletic Girlhood represented an important feature of black life in the 1920s and the 1930s. During her transition from girlhood to womanhood, sport and health served as a vehicle for her

---

[126] Peter M. Rutkoff and William B. Scott, "Pinkster in Chicago: Bud Billiken and the Mayor of Bronzeville, 1930-1945," *The Journal of African American History* 89, no. 4 (2004): 316-330.

transformation. She was encouraged to reflect an idealized figure that embraced bodily discipline, careful measurement, and future motherhood. Through physical activity and sport, the New Negro Athletic Girl was constructed as competitive, respectable, restrained. The athletic girl reflected the changing conceptions of black female athletic identity in the New Negro Era as well as illuminated the difficult standards girls faced when attempting to embody this idealized figure.

Advice and instruction on physical health for girls relayed the importance of aesthetics and appearance. However, the role of beauty extended beyond physical education and sporting spaces for girls. Educators and writers encourage girls to connect beauty and health in other areas of their lives by developing personal hygiene pedagogies. Girls attended beauty clinics, read manuals, and participated in pageants as a way to transform their physical bodies, an action that further defined idealized black adolescent femininity during the New Negro Era.

Chapter 2-Personal Hygiene: Bodily Surveillance and Beauty

In a 1933 *Chicago Defender* letter directed toward members of the younger generation, a woman outlined her deep concerns regarding girls' behavior in the public and private spheres. Identifying herself as a mother of two daughters, the author expressed her dismay regarding the everyday conduct of high school and college girls. Instead of embodying characteristics such as restraint and patience, the woman observed girls with abrasive attitudes who possessed an affinity for leaving their parents' house at night to go as they pleased. Unsatisfied with their appearance, the woman also commented on a "noticeable lack...of neatness" from girls and young women in their daily lives.[1] In her view, girls' conduct correlated to their bodily aesthetics.

In the letter, the author urged girls to value "cleanliness"—a characteristic that she argued was lacking in girls' comportment. Instead of valuing a demure and clean appearance, the writer suggested that girls often put "powder, lipstick, and rouge" on a dirty face, connecting cleanliness with the presentation of physical beauty. Concerned about girls' application of cosmetics and the presence of dirt on their faces, she also accused them of using cosmetics to seduce male colleagues in office settings. According to the author, cleanliness reflected a commitment to improving one's exterior and interior self while still reflecting a sense of beauty. "An unclean girl is positively obnoxious," she stated and emphasized the importance of bathing, especially after work, as a way to cultivate beauty and encourage relaxation. For the author, modern girlhood transgressed previously held ideas about gender, appearance, and decorum. The letter provides

[1] "Mother of Two Rebukes College Women," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Sept. 2, 1933.

insights into the types of bodily surveillance African-American girls faced and showcases some of the ways the adolescent body remained under the watchful eye of adults and peers under the guise of advice for maintaining hygiene and beauty.

Through rituals of grooming the body, personal hygiene connected to intensive forms of beauty that involved daily maintenance achieved by outside products. Personal hygiene includes both the prevention of health problems as well as the appearance of the healthy and clean self, which is also dependent on ideologies of hygiene that shift across cultures and times.[2] Central to these ideologies include the visuality of the body, which remained key for girls during the New Negro Era. Personal hygiene involved not only the maintenance of the clean body; girls were also instructed to place value on the display of qualities such as desirability and attractiveness.

In this chapter, I examine how African-American girls were instructed to engage in beauty culture in order to produce visions of healthy black girlhoods. Drawing upon the works of scholars of beauty, I define "beauty culture" as products, forms of informal and formal education, advice, images, and practices that sought to target the aesthetics of the physical body, particularly the skin and hair.[3] Publications such as *The Chicago Defender* and *Half-Century Magazine* as well as social organizations such as the Y.W.C.A. instructed African-American girls to craft their appearances, arguing for the importance of personal hygiene and beauty. Migration, intergenerational connections

---

[2] Katherine Asheburg, *The Dirt on Clean: An Unsanitized History* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2008); Virginia Sarah Smith, *Clean: A History of Personal Hygiene and Purity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Suellen Hoy, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Carl A. Zimring, *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States* (New York: NYU Press, 2017).

[3] Additionally, Kathy Peiss states that beauty culture is about material products as well as "a system of meaning," *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

with club women, and attention to consumer culture shaped messages directed at African-American girls regarding health and beauty, identifying physical appearance as a way to display an image of middle-class respectability, critical within urban Northern spaces.

Messages circulated in publications and advice columns reminded African-American girls that the formation of the healthy body included an awareness of individual and collective bodily surveillance. Within homes, individual girls were expected to monitor their bodies and participate in beauty rituals. However, African-American girls also faced collective scrutiny from others within public spaces. Adults monitored African-American girls in urban spaces, particularly as more and more families relocated to cities during the Great Migration. Driven by a need to present a respectable image, middle class African-American adults instructed girls to be mindful of their appearance in public places. As LaKisha Simmons argues, girls faced the "double bind" of white racism and black middle-class respectability during 1930s and 1940s New Orleans.[4] I build on her work by tracing how African-American girls' relationship to personal hygiene and beauty also required an awareness of this tension in the urban North.

Like girls of other races, African-American girls faced external pressures to maintain a healthy and beautiful body. The introduction of the mirror within domestic spaces at the turn of the century prompted American girls to pay strict attention to their faces.[5] Material objects such as mirrors, combined with a growing consumer culture that offered beauty advice in magazines, prompted a greater focus on the body for adolescent

---

[4] LaKisha Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press Books, 2015), 5.
[5] Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 66.

girls. Newspapers, advice manuals, and social institutions instructed girls to view their bodies as sites of self-improvement. Advice columns geared towards teenage girls in magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal* during the interwar era centered values of "self-correction" in behavior as well as appearance, which required strict monitoring of the body.[6] While African-American girls were occasionally directed by girls' organizations to read *Ladies Homes Journal*-and perhaps read them on their own accord-these publications offered no representations of black beauty culture. Mainstream consumer culture of the 1920s and the 1930s reflected the experiences of white girls and women, leading black communities to create their own beauty culture within print publications.

Instead, African-American girls read beauty advice in African-American newspapers, magazines, and club manuals. Messages regarding how to mold the adolescent female body were transmitted through intergenerational cooperation and print culture. These spheres merged together as African-American female educators published their own manuals for girls and print media sources included advice from older African-American women. As girls were given advice on how to take care of their skin, they were also instructed to embrace the beauty of their skin tones. In the face of mainstream racial hierarchies that identified whiteness as inherently beautiful and blackness as grotesque, the rhetoric of beauty for African-American communities was deeply politicized.[7] The desire to view racial consciousness and black beauty as interconnected remained a crucial part of skincare.

---

[6] Ilana Nash, *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 15.
[7] Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 53-56.

Publications also demonstrated the emergence of a national African-American girls' beauty culture. Photographs in black newspapers illuminated the ways African-American girls participated and reworked white conceptions of modern girlhood by showcasing their ability to display flapper hairstyles. African-American girls also demonstrated their beauty on the national stage of the pageant, which represented idealized black adolescent femininity. Beauty work, often done under the guise of health, illustrated a formative part of constructing black girlhoods as symbols of racial pride during the New Negro Era.

Black Girls' Beauty Culture

In acknowledging the cultural and intellectual value of beauty culture, scholars detail the ways the female body, through practices of self-adornment, reflects notions of class, race, gender.[8] Scholars such as Blain Roberts also argue for the importance of regional studies of beauty in her scholarship on black and white southern women's beauty culture, analyzing the role of location in shaping conceptions of physical appearance. This chapter is also attuned to the relationship between location and beauty. Cities in the urban North were prime spaces for newly arrived girls to display their Northern and modern identities. Additionally, print culture established national ideas of black girls' beauty culture through photographs in newspapers and magazines.

---

[8] Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Blain Roberts, *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women: Race and Beauty in the Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2014); Alys Eve Weinbaum, Lynn M. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger, Madeleine Yue Dong, and Tani E. Barlow, *The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Margaret A. Lowe, *Looking Good: College Women and Body Image, 1875-1930* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2003); Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Vintage, 1998).

Scholars such as Kathy Peiss have also traced the role of beauty culture as essential for understanding the relationship between gender and modern identities. As Peiss notes, beauty culture encouraged the fashioning and establishing of one's identities, particularly as it connects to the "modern social experience."[9] Through forms of beauty culture, such as through cosmetics, skincare, and haircare, girls and young women participated in the process of becoming modern. While these practices were not necessarily new, the mass production of products and their presence in advertisements illustrated advancements in consumer culture.

African-American women used beauty culture as a space to articulate "New Negro Womanhood" during the turn of the early twentieth century.[10] According to scholars of African-American gender studies, New Negro women crafted beauty culture as a space for self-definition, community building, and economic advancement. Black women invested in products made by other black female members of their community, creating a new consumer culture focused on their needs and interests.[11] New Negro beauty culture also circulated through print publications which advertised cosmetics and haircare, promising bodily transformation and self-improvement. African-American girls were also the target of this New Negro beauty culture as they were directed, often by

---

[9] Peiss, *Hope in a Jar,* 6.

[10] Treva Lindsey, *Colored No More: Reinventing Black Womanhood in Washington, D.C.* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 55. For more on black beauty culture, see: Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2002); Noliwe M. Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Noliwe M. Rooks, *Ladies' Pages: African American Women's Magazines and the Culture that Made Them* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Laila Haidarali, *Brown Beauty: Color, Sex, and Race from the Harlem Renaissance to World War II*. (New York: NYU Press, 2018); Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), Tiffany Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African-American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 2010),; Maxine Leeds Craig, "Race, Beauty, and the Tangled Knot of a Guilty Pleasure," *Feminist Theory* 7, no. 2 (2006): 159-177.

[11] Lindsey, *Colored No More,* 52-85.

health writers and educations, to purchase products and participate in practices of skincare and haircare.

Beauty and health were often intertwined. Through work with communities in urban and rural environments, black club women in the early twentieth century who directed health education and health care initiatives "equated health with cleanliness and cleanliness with respectability."[12] Susan Smith argues that these programs were primarily aimed at women, through improving the cleanliness of the home. However, I also extend her argument to consider the ways girls received similar messages about cleanliness and respectability. Personal hygiene could shape young black female bodies into symbols of visible racial uplift. Through health education, African-American girls were also subject to personal hygiene instruction that connected aesthetics and respectability.

While most scholarship on black beauty culture focuses on women, historical studies of African-American girls' beauty culture has received little scholarly attention.[13] This chapter provides an intervention into studies of beauty culture by centering the lives of black adolescent girls who were directed to connect beauty with hygiene. Adolescence represented a formative time for the instruction of ideal beauty standards. Through girls' clubs, college campuses, and advice manuals, educators and writers reminded girls that health could be made visible through cultivating the beautiful body.

Establishing Bodily Surveillance

---

[12] Susan Lynn Smith, *Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: Black Women's Health Activism in America, 1890-1950* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 47.

[13] An exception includes Laila Haidarali in *Brown Beauty* who, although focuses her study on New Negro women, occasionally addresses the experiences of girls through doll culture and sociological studies on colorism. In her study, bobbed hair marked womanhood while a "sweet" expression noted childhood, while I view bobbed hair as an expression of youth (135).

Migration

As more girls migrated to the urban North from the rural South, northern middle-class girls were expected to present a refined image of their physical appearance. As Victoria Wolcott notes, black reformers expressed their anxieties regarding the arrival of southern female migrants. In Detroit, reformers addressed their ire at the behavior and dress of migrants, particularly women, from the South. A "Dress Well Club" was founded in the city in 1917 in order to encourage people to maintain their body appearance. Part of the work of this club included going to public areas where members "distributed cards and pamphlets" in order to encourage the correct forms of bodily presentation.[14] In addition to social clubs, the black middle-class established the body as a symbol of racial uplift in national black newspapers.

In a series of articles, the *Chicago Defender* warned potential and new arrivals about conduct and appearance. In March 1919, the front page issued a list of rules under the title "Where We Are Lacking." Admonishing new arrivals for their behavior in street cars to "being half-clad" in public, the newspaper reminded readers that "practices found...upon the country cross roads of the South" were unacceptable in Northern cities.[15] For girls arriving to Chicago, adhering to these rules required a sense of vigilance about their skin, body, and hair according the mores and models set up through middle-class urban black culture.

Several years later in 1923, the *Chicago Defender* issued another warning to new arrivals through a list of rules printed in the newspaper. In "Don'ts For Newcomers,"

---

[14] Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 56-57.
[15] "Where We Are Lacking," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), May 17, 1919.

people are encouraged to "be an active force for decency and welfare." Active decency is read through the body as the rules target both appearance and behavior in public. Girls and women were warned to not flirt, especially while wearing "chunky" hair that has "bed lint."[16] In addition, girls were directed to avoid cleaning their nails in public as well as abstain from wearing items such as overalls, particularly in shopping districts. Such advice reflected pressures on newly arrived migrant girls to devote attention to their bodies as a way to shield oneself from judgement by the northern black middle-class community. Engaging with beauty culture could display their urban, middle-class, and cosmopolitan identities.

Middle class African-Americans who were already established in the North portrayed the bodies of newly arrived girls as unable to adapt to norms of cleanliness and beauty. Messages, circulated through the *Chicago Defender,* reached not only those already located in cities such as New York, Chicago, or Washington D.C., but also girls in cities in the South who planned or aspired to migrate northward. These messages served as a warning for girls to actively embody a sense of respectability when living in and moving around urban northern cities. This advice assumed that girls coming from the South did not already aspire towards respectability—a claim that scholars have countered in their work.[17] Their advice asserted a geographic bias that ignored middle-class urban communities in the South and emphasized the ideal of the urban North.

Warnings from the *Chicago Defender* that viewed newcomers with suspicion targeted the bodies of girls and women. As Hazel Carby notes, a "moral panic"

---

[16] "Don'ts for Newcomers," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), July 14, 1923.
[17] Blain Roberts, *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women: Race and Beauty in the Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2014),

surrounded black women in urban spaces during the early years of the Great Migration.[18] This panic was often intraracial, as the unkempt black female body could represent "a threat to the establishment of a respectable urban black middle class."[19] While reformers focused on behavior, appearance remained a central fixation as well. African-American girls received messages about how to discipline their bodies in urban spaces, which required both individual and collective bodily surveillance.

As girls arrived in Northern cities, some responded to these messages by changing parts of their appearance. According to an observation from the *Saturday Evening Post,* hair care remained a priority for recent transplants. In 1924, the newspaper noted that "the first thing every Negro girl does when she comes from the South...is have her hair straightened."[20] While it was highly unlikely that every girl straightened her hair upon arriving from the South, the claim still highlights the ways in which girls' beauty became a part of migration narratives in mass media. Straightened hair reflected the ability to conform to middle-class black beauty standards. African-American girls were cognizant of the pressures to maintain a healthy and beautiful body, especially when aware of the gaze from their new urban neighbors.

African-American girls navigated the intersection of beauty culture and the Great Migration. Aware of the ways in which bodily surveillance operated within urban spaces, girls molded and shaped their appearance in accordance with black middle-class norms. Particularly for newly arrived girls from the South, girls were instructed to be extra vigilant about their appearance. Their bodies symbolized representations of visible racial

---

[18] Hazel V. Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (1992): 741.
[19] Carby, "Policing the Black Body," 741.
[20] Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics,* 35.

uplift that required careful guidance from others. African-American club women provided advice for young adolescent women, creating an intergenerational foundation for beauty culture disseminated through health education.

Intergenerational Beauty Culture

Young women were served by educational institutions that emphasized the role of personal hygiene and beauty. At these institutions, girls learned about personal hygiene from African-American educators, thus emphasizing the intergenerational nature of this work. While girls likely learned about personal hygiene from their families, clubs and schools offered a formal curriculum as well as the opportunity to learn about their bodies among their peers. Black female health educators focused on the role of racial identity within the instruction of beauty culture in order to build the self-esteem of their students.

Scholars have examined the National Training School for Girls and Women in Washington D.C. and the relationship between self-improvement, cleanliness, and the body. Founded in 1909 by Nannie Burroughs, Victoria Wolcott notes that the school propagated an ethos of middle-class respectability through the body and home, symbolized by their motto "Bible, Bath, and Broom."[21] The school instructed girls on the correct way to lead morally and spiritually clean lives which also connected to their outward appearance as they were assessed on qualities that included "personal cleanliness."[22] The National Training School for Girls and Women aimed to challenge images of black girls and women as "unclean and unrefined."[23] Girls' "hair, body, odor,

[21] Victoria Wolcott, "'Bible, Bath, and Broom': Nannie Helen Burroughs's National Training School and African-American Racial Uplift," *Journal of Women's History* 9, no. 1 (1997): 93.
[22] Rooks, *Hair Raisin*g, 41.
[23] Wolcott, "Bible, Bath, and Broom," 87.

and clothing" were checked daily and they were steered away from artificial beauty enhancements such as bleaching and straighteners.[24] Burroughs believed these products facilitated the emulation of standards of whiteness and the rejection of one's racial identity. In a rebuke towards mainstream beauty culture, Burroughs once questioned "What does this wholesale bleaches of faces and straightening of hair indicate? It simply means that women who practice it wish they had white faces and straight hair."[25] Instead, girls at the school maintained a simple appearance that upheld standards of cleanliness while still avoiding modern trends of beauty culture reliant on notions of whiteness.

At Howard University in Washington D.C., girls under the instruction of Maryrose Reeves Allen received different messages regarding personal hygiene than students at the National Training School. While Burroughs emphasized beauty through simple and clean appearances, Allen embraced enhancements such as cosmetics and straighteners. A physical education and health instructor, Allen insisted on teaching the value of beauty through personal hygiene. Girls learned about personal hygiene in her courses as well as at a laboratory which aimed to "teach the individual how to correct her personal defects and habits in order to both acquire and to maintain beauty."[26] Within Allen's instruction, girls cultivated a sense of self-surveillance, facilitated through the health education classroom. This self-surveillance also occurred within Allen's body aesthetics course which combined instruction with a beauty clinic. In this beauty clinic, girls learned about "care and styling of the hair," "skin analysis" and "selection and use

---

[24] Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics,* 41-42. However, eventually Burroughs would shift her beliefs in the 1930s, noting the importance of beauty culture as a means of professional and economic development (Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics,* 68).
[25] Rooks, *Hair Raising,* 41. Quoted from Dorothy Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Norton, 1984), 429.
[26] "The Development of Beauty in College Women through Health and Physical Education," 1938, Box 160-4, Folder 4, Maryrose Allen Reeves Papers, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

of cosmetics."[27] While Burroughs condemned the use of cosmetics, Allen included these as essential parts of her curriculum.

Within the space of the beauty clinic and the health education classroom, Allen viewed cosmetics as a tool to augment the appearance of her students. When reflecting upon her time at Howard, Allen stated:

> "In 1925 when I first came to Howard University I was so impressed with the natural beauty of our Negro girls, their warm rosy, rusty, creaming, pinky-white ebony-like golden tan and brown complexions. And along with all these various types of complexions the perfect color eyes, hair, lips and teeth to blend in with all of this to make it harmonious."[28]

Allen remained insistent on affirming the natural beauty of her students. This natural beauty did not necessarily mean the elimination of cosmetics or lack of hair straightening. For example, a 1928 Howard University yearbook displayed the straight hair styles of her physical education students.[29] Instead, natural beauty was primarily about their skin tones. Allen wished to enhance the natural beauty of her students through beauty clinics and physical education instruction. Allen's statement and work illustrates the potential for beauty culture to affirm girls' self-esteem.

While concerned with the plight of the college girl, Allen also focused her attention towards younger adolescent girls and expanding the project of intergenerational beauty work. After working at John Hope Junior High School in Indianapolis, Indiana, Allen proposed a girls' club devoted to personal hygiene and character development.[30]After spending time in her health and physical education classes at the

---

[27] "Beauty Clinic," n.d., Box 160-8, Folder 10, Maryrose Allen Reeves Papers, MSRC.
[28] "Letter to Mr. Goodman," February 5, 1957, Box 160-9, Folder. 5, Maryrose Allen Reeves Papers, MSRC.
[29] Howard University, *The Bison* (Washington, D.C.: 1928), "Physical Education for Women," MSRC.
[30] "Charm Club," n.d., Box 160-4, Folder 5, Maryrose Allen Reeves Papers, MRSC.

junior high school, Allen observed how the impoverished nature of the school affected girls' access to personal hygiene and beauty classes. It is not clear if this girls' group ever came to fruition. However, Allen's proposal provides insight into the kinds of attention and care she envisioned for young African-American girls. Her outline for her club also operates as a guidance manual for her young prospective students. Noting a lack in the school's health education curriculum, she developed a "Charm Club" in order to establish a curriculum around cultivating appearance and personality for the girls in her care.

In the Charm Club, girls' personal hygiene directly tied to their physical and emotional sense of self. While Allen mentions the "medical implications" of cleanliness, which included preventing the spread of disease, the "social aspects" of cleanliness were also of great importance. Social aspects included maintaining one's appearance to establish and maintain social relationships. These social aspects also connected with future prospects. Personal hygiene could potentially impact a girl's professional chances, especially within "private interviews."[31] In order to secure employment, African-American girls needed to not just behave in a respectable manner—they needed to look the part as well.

In the Charm Club, girls are instructed to keep a record for three weeks of their "health habits" which included care of nails, application of deodorant, and bathing. However, Allen also guides girls to monitor their fellow members. Through careful observance, girls analyze the faces of other girls in the club in order to decide on the best form of cosmetic application. Girls' collective beauty work involved individual and group surveillance. The Charm Club directs girls to find a "buddy" in the club who could

[31] "Charm Club," n.d., Box 160-4, Folder 5, Maryrose Allen Reeves Papers, MRSC.

give and receive advice regarding the presentation of their clothing. Through peer relationships and adult supervision, beauty work became a project in which appearance was continually worked upon in the private sphere of the home and the public sphere of the club or classroom.

This type of intergenerational beauty work also pointed to the importance of consumer culture. In *Pudge Grows Up: A Series of Meetings for Girls* (1936), a publication written by Frances Harriett Williams and Wenonah Bond Logan, two black women who worked for the Y.W.C.A., members were instructed to develop a visual map of personal hygiene. The manual directs girls to build a personal collage drawn from women's magazines that identified aspirational forms of beauty. These collages formed part of a "Personal Attractiveness" scrapbook inspired by magazines such as "*Vogue, Harper's Bazaar, Ladies' Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping*."[32] Not only for girls' individual gain, the collages were also to be displayed within the local organization "where a great many people can see it."[33] While these collages offered a visual display of beauty culture, they also relied on images from white mainstream women's magazines. Perhaps unintentional on the part of the authors, the instructions regarding the collages symbolized the dominant ways that representations of American beauty culture were often synonymous with whiteness.

While the magazines cited by *Pudge Grows Up* targeted white audiences, African-American girls also read publications from their own communities that addressed the role of beauty. Through African-American print publications, girls read about the

---

[32] Frances Harriett Williams and Wenonah Bond Logan, *Pudge Grows Up,* 1936, Box 568, Folder 17, YWCA of the USA, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.
[33] Williams and Logan, *Pudge Grows Up,* 1936, Box 568, Folder 17, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.

most efficient ways to achieve an ideal physical appearance. These publications encouraged girls to buy certain products as well as mold themselves into images of modern beauties who used cosmetics to accentuate their skin tone and dedicated time to care for their hair. African-American women's publications in the 1920s reached a wide scope of readers, including girls who already resided in urban areas and girls who might migrate to the Urban North. Reflecting the types of messages club women sought to instill within intergenerational health education, black women's magazines disseminated messages to African-American female adolescents across the country.

Consuming Beauty

Through the circulation and purchase of goods, many girls during the interwar era used new products as a way to create and display their modern identities.[34] The emergence of consumer markets identified beauty as both a commodity and an element of girls' culture. Girls' participation as consumers and representatives of beauty culture promoted new practices and forms of identity expression, particularly through haircare and skincare. The concept of agency is useful in understanding girls' consumer culture.[35] Girls were not all gullible consumers who easily brought into ideas of self-improvement while purchasing products. Instead, beauty culture functioned as a space where girls actively constructed their own gendered and racialized identities.[36]

As Kathy Peiss argues, conversations regarding consumption and beauty culture require attention to racial categories. The idea of a singular "mass market," often invoked

---

[34] Alys Eve Weinbaum, Lynn M. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger, Madeleine Yue Dong, and Tani E. Barlow, *The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 18-22.
[35] Weinbaum et. al, *The Modern Girl Around the World,* 20.
[36] Weinbaum et. al, *The Modern Girl Around the World,* 20.

in studies of beauty culture, flattens the experiences of women.[37] Instead, attention must be paid to the category of race as well as gender. Through this focus, a different mass market culture emerges, one that concerns the experiences of black women. I expand upon her work to imagine how African-American girls also developed a different mass culture than did white girls. Through attention to race, gender, and age, African-American girls participated in a different consumer market than those of their white peers as well as their older black female figures.

Notions of class also informed the consumer market. African-American middle class and upper middle-class women used consumer culture as a form of "conspicuous consumption."[38] Beauty culture and consumer practices did not merely physically transform bodies, but also displayed notions of class. African-American middle class girls were also directed to display conspicuous consumption through the body as they were guided by older women in their lives who worked as educators and advice writers. The presentation of the ideal body and the ways in which girls attained products to make that image possible represented the nature of a class-based beauty culture.

During the early twentieth century, African-American middle class girls and women had greater access to products that were specifically designed for their own skin and hair. The growth of black entrepreneurs such as Madame C.J. Walker and Annie Malone ignited a black female centered beauty consumer market.[39] As Marcia Chatelain

---

[37] Peiss, *Hope in a Jar,* 203.
[38] Lindsey, *Colored No More,* 66.
[39] A'Lelia Perry Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam CJ Walker* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2001); Beverly Lowry, *Her Dream of Dreams: The Rise and Triumph of Madam CJ Walker* (New York: Vintage, 2011); Davarian L Baldwin, "From the Washtub to the World: Madam CJ Walker and the 'Re-creation' of Race Womanhood, 1900–1935," in *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* eds. Weinbaum et. al (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008): 55-76. For black beauty culture in the Canadian context, see: Cheryl Thompson, *Beauty in a Box: Detangling the Roots of Canada's Black Beauty Culture* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 2019).

argues, girls also participated in this black female consumer culture during the Great Migration. Girls faced an array of products that targeted both the texture and the color of their skin. Young women with disposable income were eager to spend money on these products, particularly in urban centers where cosmetics were more widely available.[40] The city offered not only economic and social opportunities, but also an opportunity to define themselves as beauty consumers. I also extend her argument to view how black girls engaged with consumer markets by emphasizing the role of print culture.

One such avenue for the dissemination of these products and beauty ideals included black newspapers and magazines, researched in detail by scholars such as Noliwe Rooks.[41] Founded by Katherine Williams at the age of twenty-one, African-American women's magazines such as *Half-Century Magazine* (1912-1927) provided avenues for African-American girls and women to learn about beauty culture.[42] While the magazine was published in Chicago, its national scope reached readers across the country. Williams wanted the publication to be accessible for a variety of black communities across social and economic classes and geographic regions.[43] The publication addressed subjects such as domestic life, fashion, conduct, and politics. In the context of the migration, *Half-Century Magazine* disseminated advice and information about dress and appearance for readers who resided in rural areas and hoped to move to more urban spaces as well as for readers already residing in urban spaces.

---

[40] Marcia Chatelain, *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 71.
[41] Noliwe M. Rooks, *Ladies' Pages: African American Women's Magazines and the Culture that Made Them* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004). See also, Elizabeth M. Sheehan "To Exist Serially: Black Radical Magazines and Beauty Culture, 1917–1919," *The Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* 9, no. 1 (2019): 30-52.
[42] Rooks, *Ladies' Pages,* 4.
[43] Rooks, *Ladies' Pages*, 70.

Although first geared towards both men and women, *Half-Century Magazine* shifted towards a primarily female demographic. Originally, the full title of the magazine was *Half-Century Magazine: A Colored Monthly for the Business Man and the Home Maker.* The title later changed to *Half-Century Magazine: A Colored Magazine for the Home and Home Maker.* The removal of the figure of the businessman crafted the magazine as a publication for girls and women who primarily inhabited the domestic sphere. Readers most likely did not occupy homemaker as their primary occupation. However, the aspirational goal of the title nudges readers to acknowledge the importance of the home. In addition, the home is seen as a space to cultivate one's appearance in private in order to present the right image in the public sphere.

While scholarly examination on *Half-Century Magazine* often centers on women, I also offer an analysis on the magazine's guidance to girls. Advice on personal hygiene through columns and fictional stories informed girls on the right ways to shape their appearance. In the short story "Popularity and Personal Daintiness" (1920) a young girl by the name of Marie Louise ponders the role of personal hygiene in her daily life. Written by Evelyn Northington, a contributor to *Half-Century Magazine,* the essay echoed her previous writings on beauty for African-American women. During her time at the magazine, her columns addressed topics such as hair, skin care, and other matters pertaining to health and beauty.[44] Marie Louise served as a surrogate for girls interested in improving their looks.

"Popularity and Personal Daintiness" identified the connection between girlhood, health, and beauty through the intergenerational relationship between Marie Louise and

[44] Evelyn Northington, "Popularity and Personal Daintiness," *Half-Century Magazine,* May 1920, 10.

Northington, the author. Prompted by the events of the previous evening, Marie Louise, a girl of "debutante age," brings her concerns regarding her lack of male suitors during a dance to Northington.[45] Northington, while not Louise's mother, is a matronly figure eager to dispense advice to the distraught girl. The category of debutante highlights her age and social status. The presentation of the debutante marked her coming of age in high society spaces, often through the lavish balls and elaborate dresses that marked a girl's classed position.[46] Marie Louise's anxieties about her appearance reflected her conscious desire to present herself to her peers in public. Two of her friends, Lillian and Ruth, also felt neglected by the boys at the dance while a multitude of other suitors approached their other friend, Violet Ross. Appearance is tied to desire as Evelyn Northington connects the absence of male connection with Marie Louise's failure to properly present herself.

The meaning of personal daintiness is explained to Marie Louise as well as transmitted to other potential girl readers through Northington's advice. Out of the four girls in the story, Violet is constructed as the ideal girl due to her diligence in keeping up her appearance. Her skin is clear and blemish free while Marie's is full of blackheads. In addition, Lillian's hair is frizzy and dirty while Ruth's body has "unpleasant odors."[47] Marie and her friends become the target of Northington's intervention as Violet is painted as the type of girl who has remained vigilant, devoting time and labor to her appearance. The reward for Violet's vigilance is Northington's approval as well an expanded pool of male suitors. In order for Marie and her friends to improve their appearance, Northington

---

[45] Northington, "Popularity and Personal Daintiness," *Half-Century Magazine*, May 1920, 10.
[46] For more on debutantes, see Karal Ann Marling, *Debutante: Rites and Regalia of American Debdom* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004). Miya Carey also writes extensively about debutante balls in her dissertation "The Charm of all Girlhood," PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2018.
[47] Northington, "Popularity and Personal Daintiness," *Half-Century Magazine*, May 1920, 10.

presents Marie with several options, requiring attention to the individual and collective nature of beauty work.

The individual work suggested to Marie included advice to wash her face every night and avoid falling asleep with "powder" and "rouge." For her friends, Northington recommended a "clean bath, fresh underwear and a good deodorizer."[48] While Northington relayed this information to Marie, it was Marie's responsibility to transfer this information to her friends, reflecting the collective underpinnings of beauty culture as well as a need to encourage girls to purchase more products. Although Marie notes the difficulty in telling her friends about their beauty transgressions, ultimately the advice is well received. By the end of the story, Marie's skin is clear, her hair is in the "latest mode" and she has had "brilliant success" at her recent dance.[49] Despite the laborious and time intensive nature of her new routine, Marie insists that she must continue to take time to focus on her beauty. By the end of the story, the result is a newfound confidence rooted in personal appearance that also transforms her female friends.

Although Marie and her friends were fictional characters, their worries about their outward appearance likely represented the concerns of some African-American adolescent girls during the early twentieth century. The short story illustrated the connection between cleanliness, attractiveness, and personal responsibility. As the intended audience for this story, girls were seen as responsible for developing not only their own appearance, but the appearance of their community as well. Stories such as Northington's were designed to inform as well as shape one's beauty practices. Young female readers not only read Northington's columns, but also responded to her advice

[48] Northington, "Popularity and Personal Daintiness," *Half-Century Magazine*, May 1920, 10.
[49] Northington, "Popularity and Personal Daintiness," *Half-Century Magazine*, May 1920, 10.

through their own letters. When *Half-Century Magazine* did not include Northington's beauty column in several issues, a group of young female readers felt the absence of this column, writing the following letter to the magazine:

> "Dear Miss Northington,
>
> You haven't had a "beauty article" for a long time. Those articles were so helpful when you had them regularly each month that we miss them terribly now. You can't imagine how much better looking we are getting to be by taking your advice. Let's have some more beauty hints soon, won't you?
> Three Girl Readers"[50]

The three girl readers, through their collective letter writing, affirmed the importance of the column.[51] The practice of reading the column became instructive for the girls. Through reading the magazine, girls consumed the messages around application and the purchase of products necessary in order to display the ideal beautiful body.

The beauty discourse of personal hygiene attempted to shape African-American girls into respectable and healthy representatives of their community through bodily discipline. Under the watchful eye of citizens in the urban North, girls were instructed to maintain their appearances in order to display visible forms of racial uplift. Girls drew upon club women's instruction as well as advice found in African-American publications in order to create visions of black girlhood that centered the ideals of health and beauty.

Constructing these visions also required targeting specific sites of the body, including their skin and hair. African-American girls engaged in skincare and haircare practices that sought to both uplift their self-esteem as well as embody a symbol desired

---

[50] "The People's Forum," *Half-Century Magazine*, October 1920, 17.
[51] Gholnecsar E. Muhammad and Marcelle Haddix, "Centering Black Girls' Literacies: A Review of Literature on the Multiple Ways of Knowing of Black Girls," *English Education* 48, no. 4 (2016): 326.

by girls around the world, the flapper. Through attention to the skin, African-American girls were encouraged to develop an ethos of racial pride through the site of the body. By participating in hair trends such as the bob, African-American girls articulated their own version of modern girlhood.

Racial Pride and Skincare

During the early twentieth century, mainstream girls' beauty culture merged medical intervention and consumer culture. As Joan Brumberg argues, the growth of dermatology increased the rate of attention provided towards girls' skin during the twentieth century.[52] Medical advice, combined with individual monitoring of the skin within the home, translated into the growth of a girls' beauty marketplace.[53] Increased attention towards skin provided a greater need for cosmetics that could improve complexion. The needs and desires of girls as consumers prompted businesses and advertisers to pay attention to products that sought to not only enhance with cosmetics, but also improved the condition of the skin.[54]

The relationship between the health of the skin and cosmetics illustrated the changing nature of girlhood and notions of appropriate forms of physical adornment. Prior to the 1920s, adults generally discouraged the use of cosmetics for girls because of its association with prostitutes as well as other women read as unrespectable.[55] However, in the 1920s, the view of cosmetics shifted as girls wore makeup in print advertisements

---

[52] Brumberg, *The Body Project,* 60-68.
[53] Kelly Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls' Culture, 1920-1945* (New York: Springer, 2004), 78-80.
[54] Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox*, 78-88.
[55] Peiss, *Hope in a Jar,* 53-54.

and cinema screens. Cosmetics then began to become associated with "career success, heterosexual romance, and natural beauty," all qualities read as desirable and aspirational for young women. [56]

However, the use of cosmetics carried an additional level of stigma for African-Americans girls. While the acceptability of cosmetics had shifted, for African-American girls who were already viewed as hypersexual, displaying natural beauty remained critical to achieving ideal New Negro Girlhood. The desire to remain respectable in appearance through adhering to standards of beauty shaped black girls' beauty practices. African-American girls received messages on cultivating natural appearances that stressed the need to "subdue, not highlight" facial features.[57] Makeup rested in enhancing natural beauty, rather than presenting an image of artificial aesthetics**.** In addition, cosmetics made black girls and women wary of the suggestion that outside products and changes were necessary to be considered "equal" to their white female counterparts. [58]

The connection between cosmetics, perceptions of equality, and femininity often pointed to the role of skin color. African-American girls and women faced enormous pressure to lighten their skin. As Treva Lindsey asserts, skin lightening did, at times, define New Negro Womanhood. The use of these products suggested a modern consumer identity, while at the same time exemplifying "white cultural hegemony."[59] Often, these products were sent discreetly, obscuring the fact that the consumer participated in skin

---

[56] Roberts, *Pageants,* 75.
[57] Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*: *Modernity, the Great Migration, & Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 57.
[58] Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*, 59
[59] Treva Lindsey, "Black No More: Skin Bleaching and the Emergence of New Negro Womanhood Beauty Culture," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 4, no. 4 (2011): 106

lightening and could ensure the facade of naturalness.[60] The process involved applying a cream on their skin and lightening their skin several shades. However, these creams contained various chemicals that could also damage the skin of the user. Black reformers argued about the practice of skin lightening and its investment in white beauty standards. However, lighter skin was associated with cultural capital. Girls and women with lighter skin received preferential treatment for employment over darker skinned peers.[61] For lighter skinned girls who could "pass" as white, lighter skin offered safety as well as social and financial security.

As evidenced within their own letters to beauty columns, African-American girls detailed their own worries about the tone of their skin. In a 1920 letter to the *Chicago Defender*'s "Beauty Hints" column, a teenage girl inquired about bleaching her skin by asking the following questions: "Have you a good bleach for my neck and arms? Do you think a girl of 14 years old is too young to bleach her skin?"[62] While the advice columnist gave her suggestions for using "almond meal" or "cornmeal" to alter her skin, the columnist responded that the girl was too young to use cosmetics as a form of bleach. Her questions note the role of skin bleach in not only covering up the face, but other areas of the skin as well. While face powder could cover up the skin, bleach covered more areas of the body. The questions also highlights the girl's anxieties about the color of the skin and her desire to become lighter. These anxieties were not imagined–on the same page as her question lay an advertisement for Dr. Fred Palmer's Skin Whitener, aimed towards "beautiful women." In newspapers and magazines, the implicit message that bleach was

---

[60] Treva Lindsey, "Black No More: Skin Bleaching and the Emergence of New Negro Womanhood Beauty Culture," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 4, no. 4 (2011): 106.
[61] Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 77.
[62] "Beauty Hints," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), January 24, 1920.

necessary for beauty was promoted within its pages. Messages in African-American publications were complicated. African-American publications advertised skin lightening products while others worked to dispel a hierarchy of color for young women.

Magazines such as *Half-Century Magazine* aspired to uplift the self-esteem of their readers. In June 1919, *Half-Century Magazine* directed readers to recognize the beauty of their black female peers in the article "Types of Racial Beauty." In the following quotation, the article assured readers of the importance of beauty located within of a variety of skin colors*:* "There is no question about it, our race has produced more varieties of beauty than any race on earth and the peculiar thing is that one seldom sees two pretty girls with the same complexion or with features exactly alike."[63] Through insisting on the beauty of African-American girls and women, messages from black publications affirmed the physical appearance of its readership.

In the full-page spread "Types of Racial Beauty," twenty-seven different photos of girls and women of varying ages highlighted the female subjects' beauty as they face the camera in different poses. The photographs encouraged the readers to view and understand the different types of beauty within the African-American community. Through the use of different skin tones, the magazine portrayed black female identity as diverse in terms of color and beauty. The magazine, through its photographs of African-American young women, aimed to remind readers of the beauty of their own race. Rather than establishing rigid standards of beauty, the magazine argued for a wide spectrum of beauty for its readers.

---

[63] "Types of Racial Beauty," *Half-Century Magazine,* June 1919, 7.

As a part of a history of early black visual culture, photographs such as the ones in *Types of Racial Beauty* demonstrate the power of images for African-American communities. In W.E.B. Du Bois' photographic exhibit, *The Exhibit of American Negroes*, his use of visual culture traced his need to illustrate civility and progress in African-Americans, though his project was also rooted in middle class assumptions of racial uplift. In his exhibit, he documented black citizens living in the United States. Through the use of the polished and refined body, his photos documented the ways in which appearance has been used as a marker of progress and success.[64] The insistence of racial beauty in *Half -Century Magazine* argues for visual imagery as a means of identifying progress and affirming beauty, a quality that had been denied to African-American girls.

Articles such as "Types of Racial Beauty" served as a predecessor for the beauty contest in *Half-Century Magazine*, which began in September 1921. Their contest, "Who is the Prettiest Girl in this Country?" was open to girls and women sixteen years of age and older.[65] One of the judges of the contest included Ida B. Wells. Wells, known for her journalism as well as her anti-lynching campaigns, is not as well known for her work on beauty culture. However, her position as a judge suggests her attention in recognizing beauty spaces for African-American girls and women. Additionally, her presence could also legitimize the beauty pageant due to her status as a high-profile activist and reformer.

---

[64] Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: WEB Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 2-23.
[65] "Who is the Prettiest Girl in this Country?," *Half-Century Magazine,* September 1921, 9.

In "Who is the Prettiest Colored Girl in the United States?" girls from across the country featured in the magazine established a visual representation of beauty culture that challenged white standards. In a November 1921 call for submissions, the magazine suggested that "many white people are under the impression that there are no pretty Colored women."[66] The photographs of the girls allowed viewers to see the varied beauty found in the African-American community. The magazine hoped to help audiences to see the value of black beauty culture through its female representatives. Advertisements from the Overton Hygienic Company that followed the call for submissions suggested how girls could achieve this beauty. The Chicago based company promoted creams, face powder, and blushes, their name evoking the language of health in order to develop beauty.

Through girls and young women who varied aesthetically from different geographic regions, *Half-Century Magazine* curated images in which girls could see their reflections. As part of the goals of this contest, *Half-Century Magazine* encouraged its readers to recognize "that all beautiful skin is not white" and "that all the pretty profiles do not belong to members of the white race."[67] While it is possible that some whites may have read the magazine, *Half-Century* was predominantly aimed at African-American women. The project aimed to boost the self-esteem of young African-American women readers by asserting the value of their own skin hues. By interlinking skin color and beauty, the magazine hoped to instill a sense of racial pride within its readers.

Contests and photographs in black print culture encouraged the development of natural beauty and argued for the recognition of black girls' beauty on a national scale.

---

[66] "Do You Know a Beauty?," *Half-Century,* November 1921, 8.
[67] "Who is the Prettiest Colored Girl in the Country?," *Half-Century,* September 1921, 9.

Part of this recognition also involved addressing the role of not only skin, but also hair as a site for defining black girls' beauty culture. An emphasis on skin sought to boost the self-esteem and racial pride of girls. While the pursuit of haircare aligned with these missions, a different purpose also arose. Hair, particularly the bob, could remake conceptions of modern New Negro girlhood during the 1920s and the 1930s.

Modern Hair

During the early twentieth century, innovative techniques in hair care expanded the possibilities for African-American girls' physical appearance. Advancements in African-American girls' hair care relied upon the gains made by African-American female entrepreneurs. The work of entrepreneurs such as Madame C.J. Walker and Annie Malone expanded the market of available products for girls and women.[68] Walker and Malone, both African-American women from the South, grew beauty culture empires that improved the availability and quality of hair care products for women across the country. Their products aimed to transform the hair by making it less curly as well as providing treatments that claimed to help with hair growth.

Madame C.J. Walker, who expressed interest in uplifting members of her race, went to great lengths to deny accusations that her beauty products encouraged white beauty standards, which could be detrimental to her business empire which consisted primarily of black women. [69]

---

[68] For a biography on Madame C.J. Walker, which also includes information on Annie Malone, see: A'Lelia Perry Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam CJ Walker* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2001).

[69] Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker*, 20.

Scholars have asserted that Walker's work established and circulated ideals of New Negro Womanhood. Erin Chapman and Davarian Baldwin note that Walker's messages focused on the fashioning of self-identity through engaging in modern beauty culture. Additionally, Walker's messages addressed the care of the hair, seen through a variety of products that addressed the treatment of the scalp and the hair. As Chapman states, her products also emphasized the "importance of good hygiene" through the "Walker method and products."[70] Her products aspired to create modern and healthy depictions of beauty. While these at times did reflect ideals of whiteness, I draw upon Davarian Baldwin's claim that New Negro Womanhood's investment in beauty culture "included overlapping realities of white emulation and black resistance and agency."[71] Messages addressed to girls also included these realities while still attuned to the health implications of haircare.

Although girls had access to a variety of new products, not all of them were beneficial for maintaining the long-term care of their hair. While at Howard University, physical educator Maryrose Reeves Allen noticed that the college girls at Howard University had "hair of lovely highs though often spoiled by poor grooming oils, wax, etc., but hair that was alive, healthy and with body enough to stand up and gleam in spite of improper care." [72] Although Allen admired the beauty in her female students' hair, she still acknowledged the fact that these products could damage the hair of her students. Improper hair care came from products with harmful ingredients "that could break hair

---

[70] Erin D. Chapman, *Prove it On Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 85.
[71] Davarian L. Baldwin, "From the Washtub to the World: Madam C.J. Walker and the 'Re-creation' of Race Womanhood, 1900–1935," in *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* eds. Weinbaum et al. (Durham: Duke University, 2008), 60.
[72] Letter to Mr. Goodman, February 5, 1957, Box 160-9, Folder 5, Maryrose Allen Reeves Papers, MSRC.

and burn the scalp."[73] Instead, girls were encouraged to focus on identifying resources that helped with preserving the health of their hair.

However, preserving the health of the hair proved difficult in the face of inequalities. The stresses of living under racism impacted the very sites of beauty that African-American girls sought to refine and present. African-American girls living under Jim Crow faced a lack of nutritious food as well as poor housing conditions which affected the health of their hair.[74] For girls living and working in the South, "excessive sun exposure" also contributed to hair damage.[75] Girls faced a difficult task of maintaining the health of their hair in the face of racism and poverty that affected their physical bodies.

African-American girls also navigated hair care advice which addressed the concerns of white female consumers. In a Y.W.C.A. Health Inventory geared towards members of all races, girls were evaluated based on different points around the body, including hair. Girls assessed themselves based on hair that fulfilled three requirements: "clean" "glossy" and "free from oil."[76] Hair that is "glossy" and "clean" received one point each. However, hair that is oil free is weighted the highest at three points. Oil-free hair was seen as cleaner and more hygienic, despite the fact that this was a standard primarily instituted by and for white populations with thin and fine hair. African-American girls, whose hair needed more oil, were at a disadvantage as the inventory upheld white standards of beauty.

---

[73] Roberts, *Pageants*, 61.
[74] Davarian L. Baldwin "From the Washtub to the World: Madam C.J. Walker and the 'Re-creation' of Race Womanhood, 1900–1935," in *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* eds. Weinbaum et al. (Durham: Duke University, 2008), 60.
[75] Roberts, *Pageants,* 63.
[76] Emma Knauss, *A Health Project,* n.d.*,* Box 568, Folder 7, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.

Instead, health manuals addressed to African-American girls challenged normative beauty standards. Written by Myra Logan, an African-American doctor, the publication *Beauty and Health* (1936), assured girls that no frequency on hair washing existed. The manual asserted the value of individualized hair care by addressing the varied needs of girls.[77] Additionally, physical educator Maryrose Reeves Allen at Howard University suggested a different way to assess girls' hair. In a proposal for a club with junior high girls, Allen's rules included "oil hair this week" as well as "hair washed in the past two weeks."[78] Instead of assuming that girls needed to wash their hair daily and have their hair oil free, these manuals provided a contrast against unattainable practices for African-American adolescent girls. By providing culturally relevant beauty manuals, these educators informed and affirmed ideals of beauty for black girls.

Drawing upon advice in magazines and from health educators, African-American girls' haircare used new products and demonstrated new styles which facilitated emerging expressions of modern New Negro Girlhood. No longer relegated to merely pinning up, hairstyles ranged from long straightened hair to slick bobs. It was through the hair bob that African-American girls both demonstrated modern girlhoods as well as pushed back against the whiteness of representations of adolescent femininity.

The hair bob, a style central to the figure of the modern girl of all races in the 1920s, could be found in magazines and films in the United States, in addition to places around the world.[79] The emergence of bobbed hair signaled a change in ideas and values

---

[77] Myra Logan, *Beauty and Health,* 1936, Box 617, Folder 2, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.
[78] "Charm Club," n.d., Box 160-4, Folder 5, Maryrose Allen Reeves Papers, MSRC.
[79] *The Modern Girl Around the World* traces the bob across global contexts including the United States, France, and South Africa. eds Weinbaum et al., *The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

about girls' appearance. Through the image of short hair, the bob reworked ideas of femininity. Bobs worn by African-American girls demonstrated their desire for inclusion into modern American girlhood. Although overlooked in scholarship regarding hairstyles and the bob, some African-American girls were still eager to participate in this trend, as evidenced by photographs in the black press.

However, for African-American girls, bobbing their hair entailed more maintenance than other styles such as pinned hair. Bobbed styles required hair to be pressed straight in order to receive the desired effect. The cutting of hair that took longer to grow compared to their white counterparts provided an additional dynamic that was specific to African-American girls. For girls who were already subject to racialized notions of beauty, the bob could amplify fears of the style's potential impact on African-American girls' reputation and appearance.

These fears highlighted a disconnect between club women and younger modern girls regarding hairstyles. In the 1924 short story "The Bobs Have It" by Margaret Lyndon in *Half-Century Magazine,* tensions between younger and older generations unfold within the text.[80] Unlike Evelyn Northington who previously delivered advice to girls in the magazine, Margaret Lyndon does not have an established beauty column in the magazine. However, she still takes the role of the older and wiser dispenser of beauty advice through fiction.

In the short story, a girl insists on having her hair bobbed, despite complaints from her mother. The nameless girl is referred to a "fluffy bit of pink and brown

[80] Margaret Lyndon, "The Bobs Have It," *Half-Century Magazine,* July/August 1924, 11.

humanity" by the narrator which emphasizes her beauty and race, as well as her sense of moral character.[81] The girl expresses dismay that her mother forbade her from bobbing her hair. Eager to fit in with her peers, she states that the rest of the girls in her class have their hair bobbed, highlighting the social aspect and belonging that hair practices inscribed for youth. Lyndon noted that bobbing the girls' hair would make her face appear "longer, thinner, and a bit hard" and pointed out that people with bobbed hair often neglected it.[82] Beauticians confirmed this, acknowledging that it was too hard to do the hair "becomingly" and "neatly" when the hair was in the process of growing out.[83] While Lyndon does not eschew all bobs, she notes that very few types of bobs accentuate girls' beauty and advises readers who are interested in the style to be vigilant and disciplined in their care of their hair.

Fictional texts also illuminated the bob's function as a symbol of exoticism. In John Matheus short story "Fog" published in Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro* (1925), a young teenage girl sits in a train car with her family. Her bobbed hair is described as achieved through the use of the Poro method.[84] Capitalizing on the appeal of the exotic "other," the unnamed girl displays "an Egyptian cast of features."[85] For the rest of the text, she is referred to as an "Egyptian faced girl." Similarly, other advertisements capitalized on this rhetoric as well. The Kashmir Chemical Company, a hair and cosmetics company, relied upon images of racialized and exoticized women. Through

---

[81] Lyndon, "The Bobs Have It," *Half-Century Magazine,* 11.
[82] Lyndon, "The Bobs Have it," *Half-Century Magazine,* 11.
[83] "Bobbed Hair Doomed, Say Beauticians," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), October 29, 1927.
[84] The Poro method was part of Annie Malone's brand, which rivaled the products of competitor of Madame C.J. Walker. For more on Annie Malone, see Chajuana V. Trawic's dissertation, "Annie Malone and Poro College: building an empire of beauty in St. Louis, Missouri from 1915-1930" (University of Missouri, 2011).
[85] John Matheus, "Fog," in *The New Negro,* ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, Inc., 1925, Second Printing 1927) 89.

suggesting that their products were inspired by "Egyptian beauty secrets," the company cited Cleopatra as an important figure in their advertisements.[86] Thus, the bob becomes an object of racial transformation. However, the hair bob maintains a sense of duality through finding a way to assert both an African-American and African identity for its wearers. Rather than a symbol of white beauty culture, black writers and advertisers tried to reinvent the bob as a style with African ancestry.

Girls also expressed new standards of beauty through bobbed hair which circulated in African-American newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender.* After an unnamed girl visited the office of the *Chicago Defender* in 1922 and stated "bobbed hair adds to a woman's beauty," the newspaper encouraged other girls and women to submit images of themselves to the newspaper.[87] Rather than dismiss bobbed hair as a fad, the newspaper established a public space for the display of black bobbed hair. Girls used bobs to assert young black female identity through hair, connecting beauty culture with expressions of New Negro Girlhood.

The process of African-American girls' collectively defining their own modern hairstyles challenged white representations of bobbed hair. Girls mused over questions such as "Is Bobbed Hair Attractive?" in the *Chicago Defender* by sending in their own photographs as proof. The photographs encouraged the viewer to focus on the girls' hair and face. The viewer was encouraged to associate girls' beauty with shorter hair, reworking ideas of femininity for both the subject and the viewer. Black girls who submitted photographs of themselves also challenged the whiteness of the flapper. No longer relegated to only seeing images of white bobbed girls in the popular press in

---

[86] Walker, *Style and Status,* 5.
[87] "Is Bobbed Hair Attractive?," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), September 30, 1922.

publications such as *Vogue*, black girls with bobbed hair created alternative representations of the style for African-American communities.

For girls such as Le Etta Revells of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, bobbed hair remained a way to assert their identities. In the photograph above that she sent into the *Chicago Defender*, her bob features prominently as she gazes self-assuredly at the camera. As she stated in the *Defender*, "Of course bobbed hair adds beauty to a girl, and if I live to be 50 years old I shall keep mine cut." [88] Revells affirmed the beauty of bobbed hair as a symbol for the expression of her girlhood identity and imagined the bob as central to her future identity as an older woman.

Despite instances in which girls and women were shamed or violently punished for wearing bobbed hair, girls such as Revells remained steadfast in their desire to showcase their hair. The *Chicago Defender* reported examples in which husbands cut off the remaining part of their wives' hair after coming home with a bob.[89] While girls navigated racism in the public sphere, they also faced violence in interpersonal spheres. The bob, as a mode of expressing feminine identity and desire, provoked disdain from men who felt that the hairstyle conflicted with appropriate expressions of girlhood and womanhood. These appropriate expressions of girlhood equated long hair with

[88] "Another Bobbed Beauty," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), September 16, 1922.
[89] "Bobbed Hair Breaks Two Family Ties: Shingled Wives Make Hubbies Crazy," *Chicago Defender,* (Chicago, IL), July 12, 1924.

femininity. These disturbing instances of violence also noted the ways in which girls' husbands and boyfriends attempted to control their bodies when girls transgressed boundaries of docile femininity within their partnerships.

Bobbed hair challenged traditional ideas of femininity as well as established black visions of the modern girl. The image of Revells and other girls in the newspaper generated a visual framework for promoting the bob as a form of modern African-American female identity. Hair became not only an expression of the individual self. Hair also became an expression of a collective identity through visual culture. The legitimization of the bob in the *Chicago Defender* identified the hairstyle as one that was an essential part of a national African-American girls' culture.

Images of African-American girls in popular press publications provided a visual landscape of African-American girls' hair practices. African-American girls' bobbed hair existed as a symbol of beauty as well as demonstrated a willingness to adapt to cultural ideas and values about the modern girl. For girls arriving in urban areas, as well as girls already occupying these spaces, hair expressed adherence to social codes and norms, engagement in a growing beauty marketplace, and a facet of a growing girls' culture.

Attention to hair and skin required careful individual and collective surveillance. By monitoring themselves as well as paying attention to others, African-American girls formed their own beauty cultures, shaping visible constructions of New Negro Girlhood. From the tone of their skin to their hair styles, African-American girls participated in the growth of beauty culture, circulated across magazines and newspapers. As projects of developing racial pride as well as crafting their own forms of modern girlhood, black girls' beauty culture informed physical appearance and racial consciousness.

Pageants associated with the same types of publications that girls read for beauty advice such as the *Chicago Defender* further worked to bolster the visibility of the ideal New Negro Girl. Girls who participated in these pageants embodied the physical appearance and respectability necessary to represent their black middle-class communities. The beauty queens of the New Negro Era symbolized the relationship between beauty and health. By drawing upon bodily surveillance, beauty queens demonstrated their ability to reflect visible racial uplift for readers and spectators across the country to witness and admire.

Miss Bronze America

As a social performance of personal hygiene, beauty pageants during the New Negro Era provided girls with the opportunity to represent both themselves and their communities on a national stage. Girls who competed in the event demonstrated the visible achievement of ideals of beauty and health. Beauty pageants reinforced information on bodily discipline dispensed by health educators as well as found in advice manuals, magazines, and newspapers. Those who could claim the title of beauty queen showcased a visible representation of the ideal New Negro Girl—a representation that circulated and established ideologies of racial uplift through photographs of the beautiful and healthy female body.

Beauty pageants grew in popularity at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, the Miss America contest cemented the pageant's status as a national event. Originating in Atlantic City in 1921, Miss America drew in young white female contestants from across the country. Sixteen-year-old Margaret Gorman was crowned as

the winner in the first year of the contest. Gorman, with her "five foot one inch and 108 pound frame" and long hair, represented a demure, youthful, and petite femininity that appealed to judges and observers.[90] During the first years of Miss America, the winners were all between the ages of fifteen and nineteen, emphasizing the importance of youth within the contest. Spectators heralded the contestants for eschewing bobbed hair and cosmetics as the pageant affirmed displays of "natural" femininity which aligned with the desires of the adult organizers, an image in opposition to the Modern Girl of the 1920s.[91]

Despite the allure of the pageant, not all were convinced of its merits. Some adults feared that the pageant contributed to the exploitation of girls. Adults felt uneasy with the bathing suit portion of the pageant and its emphasis on displaying partially unclothed female adolescent bodies. Winning prize money also allowed girls to monetize their bodies, an action that made adults deeply uncomfortable. In 1924 the Y.W.C.A. of Trenton accused the Miss America Pageant of bringing "serious perils" to its female participants, passed a resolution within the organization that addressed their concerns with the pageant and argued for its abolishment.[92] *The New York Times,* as well as other newspapers, published similar rebukes. Eventually, the pageant would be briefly discontinued in 1928 and would return in the 1930s.[93]

The Miss America pageant, which would not include its first black contestant until 1971, remained off limits for African-Americans. In response, African-Americans cultivated their own contests and pageants in which their own girls took center stage.

---

[90]Kimberly A. Hamlin, "Bathing Suits and Backlash," in *There She Is, Miss America* ed. Darcy Martin and Elwood Watson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 35.
[91] Hamlin, "Bathing Suits and Backlash," in *There She Is, Miss America,* 38.
[92] Hamlin, "Bathing Suits and Backlash," in *There She Is, Miss America,* 27-51.
[93] Hamlin, "Bathing Suits and Backlash," 46.

Scholarship on African-American beauty contests have often focused on smaller "local" contests such as ones at historically black colleges and civic organizations.[94] Campus beauty pageants arose during the 1920s and grew in popularity across the country.[95] Historically black colleges crowned campus queens that would best embody physical femininity as well as sound character. These pageants, under the watchful eye of presidents and administrators, provided a space for girls to represent their college campuses as well as display ideal expressions of femininity.[96]

As Blain Roberts notes, white-controlled black beauty companies attempted to organize their own pageants. The Golden Brown Chemical Company sponsored a beauty contest for African-American participants from all over the country in 1925. The white owned company, which specialized in skin bleaching products, held the final event in Atlantic City. Leading up to the pageant a black woman by the name of Mamie Hightower, associated with Golden Brown Chemical Company, published features in black newspapers in order to recruit beauty contestants.[97] Aware of the distrust that a white company who produced whitening products may evoke, the use of Mamie Hightower operated as a shield against potential critique. However, Hightower did not exist— Golden Brown Chemical Company created her as a character in order to boost participation in the pageants.[98] By having white employees write as a black woman pushing skin lightening products at their company, the pageant's commitment to advocating for black beauty could be viewed as halfhearted and disingenuous. The

---

[94] Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?*, 53. and Roberts, *Pageants,* 176-191.
[95] Karen W Tice writes extensively on college pageants in *Queens of Academe: Beauty Pageantry, Student Bodies, and College Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[96] Tice, *Queens of Academe,* 32.
[97] Roberts, *Pageants,* 174.
[98] Roberts, *Pageants,* 174.

pageant reads as a marketing ploy to recruit possible consumers rather than an attempt to change African-American beauty culture. Instead, pageants organized by the black press, particularly the *Chicago Defender,* crafted their own narratives of black beauty.

In the 1930s, young girls were encouraged to participate in "Bathing Beauty" contests in Chicago sponsored by Bud Billiken, the children's pages of the *Chicago Defender.*[99] These contests featured participants in bathing suits who could demonstrate charm and beauty. The *Chicago Defender* reminded "every mother in the Chicago area and its vicinity who has a girl between the ages of 2 and 8" to nominate their daughter for entry into the contest.[100] During the first year of the contest, contestants were divided into two age groups: two years old to four years old and four years old to eight years old. Later versions of the pageant expanded to include girls up to eleven years of age. These pageants, geared at children, reminded girls of the importance of pageantry at an early age, a lesson that could inspire them to join later iterations for adolescent girls. The pageant, which would be held during the Bud Billiken picnic, also included the presence of a "Paramount movie men" who photographed participants.[101] The Bud Billiken parade and picnic, founded in 1930, drew a large crowd of people including African-Americans in Chicago, as well as those travelling from across the country.[102]

During the pageant, attention focused on the young girls whose mothers had spent time perfecting their hair and finding the right bathing suit. These crowds included as many as two thousand spectators to cheer on their beauty queens.[103] The "Bathing

---

[99] Paige Gray, "Join the Club: African American Children's Literature, Social Change, and the Chicago Defender Junior," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (2017): 149-168.
[100] "Big Bathing Beauty Contest for Kiddies," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), August 9, 1930.
[101] "Big Bathing Beauty Contest for Kiddies," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), August 9, 1930.
[102] Peter M. Rutkoff and William B. Scott, "Pinkster in Chicago: Bud Billiken and the Mayor of Bronzeville, 1930-1945," *The Journal of African American History* 89, no. 4 (2004): 316-330.
[103] "Bud's Prize Bathing Beauties," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), August 20, 1932.

Beauties" walked around a pond while "displaying their forms," emphasizing the role of body in the selection of the winner.[104] Girls were judged on not only their bathing suits, but their physical forms as markers of beauty and success.

Through the presentation of healthy bodies, girls demonstrated their capacity for collectively representing both their families as well as their race. As pageant queens, the "Bathing Beauties" offered younger girls the opportunity to illustrate health through their bodily forms. Through the language of "inspection," the contests harkened to the "Better Baby Contests" which examined the health of young children across the country.[105] By institutionalizing spaces for black beauty at a young age, the pageant could build self-esteem for the participants as well as create a larger community consciousness that recognized the beauty of young black girlhood. The "Bathing Beauties" provided the foundation for pageants for teenage girls that further encouraged the public display of physical appearance on a national stage.

A year later, a pageant titled Miss Bronze America aimed at adolescent girls continued to blend together age, gender, and beauty within the public sphere. Miss Bronze America, a play on the Miss America title, inserted black girls and women into the world of national pageantry. By emphasizing bronze, the contest centered the race and skin color of their potential contestants. While the whiteness of the Miss America pageant was implied by the exclusion of contestants of color, Miss Bronze America proudly boasted its inclusion of black young women as figures of beauty. Through Miss Bronze America, the contest hoped to showcase a large array of skin tones and colors.

---

[104] "Prepare for Big Bathing Beauty Show," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), July 9, 1932.
[105] Susan J. Pearson "'Infantile Specimens:' Showing Babies in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Social History* 42, no. 2 (2008): 341-370.

Cognizant of potential accusations of colorism, the contest stated girls would be chosen based on a variety of factors and would not discriminate based on skin tones. Organized in conjunction with the Negro Day during the Chicago World's Fair, the beauty contest Miss Bronze America was billed as one of the highlights.

The pageant's connection to Negro Day complicated the event. Although the contest uplifted the bodies and beauty of its participants, its contest took place within the confines of a World's Fair that belittled the contributions of African Americans. The theme of the fair, A Century of Progress, ignored the advancements of African Americans. Community members debated the merits of having a separate Negro Day, particularly as it was seen as legitimizing their exclusion from the exhibitions of the fair. Additionally, certain vendors at the fair also refused black citizens service.[106] Coverage of the pageant itself was positive as journalists focused on the "bronze feminine loveliness" of the female participants during the event.[107] However the winner, sixteen-year-old Dorothy Beasley, received little coverage. Tainted by accusations regarding her participation in a "vice ring," Beasley eventually sued for her prize money which had been withheld from her.[108]

A later iteration of the Miss Bronze America pageant in 1940 illustrated the changing nature of the pageant. Coverage of the pageant was greater than years past—journalists had previously reported sparingly on previous pageants which occurred at local ballrooms. However, in 1940, Miss Bronze America would be held in conjunction

---

[106] Cheryl R Ganz, *The 1933 Chicago World's Fair: A Century of Progress* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 113-115.
[107] "'Negro Day' To Be Gala Affair Here," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), August 12, 1933.
[108] "Vice Ring Victim," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Oct. 14, 1933 and "Miss Bronze America Wins Suit," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), June 30, 1934.

with the American Negro Exposition, known as the first world's fair organized by African-Americans. Rather than relegated to the margins of the World's Fair, African-Americans created their own space to document and present their achievements.[109] During the 1940 iteration of the pageant, the health and beauty of black girlhood became a national symbol of success and pride. The event conveyed a larger message that identified beauty as a central theme in creating a collective national and racial identity. Elizabeth Galbreath, the women's editor for the *Chicago Defender,* who often reported on social events and gossip in the city, expressed her excitement for Miss Bronze America. Galbreath informed her readers of the significance of the pageant, writing:

> "It ought to be mighty fine for the men, having the most beautiful girls assembled in one city. Needless to say, the girls have already benefited from this undertaking. I think it has made more women of the Race 'beauty conscious.' Perhaps this has been the most thorough undertaking of national beauty we have ever experienced and that is something to aspire to."[110]

As both participants and observers, girls were encouraged to view the event as a call to action to target their physical appearance. Galbreath's assessment of the pageant also nodded to the gaze of men as spectators. Men were also directed to view the girls participating as desirable, respectable, and the types of ideal New Negro spouses to attain in the future. While not necessarily a formal space for the development of relationships, the pageant itself demonstrates its role in crafting its participants as potential romantic partners.

Crafted as a "benefit," the pageant also could build both beauty and racial consciousness. The pageant encouraged participants and spectators to identify their own

---

[109] Jeffery Hegelson, "Who Are You America but Me? The American Negro Exposition, 1940" in *The Black Chicago Renaissance*, eds. Darlene Hine Clark and John McCluskey Jr (Champaign: University of Illinois Press), 126-146.
[110] Elizabeth Galbreath, "Typovision," *Chicago Defender,* August 17, 1940.

community as beautiful through viewing the contestants on display. Participants served as ideals of beauty who could be emulated through careful self and collective surveillance. Pageants such as Miss Bronze America represented the culmination of all that girls and young women had been taught from families, educators, friends, advertisements, newspapers, and magazines—that beauty requires discipline, management, and resulted in personal and social success.

Of course, not all pageants resulted in success. Many girls who read about the event never ended up competing. And most girls who competed in the pageant never won or achieved much fame after the event. The main goal, as Galbreath stated, centered less on the individual girl and more about the collective nature of the pageant. Through focusing on the identification and cultivation of "national" beauty, African-American beauty pageants created an embodied ideal of black girlhood.

The Miss Bronze America pageant made clear that the ideal girl was shaped by beauty, age, marital status, and body size. In an effort to deflect from accusations of colorism, the contest assured people that skin color would not be a determining factor.[111] Through adhering to skincare and haircare, as well as demonstrating cleanliness of body and character, girls were expected to embody the pageant's standards of beauty. During early iterations of the pageant, girls and women were required to be between the ages of fifteen and twenty-eight years old.[112] By 1940, the age for entry into the competition had been lowered to a minimum of fifteen years old. The bodies of participants needed to reflect "the ideal of feminine perfection" which was shaped by size. According to the

---

[111] "Begin Search for Perfect Bronze Beauty," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), June 8, 1940.
[112] "Pick 'Miss Bronze America' and Bronzeville Mayor on September 22nd," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), September 22, 1934.

organizers of the event, a potential contestant should be around 116 pounds and 5 feet 3 inches with a bust size of 34 and a waist size of 25.[113] While not all girls who competed possessed these physical characteristics, these measurements nodded to the pageant's view of the ideal female figure.

In order to gain entrance into Miss Bronze America, girls needed to possess sponsorship with a local newspaper. Through this relationship, newspapers offered social support as well as a public profile. In 1940, "26 girls, each representing a Negro publication" across the United States were entered into the pageant.[114] Leading up to the contest, newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* showed pictures of their sponsored girls, relaying their assurance to readers that their chosen girl would win.[115] Coverage of beauty pageants provided a space for African-American newspapers to demonstrate achievement and success of young black female members in their communities.

During Miss Bronze America, few beauty queens caught the attention of the public more than nineteen-year-old Miriam Ali in 1940. A well-educated student who attended the Illinois Normal College, Ali won the contest, beating out second place winner eighteen-year-old Iona Varnum and the third-place winner twenty-year-old Gladys Wells. Ali's interests and hobbies challenged normative construction of beauty queens who were expected to present restrained visions of femininity. Ali, who was a pitcher for a winning baseball team, enjoyed sports such as "boxing, football" or, as she

---

[113] "Begin Search for Perfect Bronze Beauty," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), June 8, 1940. In addition, girls were required to be single; widowers and divorcees were excluded from participating.
[114] "Miriam Ali, Chicago Defender Beauty, Awarded 'Miss Bronze America' Title, *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), August 31, 1940.
[115] "Presenting the *Chicago Defender's* Candidate for Miss Bronze America," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), August 17, 1940.

stated, "whatever is rough."[116] Middle class African-American girls were being steered away from sports that showcased muscularity and strength. Instead, Ali used her platform to highlight her interest in sports generally restricted and discouraged for girls such as her. Ali resisted normative ideas of femininity while still participating in a space imbued with traditional ideas of beauty.

Through emphasizing Ali's skin and hair, the *Chicago Defender* focused on her physical beauty in coverage of her before and after the pageant. The *Chicago Defender* described her as "the nation's prettiest brown-skin beauty" as "a beautiful cafe-au-lait" with "lustrous black hair and shining eyes," qualities that affirmed her beauty as well as her ability to maintain her health through haircare and skincare. Although her natural beauty was important, Ali and the other contestants received the services of a cosmetologist by the name of Mme. Marguerita Ward. President of the Marguerita Ward Liquid Powder Company, Ward used her products to mold the girls into suitable beauty pageant contestants.[117] In addition, rather than include the swimsuit portion that had been a staple of previous pageants, the 1940 pageant required girls to wear longer evening dresses.[118] Girls' beauty was no longer dependent on their ability to showcase their

[116] Elizabeth Galbreath, "Miss Chicago Defender Blooms into Miss Bronze America," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), September 7, 1940.
[117] "Mme. Marguerita Aids Beauty Queen," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), August 31, 1940.
[118] "Begin Search for Perfect Bronze Beauty," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), June 8, 1940.

bodies in swimsuits. Instead, the emphasis lay in their demonstration of restrained beauty through conservative clothing.

Sponsored by the *Chicago Defender,* Ali held membership in the Bud Billiken Club, the newspaper's club for younger readers. Her connection to the organization made evident her roots in respectable youth civic involvement through her work in children's and youth's clubs. The club proclaimed her "the most beautiful brownskin girl in America making Bud and his members...very proud of her."[119] Through her beauty, as well as membership in the club, Ali emerged as an ideal New Negro Girl. By positioning her the "most beautiful brownskin girl in America" the club posited her race as central to the construction of her beauty. Through Ali's beauty, the children's pages of the *Chicago Defender* guided its readers to collectively develop a sense of racial uplift and racial consciousness through the body.

As part of Ali's prize for winning the contest, she received a trip to New York City. While accompanied by her mother and two chaperones, Bud Billiken, a fictional child, assured readers that he would also join in order to "make it pleasant" for the beauty queen during her time in New York City.[120] While he goes to tourist attractions such as the Statue of Liberty with her, his series on their adventures barely contains any of her perspective. This odd form of companionship and guidance also showed the limits of Billiken. His was essentially a masculine voice, noting his approval of Ali without providing readers with insight into her own thoughts and desires.

---

[119] "Yes, Beauty Queen is a Real Billiken," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), September 21, 1940.
[120] "Bud Tells of Airplane Ride to New York," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), September 21, 1940.

Instead, the *Chicago Defender* included Ali's thoughts on the trip to New York City in a diary entry.[121] Through her diary, Ali's entry exposes the ways in which girls' writings expressed desires, fears, experiences as well as areas of potential transgression. As though to fend off accusations that may tarnish her reputation, she acknowledges her male chaperone, her mother, and her older female adult chaperone—but not the fictional presence of Bud Billiken. While in New York, spectators greeted her with a large reception as she featured in an automobile parade down Fifth Avenue. Her diary details her introduction to movie stars such as Lionel Stander and her visits to Radio City Music Hall and Central Park. Interestingly, the newspaper included her writings on her experience in nightclubs such as the Savoy Ballroom. However, the presence of her accompanying group as well as her status as a beauty queen could still reassure readers of her respectability. By detailing her travels to New York City, Ali showed readers, especially young female readers, the tangible rewards of engaging in beauty culture.

Ali also chronicled her feelings regarding the contest and its aftermath. Admitting her hesitancy in entering the contest, she stated:

"Gosh, one never knows what's in store for one. To think that I didn't even want to enter the contest, and mother made me come home from Glencoe where I was visiting my school chum, so I could enter the Chicago Defender Beauty Contest--And I won, I never dreamed I would win."[122]

Ali entered the contest at the bequest of her mother and expressed surprise upon winning. Ali's admission exposes both her humility as well as her acknowledgement that the pageant was part of her mother's aspiration, rather than her own. As Stephanie Shaw

---

[121] "From the Diary of Miss Bronze America," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), September 14, 1940.
[122] "From the Diary of Miss Bronze America," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), September 14, 1940.

argues, families particularly mothers, guided African-American girls to properly reflect their family's public and private image, reflecting classed, gendered, and racialized notions about one's social status.[123] While boys also felt pressured to maintain their appearance, the role of beauty as a gendered form of racial uplift remained central to the construction of idealized black adolescent girlhoods.

While it is possible that her diary was most likely heavily mediated and curated for the newspaper, the diary still provides insight into her voice. As a young nineteen-year-old, Ali not only possessed a national platform for her external beauty but was also allowed to publish her inner thoughts regarding her life after the pageant. Her diary shows the ways girls both resisted and embraced beauty culture. From her reluctance to her joy in winning the contest, Ali, like other girls during the New Negro Era, illuminated the ways that personal hygiene emerged as a complex space for displaying their beauty and remaking their identities. Advice manuals and mass media provided girls with information on how to attain the image of the ideal girl. Miriam Ali, an adolescent girl, embodied this figure through her skin and hair. Her beauty, shaped by her own individual bodily surveillance, circulated nationally through visual representation in the *Chicago Defender.*

Conclusion

Grooming practices that blended standards of health with beauty shaped representations of adolescent black female identity during the New Negro Era. Through advice literature in manuals and magazines, African-American girls' beauty culture

[123] Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 23.

rested on individual and collective practices of bodily surveillance. The Great Migration as well as the work of African-American female educators and women's magazines influenced the practices and classed representations of bodily surveillance. At the same time, girls also used beauty culture as spaces of racial pride through embracing their skin tones. Girls also transformed modern expressions of beauty such as the bob by connecting it to a national black girls' beauty culture, rather than one solely associated with white flappers. Finally, the space of the Miss Bronze America pageant established a vision for the ideal New Negro Girl, one whose beauty could symbolize visible racial uplift.

The rhetoric of personal hygiene not only encouraged girls to think about their current practices regarding health and appearance. Advice dispensed to girls also reminded them of their future physical appearance, especially in relation to marriage and motherhood. As the Y.W.C.A. manual *Pudge Grows Up: A Series of Meetings for Girls* reminded the adolescent girl reader, "How you look is important when you are twenty five and are ready to get married...or forty five and have a young daughter about your age who wants to be proud of her attractive mother."[124] Girls' devotion to their appearance connected to themes of desirability, love, relationships, and reproduction. In the next chapter, I examine the relationship between social hygiene, marriage, and motherhood for African-American girls during the New Negro Era. In dance halls and at proms, African-American girls learned about respectable recreation, sexuality, and their paths as future wives and mothers.

---

[124] Williams and Logan, *Pudge Grows Up,* 1936, Box 568, Folder 17, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.

Chapter 3-Social Hygiene and Respectable Recreation

Published in the Howard University student newspaper during the 1920s, the column "Social and Personal" reported on romantic pairings, recent heartbreaks, and new friendships among students at the institution. In 1924, the paper coyly stated that "Mary C. and Clarence P. went to a show; but ask them what the picture was and neither one will know."[1] The subtle jab nodded to the intimate activities that occurred between the two students as well as pointed to spaces with romantic and sexual undertones such as the cinema. Dances also provided another space to notice and comment on these undertones. After a dance, the writer of the column expressed satisfaction regarding the behavior of the female students at Howard University. Reflecting on the event, the writer stated:

> "To an eye practiced in studying dancing from the balcony, Friday's dance would have been a revelation. The conventional method of holding was observed throughout by Howard women. There were only two cases of cheek to cheek dancing but the women involved were not of Howard."[2]

The focus on young female students, rather than the male students at the university, positioned girls as being responsible for ensuring a sense of respectability on the dance floor. Howard University students were expected to dance in ways that reflected their institution's middle-class values through restrained displays of sexuality. Girls who did not adhere to these values, who instead danced closely with their partners, remained separate from the body politic of the institution. It is not clear if the girls in question who attended the dance arrived from another college or were Howard students

[1] "Social and Personal," *Howard Hilltop* (Washington D.C.), April 12, 1924.
[2] "Social and Personal," *Howard Hilltop* (Washington D.C.), February 29, 1924.

whose conduct removed them from the ideals of Howard womanhood. Regardless of where the students came from, by dancing "cheek to cheek" with their partners, the girls transgressed the social norms of the event as the close contact of their bodies demonstrated dancing's proximity to sexual activity.

Dances such as the one attended by Howard students called attention to debates regarding suitable spaces for and expressions of adolescent black female sexuality during the New Negro Era. Suitable spaces for these expressions included formal events where girls donned gowns and danced with restraint, such as proms which rose in popularity during the early twentieth century. However, organized proms held by civic clubs and historically black colleges were not the only places girls danced, much to adults' displeasure. Instead, girls also flocked to dance halls, where they socialized with peers, swayed to jazz music, drank alcohol, and met partners away from the supervision of adults. Middle-class African-American girls continued to be steered away from dance halls by parents and reformers and into formal spaces, such as proms during the 1920s and 1930s. And despite adults' intentions, girls found their ways back to the dance hall.

As African-American girls' patronized dance halls and proms, they learned about sexuality, values of class and social mobility, and how to aspire towards future motherhood and marriage. As an intervention into the sexual representations and behaviors of young women, the politics of respectability influenced how and where girls spent their time in urban spaces.[3] The ideals of "respectable recreation," which I define as the types of activities viewed as socially and morally acceptable for middle-class African-

[3] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 187.

American girls, demarcated spaces as either suitable or unsuitable for the development of adolescent sexuality. For example, proms and dance halls were assigned unequal social value by gatekeepers such as adult writers, researchers, and educators.[4]

Dance halls, viewed by middle-class adults as deviant due to their association with working-class sexuality, represented an oppositional space for ideal New Negro Girlhood. Similar to Beth Bailey, I am interested in how a middle-class "national system of culture" shaped conventions of dating and sexuality for girls.[5] A national system of culture suggested that middle-class girls received similar messages about rituals of dating from a variety of settings, from women's magazines to colleges and universities. While her study focuses on white middle class girls, this chapter examines messages received by black middle-class girls. Through national print media and social organizations, adults guided middle-class African-American girls towards proms and away from dance halls. As African-American girls navigated pressures of reflecting moral and upright behavior at communal dances, they also challenged and showcased the limits of respectable recreation through articulating intimate feelings associated with dance halls and calling for social change at proms.

During the 1920s, American girls of all races faced changing expectations regarding romantic relationships. As Beth Baily argues, the development of a dating culture, which had seen a transition from private space of the home to the public spaces

---

[4] Lilian Lewis Shiman uses the term "respectable recreation" in the title of her article "The Band of Hope Movement: Respectable Recreation for Working-Class Children," *Victorian Studies* 17, no. 1 (1973): 49-74. However, the term does not appear in her article aside from the title nor does she use the term as an analytical framework. Her work analyzes education and recreation for youth in 19th century England during the temperance movement. Rather, my term engages with the politics of respectability and its relationship to recreation.

[5] Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 7.

of streets and commercial amusements, affected the physical and emotional landscape of girls' romantic relationships.[6] Instead of being under the watchful eye of their parents or guardians, a new dating culture encouraged peer socialization in the public sphere. Courting increasingly took place in urban settings such as cinemas, dances, and shops.[7] Additionally, as Bailey notes, the move from the private to the public sphere symbolized changing power relations. Within the domestic space, girls extended invitations for boys to call on them at their homes. The shift to a public sphere in which boys asked girls out and paid for excursions reflected new capitalist interpretations of dating as an "economic exchange."[8] Recreational spaces such as dance halls and proms, in which boys could buy tickets for their dates, also encouraged this economic exchange.

The relationship between recreation and sexuality also reflected an investment in a growing social hygiene movement. [9] Social hygiene, an early twentieth century term for sexual health, aimed to shape the intimate lives of citizens, particularly youth.[10] As Robin Jensen notes, while social hygiene instruction was also known as sexual education, the

---

[6] Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat,* 13-24. See also: Kelly Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls' Culture, 1920-1945* (New York: Springer, 2004); Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Paula S. Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[7] Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful,* 262-269.

[8] Baily, *From Front Porch,* 5.

[9] On the social hygiene movement, see: Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes, "Childhood Sexuality, Normalization and the Social Hygiene Movement in the Anglophone West, 1900–1935," *Social History of Medicine* 23, no. 1 (2010): 56-78; Christina Simmons, "African Americans and Sexual Victorianism in the Social Hygiene Movement, 1910-40," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4, no. 1 (1993): 51-75. For histories of sex education see: Susan K. Freeman, *Sex Goes to School: Girls and Sex Education before the 1960s* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Jonathan Zimmerman, *Too Hot to Handle: A Global History of Sex Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Jeffrey P. Moran, *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Robin Jensen, *Dirty Words: The Rhetoric of Public Sex Education, 1870-1924* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Courtney Q. Shah, *Sex Ed, Segregated: The Quest for Sexual Knowledge in Progressive-Era America* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2015).

[10] The terms social hygiene instruction and sex education (and occasionally sex instruction and sex hygiene) were at times used interchangeably. As Susan K. Freeman states, adults deployed these terms amongst themselves while explicitly avoiding the words social hygiene or sex education when working directly with youth. *Sex Goes To School,* 8.

cloaked language of "social" could allow for a larger dissemination of instruction and avoid accusations of engaging with obscene language.[11] Formed in 1913, the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA) promoted sexual education instruction and morality across the United States.[12] The ASHA advocated for sweeping measures that included sexual health education as well as sought to eliminate prostitution and reduce sexually transmitted diseases. While originally focused on the growing problem of adult venereal disease, especially among military members, Jonathan Zimmerman notes that the ASHA increasingly began directing its attention towards youth and viewed their "education as a route to reform."[13] Social hygiene instruction in schools and clubs focused on the moral aspects of health by citing the ills of premarital sex and cautioning against places imagined to contribute to social degradation, such as brothels and dance halls.

The American Social Hygiene Association slowly and sparingly worked with African-American communities, revealing the limitations of the white mainstream movement. Instead, middle class African-Americans advised girls through homes, schools, and newspapers to stay away from dance halls, citing the dangers of sexual experimentation and unsupervised partnerships. African-American sociologist William Jones approached these topics in a 1927 study. Entitled *Recreation and Amusement Among Negroes in Washington, D.C.: A Sociological Analysis of the Negro in the Urban Environment*, the study defined proper spaces of leisure and traced the moral dangers of dance halls.[14] Adults such as Jones feared close and fast-paced dancing could lead to

---

[11] Jensen, *Dirty Words,* 1-3.
[12] Christina Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern: Women's Sexuality from the Progressive Era to World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 25-26.
[13] Zimmerman, *Too Hot to Handle,* 18.
[14] William Henry Jones, *Recreation and Amusement among Negroes in Washington, D.C.: A Sociological Analysis of the Negro in an Urban Environment* (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1927).

sexual activity, arguing against the presence of girls in dance halls. African-American girls also documented their own experiences within these spaces in letters to the *Chicago Defender.* The anonymous letters demonstrated girls' articulation of their own private intimacies. While reformers condemned dance halls, girls used the dance hall to challenge respectability politics, develop their own sexual and romantic identities, and pursue their own forms of enjoyment.

Middle-class African American girls were encouraged to participate in formal dances that reflected a sense of respectable recreation, a project which aligned with the goals of black reformers. The prom, a growing facet of youth culture, provided a space for restrained and tightly controlled displays of sexuality. By tracing the roots of black prom culture, I illuminate the long history of black girls' participation in the high school and collegiate ritual. Black proms were held at institutions such as the Y.W.C.A. as well as at historically black colleges. Aside from anonymous letters, girls' experiences at dance halls remained largely hidden. Proms offered a more public focus. Publications such as *Opportunity* and the *Chicago Defender* provided coverage of proms across the country. Visual images of proms promoted them as public, aspirational spaces for middle-class displays of ideal New Negro sexuality. At the same time, girls' letters revealed the constraints of respectable recreation and illuminated the segregation and discrimination present within formal dances held at white educational institutions.

A focus on respectable recreation generates insight into how African-American girls navigated urban spaces during the New Negro Era. As LaKisha Simmons notes about New Orleans in the 30s and 40s, African-American girls grappled with geography, sexuality, and subjectivity as they traversed their neighborhoods. Girls travelled through

different places in the city, cognizant that "in each neighborhood, there were geographies of respectability."[15] I extend this framework to examine how the politics of respectability also defined recreational spaces. Middle class reformers instructed girls on which spaces to avoid and which to frequent in order to shape their sexuality. The chapter also shows how girls demonstrated the limits of respectable recreation as they challenged classism and racial segregation within these spaces.

Crafting Sex Education for New Negro Girls

A new national social hygiene movement as well as writings on sexuality from African-American reformers influenced formal sex education in schools and social clubs for African-American girls during the New Negro Era. As Susan K. Freeman argues, sexual education curriculum often centered on the desire for "social control."[16] Through this social control, girls learned about the practice of moral conduct, how to choose ideal partners, and to avoid sexual activity. Freeman suggests that while instruction sought to discipline bodies and construct normative sexualities, overstating the degree of social control denies the student agency. My research on dance hall and prom culture suggests that as girls absorbed sexual education curriculum, they not only accepted elements of these messages but also challenged ideologies regarding the construction of middle-class sexuality.

A Limited Scope

[15] LaKisha Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press Books, 2015), 112.
[16] Freeman, *Sex Goes to School,* xi.

The American Social Hygiene Association pursued sexual health instruction through formal education, pamphlets, and lectures. Alarmed about the moral health of the nation, the ASHA forcefully campaigned against prostitution, centers of vice such as dance halls, and premarital sex. While the ASHA focused on the sexual activity of all citizens, it was the category of age that remained salient. The ASHA primarily targeted youth populations, documenting its work in a series of pamphlets published by the organization. In 1925, out of 268,500 people who had been "reached" by social hygiene instruction, 192,300 of them were high school and college students.[17] The organization believed that "children" were "the only real wealth" of the United States and hoped to preserve the fate of the nation through careful surveillance of sexual behavior.[18]

In assessing their dissemination of curriculum, the ASHA believed that traditional forms of sexual education could only go so far. Instead of typical education methods, the organization argued recreation could be more beneficial for "establishing behavior patterns."[19] The association heralded the importance of providing "wholesome" recreation for youth that could "furnish a strong protective wall for the adolescent."[20] Articles printed in the ASHA's *Journal of Social Hygiene*, such as the "The Relation of Public Recreation to Problem of Sex" (1924), reminded readers that pursuing proper forms of recreation was important, but especially for "adolescents.[21] Social hygienists

---

[17] Posters and Visual Aids from the American Social Hygiene Association, 1923-1935, Box 177, Folder 7, Social Welfare Archives, University of Minnesota.
[18] Posters and Visual Aids from the American Social Hygiene Association, 1923-1935, Box 177, 9, Social Welfare Archives, University of Minnesota.
[19] Joseph E. Raycroft, "The Relation of Play and Recreation to the Social Hygiene Program," *Journal of Social Hygiene* 14, no.5 (1928): 270.
[20] Posters and Visual Aids from the American Social Hygiene Association, 1923-1935, Box 177, Folder 7, Social Welfare Archives, University of Minnesota.
[21] Henry S. Curtis, "The Relation of Public Recreation to Problem of Sex," *Journal of Social Hygiene* 10, no. 4 (1924): 203-207.

believed that acceptable forms of recreation could provide a strong moral foundation for youth in order to avoid engaging in sexual activity.

Social hygienists directed a particular concern at the modern girl of the 1920s. As Paula Fass argues while "reared in a moral standard in which all sex was taboo," youth during the 1920s challenged these norms and engaged in sexual activity and exploration.[22] A 1922 article in the *Journal of Social Hygiene* titled "The Girl of To-Day" painted female adolescents as transgressive and a threat to acceptable displays of female sexuality. The writer viewed girls of the 1920s as more promiscuous than those of the past as well as more eager to remain unmarried. Those who participated in "objectionable dancing" served as a cautionary tale for aspiring modern girls, who risked moral and sexual judgement from adults.[23] While gearing instruction towards all girls and boys, social hygienists worried about the future implications of white female sexual behavior, in particular, which they claimed were of importance both "socially" and "biologically."[24] A perceived lack of interest in wholesome recreation and an embrace of new methods of dancing caused unease in the adults who viewed girls' unchecked sexuality as dangerous to the future reproduction of the nuclear family.

Although social hygiene instruction increased during the early twentieth century, the implementation of curriculum across racial lines proved to be uneven.[25] The ASHA attempted to rectify this inequality with the appointment of Franklin O. Nichols. Nichols served as the head of black outreach within the American Social Hygiene Association.

---

[22] Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s*, 261.
[23] Martha Falconer, "The Girl of To-day," Journal of Social Hygiene 8, no.4 (1922) 369.
[24] Kate Burr Johnson, "Problems of Delinquency Among Girls," Journal of Social Hygiene 12, no.7 (1926): 385.
[25] Shah, *Sex Ed, Segregated,* 56-77.

While he was first promoted to aid in the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, his work also included educating youth at historically black institutions.[26] Since black youth were "the future leaders of the race," Nichols pointed to sexual education as a critical part of helping young men and women practice racial uplift through the promotion of marriage.[27] He viewed this instruction as critical for the "preparation of Negro youth for marriage and parenthood."[28] At historically black institutions such as "Howard University, Fisk University, Hampton, Claflin University, Tuskegee, Virginia Normal College and the State Normal College of Virginia" courses centered on marriage and parenthood, rather than just contraception and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases.[29] Despite his efforts, many historically black colleges and universities lacked sexual education courses during the latter part of the 1930s.[30]

The American Social Hygiene Association largely ignored African-American communities, especially girls. African-American boys, white boys, and white girls were targeted in ASHA visual campaigns in 1919 titled "Keeping Fit," "Keeping Fit for Negro Boys and Men" and "Youth and Life."[31] "Keeping Fit" and "Youth for Life," directed at white boys and white girls respectively, provided images of young white children engaging in athletics and social activities while the text directed viewers to remain chaste. No such intervention existed for African-American girls. Instead, in "Keeping Fit for Negro Boys and Men" black boys were instructed to guide young black girls on the path

---

[26] James H. Jones, *Bad Blood*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 49.
[27] Franklin Nichols, "A New Opportunity for Schools," *Opportunity,* September 1926, 287.
[28] Franklin Nichols, "Social Hygiene and the Negro," Journal of Social Hygiene 15, no.5 (1929): 408.
[29] Franklin Nichols, "Social Hygiene and the Negro," Journal of Social Hygiene 15, no.7 (1929): 410-411.
[30] Paul B Cornely, "Health Education Programs in Negro Colleges," *The Journal of Negro Education* 6, no. 3 (1937): 531-37.
[31] Promotional Brochures, American Social Hygiene Association, Box 169, Folder 6, Social Welfare Archives, University of Minnesota.

to moral cleanliness. In the campaign, an image of a young black girl faces away from the camera. Her side profile showcases her pinned hair and white dress, markers of purity and respectability. The text reads "Somewhere the girl who may become your wife is keeping pure. Will you take her to a life equally clean?" The campaign denies African-American girls a sense of agency by assigning boys as responsible for monitoring their sexuality.[32]

The lack of focus on African-American girls in the visual campaign symbolizes their larger absence in mainstream social hygiene instruction as organized by the ASHA. In assessing the limited scope of sexual education for African-American girls, I focus on alternative spheres of instruction. Through respectable recreation, dance emerged as a form of social hygiene instruction. Drawing upon similar rhetoric from the ASHA, ideologies of black reformers also viewed reproduction and the figure of the middle-class girl as interconnected.

Black Reproductive Futures

In its early stages, the social hygiene movement centered on scientific and medical instruction. The ASHA enlisted doctors and public health experts to give lectures and note the dangers of venereal disease, while science classes offered topics on sex education. Susan Freeman identified a shift during the 1940s, in which white mainstream sexual education moved to focus on "psychological and social" implications.[33] This instruction focused on relationships, identity construction, and marriage. However, I note

---

[32] This also suggests the remnants of fears of khaki fever, in which during World War I, young women were accused of luring male soldiers, crafting girls' sexuality as deviant and uncontrollable. February and March 1918 issues of the *Journal of Social Hygiene* also cited the development of a Committee on Protective Work for Girls. "Girls often lose their heads in a whirl of emotions," claimed the March 1918 issue. Also see, Courtney Shah, "'Against their own Weakness:' Policing Sexuality and Women in San Antonio, Texas, during World War I," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no. 3 (2010): 458-482.
[33] Freeman *Sex Goes to School,* 6.

that African-American sexual education embraced the psychological and social implications earlier, especially for youth.

A focus on social implications among African-American reformers and educators emerged out of a distrust of medical institutions that viewed black bodies as aberrant. White physicians and researchers cited claims that African-American communities had higher rates of sexually transmitted diseases as evidence of black hypersexuality.[34] These ideologies informed messages that circulated in popular culture which also marked the black female body as sexually promiscuous.[35] A social focus allowed African-American communities to craft methods of sexual education that centered on marriage, motherhood, and visions of middle-class identity, rather than relying upon racist scientific and medical discourses that pathologized their bodies.

Through this social focus, sexual education circulated in pamphlets and other literature written by and addressed to African-Americans. Distributed at the turn of the century, conduct literature addressed to adolescent girls reminded them of their position as future race wives and mothers and the need to avoid sexual activity before marriage.[36] Texts sought to teach readers about the importance of displaying appropriate femininity achieved through chastity. This conduct literature preached what Michelle Mitchell terms the "collective destiny" of African-Americans, which relied on the configuration of middle-class visions of sexuality through the nuclear family.[37] At the same time, adults

---

[34] Alexandra M. Lord, *Condom Nation: The US Government's Sex Education Campaign from World War I to the Internet* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 34-35.
[35] Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), xviii.
[36] Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005), 140.
[37] Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation,* 108-116. For more on the history of sexuality and the black middle class see, Anastasia Carol Curwood, *Stormy Weather: Middle-class African American Marriages Between the two World Wars* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Candice M. Jenkins, *Private*

also encouraged marriage because the institution had been restricted for the ancestors of young black girls. That is, before the abolition of slavery, "slaves had been denied the ritual of romance and marriage."[38] Black enslaved Americans had been refused the ability to marry and establish secure kinship ties, as they could have their family taken away and sold. Marriage became a social right and a social ritual encouraged for young middle class African-Americans.

Anxieties about future reproduction also shaped sex education. African-American medical organizations, such as The National Medical Association, founded in 1895, dissuaded married women from using birth control during the early twentieth century. In the face of a falling birth rate, doctors pointed to African-American young women as necessary figures in carrying the future of the race; however, this emphasis on procreation was only endorsed for "middle-class and educated blacks."[39] The focus on middle class African-Americans and reproduction drew largely from eugenicist views which identified hierarchies of social class as a means to either limit or increase births, depending on one's economic status.

According to Michelle Mitchell, African-American prescriptive literature on sexuality addressed to girls reminded them of the need to produce "well born children."[40] Late nineteenth century examples included *Don't: A Book for Girls,* which cited the role of girls in continuing "the future destiny of the race."[41] By evoking the need to produce healthy children who came forth from the middle class, African-American reformers

---

Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Eleanor Alexander, *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow: The Tragic Courtship and Marriage of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Alice Ruth Moore* (New York: NYU Press, 2001).

[38] Alexander, *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow,* 79.

[39] Shah, *Sex Ed, Segregated,* 69.

[40] Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation,* 80.

[41] Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation,* 121.

viewed the reproduction of the next generation of children as essential. Sex education literature compelled girls to remember their position as future mothers.

While prescriptive literature informed African-American girls about the future implications of sexuality, scholars have also examined the role of visual literature in instituting ideas on reproduction.[42] As Daylanne English notes, W.E.B. Du Bois also drew upon eugenicist messages. In a 1928 issue of *The Crisis,* W.E.B. Du Bois argued that black Americans had an imperative to marry. He encouraged readers to marry and procreate, asking ‘‘[S]hould we black folk breed children or commit biological suicide?”[43] The question highlighted the anxieties that Du Bois, as well as other black reformers, faced regarding the reproductive activities of young black women. His question was accompanied by images in *The Crisis* of recently married black couples, including his own daughter.

Du Bois’ use of images to construct representations of black sexuality identified the power of visual images as a form of documenting black progress. In his exhibit at the 1900 World’s Fair in Paris, his photos *Types of American Negroes, Georgia, USA,* combined images of African-Americans, including those who were to represent the “best African-American families.”[44] In doing so, he depicted the ideal African-American as middle-class, a notion that also informed his calls for girls and young women to embrace domesticity and refrain from sexual immorality. Respectable recreation also relied upon the cultural work of images in constructing African-American girls’ sexuality.

---

[42] Daylanne English “W.E.B. DuBois's Family Crisis,” *American Literature* 72, no. 2 (2000): 291-319 and Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: WEB Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
[43] Daylanne English, “W.E.B. DuBois's Family Crisis,” 306.
[44] Smith, *Photography on the Color Line,* 98

African-American adults encouraged girls to pursue appropriate areas of recreation as an informal mode of sexual education. As African-American girls continued to move to cities during the Great Migration, how and where they spent their leisure time were of great concern to adults. Community organizations identified recreation as a site of both danger and uplift, particularly for those arriving from the South.[45] Reformers and scholars focused on the dangers of unsupervised recreational practices, dispensing advice regarding the correct behavior for middle class African-American girls.

Studying Recreation and Girlhood

The sexual behavior of African-American girls in Northern cities arose as an academic concern through texts by prominent African-American scholars. The creation of respectable recreation relied on contributions from black sociologists interested in the lives of urban black citizens. Orchestrated in connection with the Department of Sociology at Howard University, William Jones' study *Recreation and Amusement Among Negroes in Washington, D.C.: A Sociological Analysis of the Negro in the Urban Environment* (1927) analyzed the construction of black urban identity as connected to how and where citizens spent their free time. A sociologist at Howard University, he used Washington D.C. as a window into how recreation also affected "other urban areas inhabited by large numbers of Negroes."[46] In his study, he assessed various sites of recreation, including religious venues, theaters, and dance halls. In his analysis of

[45] Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 96-100. For more on the history of African-American women's recreation see, chapter 4, "Idle Pleasures and Frivolous Amusements" in Jane Dabel, *A Respectable Woman: The Public Roles of African American Women in 19th-century New York* (New York: NYU Press, 2008). Also, Kathy Peiss provides an extensive discussion of turn of the century white and immigrant women's recreation in *Cheap Amusements*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).
[46] Jones. *Recreation,* 123.

recreation, Jones devoted an entire chapter to dance titled "Dance Halls and Modern Dancing as Social Forces." Sexuality, especially black female adolescent sexuality, arose as a key component in his study of urban dancing. Noting that arguments about attending dance halls stemmed mainly "between mothers and daughters," adolescent girls featured prominently in his analysis of dancing as an activity to shape sexual behavior and attitudes.[47]

Ideas about social class informed the development of partnerships as well as the portrayal of adolescent sexuality. In order to preserve an image of sexual purity for middle class and upper-class black girls, Jones argued for class separation. In proclaiming middle and upper classes as the "more advanced groups of Negroes in Washington," Jones targeted class as a marker of restrained sexuality.[48] Not only arguing for the establishment of a class hierarchy, Jones also called for more class separation in an effort to preserve the social norms of elite black communities. Identifying the dance hall as a place of "illicit sex behavior," he described the space as one imbued with hypersexuality.[49] He contended that "anti-social forms of dancing" arose from the lower class and eventually would influence the recreational practices of the upper class. In addition, he feared that "sexual pantomimes" associated with dances as well as the opportunity for "intimate association between the sexes" could prove detrimental for

---

[47] Jones. *Recreation,* 123. His work echoed that of other black scholars. W.E.B. Du Bois concentrated on topics such as the relationship between the city, health, and amusements in *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899). Du Bois painted the dance hall as a complex space that, although flawed, was not irredeemable. In analyzing the dance hall, he argued that "a harmless and beautiful amusement like dancing might with proper effort be rescued from its low and unhealthful associations and made a means of health and recreation." In addition, he believed that the work of adults included ensuring girls stayed away from "the streets at night" and away from dance halls. Instead, he maintained that girls should be directed towards formal dances that could help establish proper partnerships. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study (*Philadelphia: 1899), 391.

[48] Jones, *Recreation,* 132

[49] Jones. *Recreation,* 123.

youth.[50] In order to display ideal forms of middle-class sexuality, he argued for "milder forms of social exclusion," which called for class separation among African-American communities in urban spaces.[51]

African-American girls who aspired towards New Negro Womanhood were taught to embrace similar rhetoric. In a 1925 essay *The Double Task,* Elise McDougald argued that black women navigated both sexism and racism. The essay, which was also published in Alain Locke's 1925 *New Negro* anthology, identified being marked sexually promiscuous as an aspect of the racialized and gendered discrimination that black women faced. However, McDougald, who preached the value of New Negro Womanhood, blamed working class black young women for creating an image of "immoral" character that stained the reputation of middle class and upper class girls.[52] New Negro Girls were taught to avoid working class spaces, such as dance halls, in order to reflect normative displays of sexuality. As more studies about black youth emerged during the 1930s, working class girls would continue to be accused of sexually promiscuous behavior compared to middle class black youth.[53]

Deeply classist sentiments from Jones and McDougald exposed the ways in which the construction of the New Negro Girl essentially represented a middle-class project; the spaces that she attended reflected her social status and respectability. Middle class African-Americans made a concerted effort to separate from working class citizens through recreation in order to reflect respectable sexuality, messages that girls were

---

[50] Jones, *Recreation,* 122.
[51] Jones, *Recreation,* 198.
[52] Elise Johnson McDougald, "The Double Task: The Struggle for Negro Women for Sex and Race Emancipation," 1925, Box 540, Folder 1, YWCA of the USA, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.
[53] Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings*, 122.

taught to embrace. Interclass mingling at the dance hall also contributed to fears of the black middle class in which "whites lumped all classes of black together."[54] The dance hall, essentially a working-class space, could impact the reputations of girls who the black middle class sought to portray as respectable and restrained symbols of femininity. In encouraging middle-class girls to stay away from the dance hall, African-American researchers and reformers created strict classed boundaries around representations of ideal girlhood and sexuality

Middle class girls voiced their objections to the control adults attempted to place on them. In *Recreation and Amusement* Jones relayed an anecdote describing middle-class girls' desires to enter the dance halls. In Washington D.C., two girls attended a dance held by and for the black middle and upper class. The occasion brought together members of communities within the city to meet and form social networks. The two friends were frustrated by the constrained climate of the ball. One girl informed her friend that the environment of the dance did not fit her mood. Eager to leave, she told her friend: "this is too tame for me; let's go somewhere where we can have some fun," leaving the formal dance for the dance hall.[55] The girls could have gone to the Press Club in Northwest D.C., one of the places cited by Jones as possessing a "shady reputation" or the Fisherman's Temple, where "lower classes of Negro society" attended.[56] In the dance hall, girls interacted with their peers across class lines, raising the concern of reformers and educators.

---

[54] Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern,* 23.
[55] Jones, *Recreation,* 173.
[56] Jones, *Recreation,* 128-129.

Although Jones instructed girls to avoid dance halls, he believed that dancing in other environments, such as the one originally attended by the two adolescents, could emerge as a force for good. He stated that:

> "Dancing is a social process which is intimately associated with love, and is a very definite process of courtship. It may be considered as a novitiate for love. It plays an important role in the process of sexual selection."[57]

Formal dances could provide girls with instruction on partnerships, love, and sexuality. *Recreation and Negroes in Washington D.C.* included a photograph of "The Annual Dance of the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity," which served as visual symbol for the spaces where these ideals could be learned.[58] The photograph, depicting young well-dressed college students, most likely at Howard University, provided evidence of the types of classed recreation that he hoped to see within urban black communities. Within these spaces, girls could participate in respectable recreation in organized settings.

Jones' beliefs aligned with those of national girls' organizations. In 1921, the Y.W.C.A.'s Health Education Director Jane Bellows directed local associations to monitor the conduct of girls in her essay "Social Dancing." While dancing could assist with the "cultivation of grace and refinement," she argued that it was also "the most dangerous and most easily perverted social pastime."[59] Instead, girls should be given advice on how and where to dance by Y.W.C.A. workers. Rather than pursuing dance halls, girls were to be guided towards more appropriate spaces. Bellows felt that the dancing she had witnessed was inappropriately sexualized. She argued that leaders of girls' work should view these moments as an "opportunity for sex instruction" which

---

[57] Jones, *Recreation,* 124.
[58] Jones, *Recreation,* 130.
[59] Jane Bellows, "Social Dancing," 1921, Box 591, Folder 10, YWCA of the USA, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, Massachusetts.

would attempt to steer their girls in the direction of morally upright young womanhood.[60] Both Bellows and Jones' words highlighted the constraints that many girls, regardless of race, faced as they learned how to navigate spaces of dance and sexuality.

Jones' view of dance as a space for deviance as well as the reproduction of middle-class values framed his analysis of recreation. Dance, according to Jones, could put

youth down two paths: towards "finer forms of association" or "on the downward path to crime."[61] Using Jones' terminology, I analyze how girls' relationship to dance and sexuality associated them with either the "downward path" or "finer forms of association." African-American girls during the 1920s and 1930s were caught between these two competing spheres—and often floated between them.

Dances, across their various iterations, arose as a space for the configuration of adolescent female sexuality during the New Negro Era. In the "downward path," girls who attended dance halls faced scrutiny from adults who believed that they would eventually fall into practices of sexual deviance. Girls who participated in the "finer forms of association" attended proms, or formal dances, during the New Negro Era. In these spaces, girls could meet and dance with people from their own social class, cementing the types of social exclusion desired by the reformers. Recreational spaces were not merely spaces of play for girls. Rather, they were imagined to be spheres in which African-American girls' sexuality was defined and displayed, especially in relation to class.

Downward Path

---

[60] Jane Bellows, "Social Dancing," 1921, Box 591, Folder 10, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.
[61] Jones, *Recreation,* 121.

In dimly lit and small spaces in cities, youth crowded in dance halls where they met, danced, and formed social and romantic bonds. Within these spaces, they also danced the Charleston, drank alcohol**,** and listened to jazz music. Scholars have analyzed the role of the dance hall in defining American youth culture of the interwar period.[62] Urban girls of all races across the country attended dance halls, seeking enjoyment and pleasure. As working-class spaces, these also provided respite for laboring girls.[63] However, in the eyes of Jones and other adults, middle-class African-American girls who frequented the dance hall headed towards a downward path—a path that could invoke delinquency, sexuality, and class-mixing. However, girls also found ways to define the dance halls for themselves by voicing their own experiences.

Dance halls provided American girls with a certain amount of choice including the ability to choose partners and escape parental pressures.[64] However, combined with new forms of technology, dancing also contributed to a moral panic tied to a fear of girls transgressing notions of acceptable femininity. Newspapers seized upon this moral panic and circulated stories of delinquent girls pursuing fun in illicit dance halls.[65] Not only could girls engage in unsupervised fun in the dance hall, but they could also travel with male dates in cars to these spaces. Beth Bailey suggests that with the growing use of the automobile girls now had the freedom to move more freely across cities with young male partners.[66] The freedom of movement also contributed to alarm regarding adolescent

---

[62] On dance hall culture, see: Randy McBee, *Dance Hall Days: Intimacy and Leisure Among Working-Class Immigrants in the United States* (New York: NYU Press, 2000) and Shayla Thiel-Stern, *From the Dance Hall to Facebook: Teen Girls, Mass Media, and Moral Panic in the United States, 1905-2010* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014).
[63] Peiss, *Cheap Amusements,* 1-33.
[64] McBee, *Dance Hall Days,* 95.
[65] Shayla Thiel-Stern, *From the Dance Hall to Facebook,* 53-54.
[66] Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat,* 19.

female sexuality. In *Recreation and Amusement,* Jones addressed potential sexual activity that could occur between youth, claiming that cars were a "house of prostitution on wheels."[67]

Middle class African-American girls were instructed to attend events and activities that encouraged respectable recreation. The dance hall existed as an obstacle to those demands. As the *Chicago Defender* reported in 1924, "school girls" and "college girls" spent hours with their peers across class lines at these spaces. At the dance halls, girls could "let down the bars which restrict them in the environment in which they move."[68] This freedom of mobility was attractive to girls who felt the gaze of not only white communities, but also middle-class black adults who encouraged class exclusion. Worries about the effect of interclass mixing on their middle-class daughters influenced black reformers' desire to keep these spaces separate. The paper cautioned readers that "if, for instance, girl's associates smoke, drink, indulge in sensual dancing and petting parties, these things become the standard of her conduct."[69] The *Chicago Defender* instructed girls to avoid dance halls, filled with spaces and people that could sully their reputation.

Later works such as *Colored Girls' and Boys' Inspiring United States History and a Heart to Heart About White Folks* (1922) also addressed the behavior of girls and dancing by citing the importance of future success. Written by William Henry Harrison, the book listed the achievements of African-Americans as well as encouraged readers to focus on their education. Harrison informed female readers that they had the chance to

---

[67] Jones, 117.
[68] "Dance Halls and Cabarets," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Nov. 29, 1924.
[69] "Dance Halls and Cabarets," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Nov. 29, 1924.

achieve greatness through pursuing careers in sewing, typing, beauty culture, and teaching. He cautioned girls against dancing, which he imagined could derail their future successes. According to Harrison, girls who wished to "elevate their skirts" at dances rather than going to school to "elevate their minds" diminished their future prospects.[70] The fashion of the modern girl of the interwar period generated anxieties about the sexualization of shorter clothing—anxieties faced by the white middle class as well.[71]

Although primarily a book about African-American achievement, readers also learned to connect chastity to social and educational success. The sexual innuendo of elevating skirts also further hypersexualized African-American girls. Patricia Hill Collins states how black female reformers such as Jane Edna Hunter also drew upon this rhetoric. Hunter, founder of the Phyllis Wheatley Club in Cleveland, argued that dance halls contained "half-naked Negro girls" who danced in an environment filled with "unrestrained animality."[72] Her words evoke images of uncontrollable black sexuality circulated by white racists. Her words also demonstrate how the construction of black female adolescent sexuality by the black middle class sought to eradicate any sense of perceived deviance, often at the cost of drawing upon damaging racial stereotypes.

While faced with the constant moralization about urban leisure, African-American girls' patronization of dance halls also reflected the limited scope for recreation in urban centers. The opportunities to participate in public recreation for African-American girls

---

[70] William Henry Harrison, *Colored Girls' and Boys' Inspiring United States History: And a Heart to Heart Talk about White Folks* (Allentown: Searle & Dressler Company, 1921), 169.
[71] Angela J. Latham, *Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls, and Other Brazen Performers of the American 1920s* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 48-54.
[72] Patricia Collins. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 71.

were limited. [73] Segregation restricted their choices of urban amusements, unlike white middle class girls who had access to more spaces. Black girls were restricted by places that refused entry as well as the lack of public recreation in their neighborhoods.[74] The availability and low cost of dance halls appealed to girls who possessed few options to spend their leisure time. Dance halls, unlike social organizations, did not require a membership and could be accessed by a variety of girls.

A lack of respectable recreation contributed to fears of girls falling into delinquency—a category that middle class African-American adults wanted to avoid for their daughters.

As Saidiya Hartman traces, girls' presence at dance halls could also provoke the accusation and potential charge of being a "wayward minor" in cities such as New York.[75] A "wayward minor," a sixteen to twenty-one year old young woman, could be charged with engaging in a variety of conduct, such as leaving home without a parent's consent, associating with unscrupulous people, or being "in danger of becoming morally depraved."[76] Aside from her age, the label of a wayward minor possessed no set definition. Girls who attended dance halls, who left with partners, or who rode in cars with them, could be accused of being a wayward minor. These accusations, as well as the

---

[73] Jearold Winston Holland, *Black Recreation: A Historical Perspective* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 131-141.
[74] Victoria Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 13-19.
[75] Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2019), 222. For a study on African-American girls' treatment within the juvenile justice system, see Tera Eva Agyepong, *The Criminalization of Black Children: Race, Gender, and Delinquency in Chicago's Juvenile Justice System, 1899–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).
[76] Hartman, *Wayward Lives,* 222.

legal punishments that could come along with them, also defined black adults' desire to keep girls away from the dance halls.

Hartman's further interpretations of "wayward" are useful when analyzing the experiences of African-American girls at the dance hall. Pushing back at the way this term was used to criminalize girls, Hartman defines "wayward" as the ways black girls lived, explored, and loved. While seen as wayward by the state, wayward lives also provided girls with a sense of mobility within urban spaces. A wayward girl also chose her own path and constructed her own sense of self. In Hartman's words, wayward girls defined their own experiences by illustrating the power of "improvisation with the terms of social existence, when the terms have already been dictated."[77] African-American girls knew the terms that they needed to abide by such as avoiding spaces read as deviant and hiding their sexuality. And yet, girls still challenged these terms by defining their own experiences in the dance hall. Rather than viewing these spaces as dangerous, girls' letters suggest some viewed these spaces as sites of hope and longing.

Despite displeasure from adults, girls in the dance hall negotiated ideas around love, sexuality, marriage, and partnerships. Reformers voices about girls' bodies and sexualities were often the loudest. While adults identified the dance hall as an illicit space, one in which girls' bodies needed to be shielded and protected, I offer an alternative reading of the dance hall. Girls also articulated and reworked expressions of their own sexuality. Girls visited these spaces where they socialized with peer groups, met potential dates, and danced for hours. After spending their days working or attending school, girls enjoyed spending their nights at dance halls and other city amusements.

---

[77] Hartman, *Wayward Lives,* 228.

Their patronization of dance halls encouraged a sense of freedom in the urban sphere as well as engagement in a growing youth culture that centered on commercialized leisure.

In order to examine their experiences, I turn to African-American girls' letters in advice columns. One such column "Advice to the Wise and Otherwise" traced how girls experienced love and desire. The column, printed in the *Chicago Defender* between 1921 and 1930, encouraged submissions from readers all over the country who had questions and concerns regarding their romantic relationships. As David Gudelunas argues, advice columns helped readers learn about and understand sexuality.[78] The columnist Princess Mysteria answered questions from readers as well as provided matchmaking services for people interested in being connected with friends and romantic partners. Mysteria addressed many topics during the column's tenure. Letters from girls regarding dances, especially their presence in dance halls, bring forth their own interpretations of these spaces.

These letters serve as evidence for understanding the ways in which girls expressed their own secret desires during the New Negro Era. During the "sexual revolution" of the 1920s, girls "described their own sexual awakening and recorded the details of intimate interactions with boys."[79] Attaining these records proves more difficult for scholars of African-American girlhood. As Darlene Clark Hines notes, within a culture of dissemblance, black girls and women shielded their sexuality from the outside world.[80] Scholars of girlhood have located these voices in sociological work in which

---

[78] David Gudelunas, *Confidential to America: Newspaper Advice Columns and Sexual Education* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 5.
[79] Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 53.
[80] Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14.4 (1989): 912.

African-American girls participated in interviews about their sexuality during the 1930s.[81] In an effort to locate girls' voices, I examine how girls described their own navigation of love, sex, and relationships during the 1920s through letters to advice columns.[82]

While adults taught girls about sexual education by defining what not to do in the dance hall, girls learned about sexuality within their own spaces of youth culture. Girls imagined the dance hall not as spaces for delinquency and debauchery, but as places where they received messages about sexuality within the confines of new urban environments. Their letters illuminate the potential of excavating "private" and "intimate" history, particularly regarding sexuality.[83] Scholars have also noted how the history of black periodicals often obscure the role of sexuality.[84] Letters to the "Advice to the Wise and Otherwise Column" in the *Chicago Defender* mark the newspaper's role in illuminating the sexual lives of its readers.

In a 1923 letter to "Advice to the Wise and Otherwise," a sixteen-year-old girl asked Princess Mysteria for advice regarding dancing. The girl, who adopted the pseudonym

"Disgusted Girl," enjoyed sneaking out to the dance halls to meet her friends. The dance halls, with their dim lights, close company, and fast music, appealed to her desire to connect with her peers and meet potential dating partners. However, her parents forbade

---

[81] Cahn, *Sexual Reckoning,* 98-128 and Simmons, *Crescent City Girls,* 112-140.
[82] Some of the girls used the words "public dance" and "dance halls" while other simply used "dancing". However, even when the girls do not specifically use "dance halls," the space is implied. Unlike the Y.W.C.A. or historically black colleges that youth took pride in being associated with, the letters do not include the name or hint of any organization or educational institution.
[83] Alexander, *Lyrics and Sunshine,* 5.
[84] Kim Gallon, "Silences Kept: The Absence of Gender and Sexuality in Black Press Historiography," *History Compass* 10, no. 2 (2012): 207-218.

her from going to the dance halls as well as having boyfriends. Reluctant to bend to their wishes, the girl continued to sneak out, although she admitted that she would never be the type of person to sneak out too often. A talented dancer, she relished her experiences with her friends at night and hoped to meet other boys at these events, although she confessed that she was regrettably "unlucky" when it came to romantic affairs.[85]

Although she signed her name as "Disgusted Girl," the girl's letter suggested that her disdain did not entirely rest with herself and her habit of sneaking out. While she acknowledged that her parents would disapprove if they knew, she suggested that going out once in a while was not necessarily a bad thing. Rather, the girl was disgusted by her lack of dates and failure to keep the attention of her male peers. She posed the following question to Mysteria: "How can I be loved as some girls are?"[86] Her question speaks to her own assessment and surveillance of her female peers at her dance. Through watching the coupling of other dancers, she noted her own insecurities as she yearned to find partnership within these spaces.

"Disgusted Girl" wrestled with anxieties connected to the need to feel desirable while navigating romantic relationships. However, Princess Mysteria lacked sympathy towards her situation. The columnist admonished "Disgusted Girl" and her decision to leave the house at night without her parents' permission. She informed her that "it is very foolish of you to disobey your mother to the extent of slipping out, going to dances, or any place else."[87] Mysteria instructed the teenage girl to obey her mother and assured her that love would come in due time as long as she stayed on the "right" path. Her emphasis

[85] "Advice to the Wise and Otherwise," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Nov. 24, 1923.
[86] "Advice to the Wise and Otherwise," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Nov. 24, 1923.
[87] "Advice to the Wise and Otherwise," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), Nov. 24, 1923.

on obedience and morality conflicted with the letter writer's desire for self-discovery and sexual expression—a conflict that girls during the New Negro Era constantly negotiated.[88] The letter and Mysteria's response illustrated the constrained choices girls faced regarding sexuality and dating as well as the generational conflicts between adolescents and older women.

Girls also considered the careful balance of fitting in with peers and the approval of adult community members. In 1924, two eighteen year old girls, who signed their letter Two Pals, asked Mysteria "Is it right to attend public dances?"[89] The use of the word "right" emphasized the moral quandary that girls faced in their assessment of the dance halls, reflecting worries about deviating from representations of chaste girlhood. Although dance halls were popular with youth, other girls wrestled with their appeal. Mysteria reminded girls that dance halls intended to "attract the very people we endeavor to shun in our daily life."[90] Girls reading her response learned that attending dance halls impacted one's social reputation, a message circulated by middle class reformers in their own communities. Instead, Mysteria and other adults attempted to guide girls away from the dance halls and towards forms of recreation they deemed respectable.

Other girls viewed the dance hall as a space for freedom and exploration. In 1923, a seventeen-year-old girl, who signed her letter G.M., informed Mysteria that she was married and expecting a child soon. Although her husband was "very nice," she was tired of married life.[91] The young wife felt increasingly restless and lonely. Her husband often

---

[88] Erin D. Chapman, *Prove it on Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular culture in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 148.
[89] "Advice to the Wise and Otherwise," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), April 26, 1924.
[90] "Advice to the Wise and Otherwise," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), April 26, 1924.
[91] "Advice to the Wise and Otherwise," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), December 29, 1923.

went out at night as she stayed at home. As a married woman, G.M. was expected to stay home and take care of domestic affairs. In her letter to Mysteria, she expressed that she longed to go out dancing, which she greatly enjoyed and missed. Married life made it difficult for her to indulge in dancing as well as other activities outside of the home. G.M. was expected to leave her days of dancing behind while her husband, not bound to the same domestic restraints, could exercise his freedom of mobility and choice. She informed Mysteria that she would leave her husband after the birth of their baby. While she loved him, she felt a strong desire to leave her marriage and pursue her own desires. "I miss my good time," she said, her words conjuring an image of dancing as a space of joy and desire.

Mysteria's response admonishes not only G. M. but also other girls interested in putting their love of nightly dances above their other affairs. "You are, or at least should be no longer a dance-mad, good time loving flapper," Mysteria implored her as a reminder of her position as a wife and a mother.[92] After all, she told G.M., the fact that her husband spent his evenings away from home was of little importance. Mysteria informed her that "the beautiful labor of keeping a home" rested with G.M., crafting the domestic sphere in opposition to dances.[93] G.M.'s desire to attend dances conflicted with her duties as a wife and mother, duties that Mysteria and other African-American reformers believed essential for the racial uplift African-American young women could obtain through the home.

For girls such as G.M. the dance hall could symbolize a place to break free of the restraints imposed by marriage and motherhood. In the eyes of adults such as Mysteria, it

---

[92] "Advice to the Wise and Otherwise," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), December 29, 1923.
[93] "Advice to the Wise and Otherwise," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), December 29, 1923.

also encouraged a sense of delinquency perpetuated by "dance-mad flappers" who brushed off their domestic duties. By dismissing flappers, Mysteria drew firm limits around acceptable representations of black adolescent femininity. As a component of personal hygiene, African-American girls could evoke the aesthetics of the flapper by sending in photographs of their bobbed hair to the *Chicago Defender.* However, adults were less enthusiastic about her sexual undertones, especially as connected to dancing. The figure of the flapper, as well as her presence in the dance hall, could disrupt notions of respectable femininity. Through her carefree attitude and willingness to shun conventions of marriage, she posed a threat to reformers' visions of ideal New Negro Girlhood. Girls such as G.M. challenged these visions by articulating their desires to define their own lives.

Letters also address the role of compulsory heterosexuality within the site of the dance hall. In a 1924 letter to Mysteria, a young woman cautioned that the advice columnist had "never had a letter like this before."[94] Signing the letter "Worried," she admitted that she possessed no romantic feelings for boys, despite attending dances with them. However, she did hold romantic feelings for her female best friend, feelings that seemed to be unrequited due to the friend's strong interest in boys. "Worried" asked the advice columnist for help developing an interest in boys, particularly as she noticed others remarking that she would never get married. Mysteria forcefully told her to continue being around boys, continue socializing with them, and avoid her female friend in order to become "normal."[95]

---

[94] "Advice to the Wise and Otherwise," *Chicago Defender,* (Chicago, IL), March 15, 1924.
[95] "Advice to the Wise and Otherwise," *Chicago Defender,* (Chicago, IL), March 15, 1924.

The role of "static narratives of heterosexuality" in African-American history often obscures the lives of LGBTQ African-Americans. [96] This letter reveals the black queer girls in the archive rarely addressed in histories of girlhood and African-American gender studies. Through the use of anonymity, girls' letters to the advice column in the *Chicago Defender* facilitated a sense of openness in discussing their sexual identities. As the girl who sent the letter to Mysteria demonstrated, finding a female partner could prove difficult in heterosexual dance spaces. Instead, scholars have pointed to the ways "private spaces" of parties at homes facilitated the development of same-sex romantic relationships away from the surveillance of hostile and judging fellow neighbors.[97] Although gay, lesbian, and bisexual African-Americans formed queer communities during the New Negro Era, they were still expected to hide their identities from both the black and white middle class. While the typical dance hall encouraged heterosexual coupling, young women could also attend small dance parties in cities such as Harlem where they could find same-sex partners.[98]

Letters written by girls to the *Chicago Defender* advice column reveal how some girls examined and defined their own sexuality in relationship to dance halls. The column printed their wishes for self-exploration, statements of their queer identities, and questions about the moral implications of the dance hall. While adults often defined girls in the dance halls as deviant, girls also pursued their own expressions of love and relationships within these spaces. Girls' participation in dance halls represented a

---

[96] Mattie Udora Richardson, "No More Secrets, No More Lies: African American History and Compulsory Heterosexuality," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 63-76.
[97] James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 40.
[98] Wilson, *Bulldaggers,* 40.

rejection of respectable recreation as defined by some adults. They expressed their desires and concerns through letters that challenged middle-class ideals of black adolescent sexuality.

As an alternative to the dance halls, adults encouraged girls to pursue respectable recreation. Under the watchful eye of parents, guardians, and educators, girls attended proms at churches, schools, and community organizations. The distrust of dance halls spurred adults to create spaces in which youth could participate in dance culture in respectable ways. Through lavish costumes, slower types of music, and careful surveillance, girls participated in dancing as a way to enact middle class norms as well as learn about potential partnerships. However, racial boundaries which established segregated proms also revealed the limits of respectable recreation available for African-American girls.

Finer Forms of Association

At organized formal dances, African-American girls developed the rites of courtship and displays of chaste sexuality necessary for the foundations of respectable recreation. Wary of dance halls, sociologist William Jones believed that youth morality could be transformed within the space of the formal dance. Girls were encouraged to move away from the dance hall and directed to pursue what Jones had termed as "the finer forms of association" in *Recreation and Amusement.* At proms, African-American girls were encouraged to accept sexual norms that would establish their positions as future New Negro wives and mothers.

Proms for American youth across the country at educational institutions grew in popularity during the turn of the century.[99] Under the watch of educators and administrators, youth danced slowly in formal wear, evoking a very different atmosphere than that of the dance hall. Although first attended by college students, high schools adopted proms during the early twentieth century.[100] Constructed as a "coming of age" ritual, Karal Marling suggests that proms represented the "first adult social event in the lives of high schoolers."[101] Youth demonstrated their capacity to transition from childhood to adulthood, marking the prom as a distinctly adolescent ritual.

Scholarship on the history of proms tends to focus on white educational institutions. Scholars of black beauty culture note that colleges such as Madame C.J. Walker's Walker Institute hosted proms, which blended cultivated appearances with dance.[102] Other works on black formal dances cite the importance of debutante balls within African-American communities. African-American girls in postwar Washington, D.C., for example, used debutante balls to present themselves to their larger high society communities.[103] While similar, proms were less exclusive than debutante balls, which often required an invitation. Proms, through their association with informal and formal educational institutions, could reach a larger number of participants.

---

[99] Amy L. Best, *Prom Night: Youth, Schools and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 6-7. For more on high school proms see Candace Chen's dissertation "Prom: How a High School Ritual Brought Youth Closer to Adulthood, 1890-1970," University of California, Berkeley, 2012 and Felicity Hannah Paxton's dissertation "America at the Prom: Ritual and Regeneration," University of Pennsylvania, 2000.
[100] Karal Ann Marling, *Debutante: Rites and Regalia of American Debdom* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 175.
[101] Marling, *Debutante,* 173-175.
[102] Susannah Walker, "'Independent Livings' or 'No Bed Of Roses'?: How Race and Class Shaped Beauty Culture as an Occupation for African American Women from the 1920s to the 1960s," *Journal of Women's History* 20, no. 3 (2008): 68.
[103] Miya Carey, "That Charm of all Girlhood": Black Girlhood and Girls in Washington, DC, 1930-1965," dissertation, Rutgers University, 2018.

Unlike the illicit and underground scene of the dance hall, girls' behavior became easier to observe in the closely guarded spaces of the prom. While dance halls exacerbated the fear of "unmonitored sexual contact" between youth, formal dances allowed adults to provide guidance on matters of sexuality.[104] Before attending a dance in 1935, African-American girls at the Omaha Y.W.C.A. in Nebraska attended a forum instructing them on correct behavior and etiquette. Joined by boys, the co-ed meeting titled "At a Dance" implored the youth to dance in respectable ways. Youth received lectures on the "proper decorum" at dances in an effort to guide their behavior.[105] Adults hoped to influence girls and their dates to adhere to standards of behavior that would adhere to ideals of chaste adolescence.

Lectures such as "At a Dance" highlighted the ways educators believed parents had failed to guide their daughter's conduct. Blaming a lack of parental intervention for girls' sexual activity, educators used the social space of dance to serve as de facto parents. At Philadelphia's Southwest Belmont Y.W.C.A., the organization suggested that parents lacked a concern for their daughter's behaviors. In the 1930s, a staff member reflected upon the difficulty in shaping girls' actions "when many times their parents condone their keeping of late hours." The adults at the club also noted the occurrence of "some of the unusual things which are being done by high school girls and even some of those younger."[106] Alluding to sexual activity in their use of the word "unusual," the women identified transgressions of appropriate adolescent femininity. Organizations

---

[104] Carol J. Martin, *Dance Marathons: Performing American Culture of the 1920s and 1930s* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 12.
[105] "Nebraska State News," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), March 23, 1935.
[106] Minutes of Branch Staff, 1937, Box 23, 104, Y.W.C.A. Southwest Belmont, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA.

believed that the responsibility of shaping girls' sexual behavior rested within the spaces of their clubs and dances.

However, in an effort to preserve their daughter's reputation, some parents forbade their daughters from attending dances in general, even ones sanctioned by the local Y.W.C.A. As a young girl living in Germantown, Pennsylvania, Alyce Jackson Alexander was prohibited from going to dances at the Y.W.C.A. Not knowing the type of youth who attended the dance concerned her parents and they denied Alexander the chance to go.[107] Despite the Y.W.C.A.'s status as a respectable place, her parents still drew rigid boundaries around her spaces of recreation in order to protect her reputation and sexuality.

In establishing conduct at proms, girls also learned about the types of dances and music that would be permitted. Music such as jazz, and corresponding dances such as the cake-walk, were discouraged at organized proms. Rooted in a black musical tradition, jazz grew in popularity during the 1920s and 1930s, as the music filled cabarets and dance halls.[108] However, jazz received a less than enthusiastic reception by white educators. Racism marked perceptions of the art form by those who feared the music's influence on the sexual behavior of their white female students, particularly by citing the "savage" nature of the music. [109] Leadership within the national Y.W.C.A. also suggested that jazz music encouraged girls to dance in ways that raised the concern of adults due to the sexualized nature of the movements.[110] Distancing themselves from jazz music, adults

---

[107] Alyce Jackson Alexander, Oral History, OH2, African-Americans in Germantown Between the Wars, Germantown Historical Society.
[108] Eric Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 1-52.
[109] Jacob Hardesty, "Moral Outrage and Musical Corruption: White Educators' Responses to the 'Jazz Problem,'" *History of Education Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (2016): 590-617.
[110] Jane Bellows, "Social Dancing," 1921, Box 591, Folder 10, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.

sought to craft the prom as one in which music and dance shaped controlled expressions of sexuality.

Members of the black intellectual class also regarded jazz as a lowbrow cultural art form.[111] The rejection of jazz gestured towards a desire to embrace more conservative forms of music, especially forms that avoided associations with sexuality. Their perceptions of the art form also trickled down to schools. At certain educational institutions that served black students, those who played jazz could be punished with suspension.[112] In dictating the parameters of respectable recreation, administrators and educators viewed music as a necessary component in constructing ideal female adolescent sexuality.

Programs for proms during the 1920s and the 1930s listed the dances that would be taught, documenting the erasure of dances that could be aligned with jazz. A program for the Junior-Senior Prom at Fisk University in 1927 informed attendees of the names of girls who would teach dances deemed acceptable such as the waltz, one-step, two-step, and the fox trot. [113] Through dance instruction, girls set the musical and moral tone of the prom. Although chaperones were most likely present, girls monitored themselves as well as others as they delivered information on the appropriate styles of dances. These dances, with their slow rhythms, gained favor in the eyes of adults who chaperoned proms.

Middle class girls were instructed to attend genteel proms that served to create a restrained black female identity. In her scrapbook, Marjorie Collins, a student at the historically black Prairie View College in Texas also included a list of dances at her

---

[111] Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz?,* 11.
[112] Hardesty, "Moral Outrage," 598.
[113] Booklet for the Junior-Senior Prom 1927, Ambrose Family Papers, Tennessee State Library Virtual Archives, Accessed at https://cdm15138.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/Fisk/id/291.

Junior-Senior prom which included the waltz and the fox trot. Like many other girls, her 1925 scrapbook, titled "The Girl Graduate: Her Own Book" documented her feelings, activities, and memories.[114] She attended her Junior-Senior Prom and kept her ticket as a memento to remember the occasion. Collins does not include any descriptions of her dancing closely to a companion, laughing with friends, and swaying to the music. Instead she focuses on her physical appearance at the prom, centering on her elegant outfit: "My banquet dress for the Junior Senior Prom was an orchid flat crepe with straight lines, a chiffon ruffle with ribbon trimming a corsage of purple and yellow pansies with streamers chose to match dress black satin slippers with a silver headband."[115]

Collins symbolized the ideal representations of girlhood that African-American institutions hoped to reproduce through the site of the prom. Through her physical body, Collins showcased her commitment to modest, but elegant, clothing. Her detailed description of her clothing emphasized the event's focus on displaying respectability through the body. As opposed to the short skirts found at the dance hall, Collins' dress reflected "finer forms of association," a concept also tied to displays of class status.

At Bennett College's Junior-Senior prom in 1934, girls also embraced the finer forms of association, as they ventured off campus for their end of the year dance. Instead of the typical gymnasium or Y.W.C.A. hall setting, girls attended their prom on a yacht. As the waves rocked the boat, girls spent the night dancing with their dates to an

---

[114] The Girl Graduate, Her Own Book, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Beatrix Burneston, Accessed at http://collections.si.edu/search/detail/edanmdm:nmaahc_2012.94?q=url%3Aedanmdm%3Anmaahc_2012.94&record=1&hlterm=url%3Aedanmdm%3Anmaahc_2012.94.

[115] The Girl Graduate, Her Own Book, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Beatrix Burneston, Accessed at http://collections.si.edu/search/detail/edanmdm:nmaahc_2012.94?q=url%3Aedanmdm%3Anmaahc_2012.94&record=1&hlterm=url%3Aedanmdm%3Anmaahc_2012.94.

orchestra while wearing "sport suits." Men who attended to the girls wore "white suits and caps" and passed out peppermints for party favors.[116] The clothing, presence of waiters, and the yacht traced the relationship between proms and the performance of the black middle class. As girls danced with dates on a yacht, girls also learned to tie partnerships to displays of social class. Wary of associations with the working class, middle class black institutions used objects of wealth to signify the event's mission in depicting upright forms of sexuality.

Proms hosted by black fraternities also highlighted the classed dynamics that shaped the event. Often held across the country, these proms served as a social hub for young participants, particularly for the city's "socialites." [117] At a 1921 Kappa Alpha Psi dance at Howard University, girls spent their evening with the city's young black bachelors. The *Chicago Defender* noted that the colors of the fraternity, pink and white, mixed with Howard's crimson colors, "blended in perfect harmony with the dark skinned beauties of our Race."[118] The paper makes evident how the formal dance emerged as a site for future partnerships by emphasizing the beauty of the young women as intertwined with the colors of the clothing of the fraternity members.

The *Chicago Defender* covered various proms, showcasing the restrained and elegant nature of the events. As a tool to remake representations during the New Negro Era, visual images also constructed ideologies of black identity.[119] Photographs printed in black newspapers asserted black girls' respectable sexualities at organized dances. While

---

[116] "The Junior and Senior Prom," *Bennett Banner* (Greensboro, NC), May 1934.
[117] "Kappa Dance Pleases Capital City Socialites," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), April 27, 1935.
[118] "Fraternity Gives Dance," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), June 11, 1921.
[119] Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 2-5.

girls learned about proper behavior, what types of music to listen to, and how to reflect material forms of social class at proms, coverage of proms served as a visual form of conduct literature which aimed to mold adolescent sexuality.

A 1935 prom hosted by two Chicago youth organizations, the Krazy Kats and Sixteen Sirens brought participants together under the careful watch of adults. As a portrait, the image above reminded readers of the purpose of the prom: to promote an image of black restraint and respectability. The photograph portrays the youth as composed and elegant, reflecting middle class visions of black success. In their white clothing, the youth reflected notions of chastity as the young women and men stood next to each other. Seated side by side with hands carefully placed in their laps, the youth demonstrated the possibility for future partnership with their dates. Girls, who served as hostesses for the event reflected notions of domesticity viewed as essential for their preparation as future New Negro wives and mothers.[120]

While the event provided a space for youth to socialize, the event also created an opportunity for a large number of young people to develop partnerships. Although only some of the youth who attended the prom are pictured, seven hundred youth were presented at the event hosted by the Krazy Kats and Sixteen Sirens.[121] By promoting social engagement with youth from similar social classes, dances sought to connect girls with ideal future partners. As Michele Mitchell notes, conduct literature "firmly placed sexuality within the realm of marriage and the family."[122] The image in the *Chicago Defender* promoted a vision of youth's future role in continuing the ideal of the nuclear

---

[120] Curwood, *Stormy Weather,* 86.
[121] "Krazy Kats and Sixteen Sirens Give Prom," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), July 27, 1935.
[122] Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation,* 106.

family. As a large collective body, girls and their dates reflected the hopes of adults who believed respectable recreation could establish middle class partnerships, which could lead to marriages and motherhood.

The *Chicago Defender* also published photographs of prom queens, creating a contrasting image to the perceived delinquent dance hall girl. These images also emphasized the role of beauty culture, a message also circulated by pageant winners in the previous chapter who embraced personal hygiene practices. While photographs of collective youth at proms visualized the promise of future marriages, coverage of individual prom queens in the *Chicago Defender* also served to demonstrate girls' fitness for future motherhood through her conduct and her beauty. The prom queen's association with an event that located partnership as its key goal represented her as indicative of the types of girls to imagine as a future wife and mother. As Laila Haidarali argues, the construction of New Negro Womanhood included not only producing children, but also suggested the "literal rebirthing of African-American culture."[123] New Negro girls were also encouraged to view themselves in tandem with this image.

As symbols of femininity, especially within a space designed to promote middle class partnership, prom queens symbolized the ideal types of young women who were tasked with the reproduction of children and displays of social status. Featured in the *Chicago Defender,* Marie Schexnyder displayed the type of respectability essential for future New Negro motherhood. Crowned by the Wolves Athletic Club in Chicago in 1935, Schexnyder set the record for being crowned prom queen twice in a row. Described as a "prominent member of the young social set," she reflected values of beauty,

---

[123] Laila Haidarali, *Brown Beauty: Color, Sex, and Race from the Harlem Renaissance to World War II*. (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 110.

popularity, and social mobility. Her position as an important member of the African-American social scene in the West Side of Chicago portrayed her as an aspirational example for other adolescent girl readers.

Photographs of individual and collective girls at proms provided a public view for middle class black adolescent sexuality. By offering images of youth within surveilled dance spaces, the *Chicago Defender* sought to feature those imagined to reflect ideals of suitable future marriage and motherhood. As girls across the country read the paper, the images suggested the importance of social class, beauty, and chaste sexuality. As a space for girls to both learn about ideals of partnership as well as display models of guarded sexuality, the prom provided an alternative form of social hygiene education.

Although largely represented as positive spaces, the black press also pointed to the difficulties that arose within proms. I use this remaining section to address the limits of respectable recreation for African-American girls during the 1920s and 1930s. Dances demarcated strict racial boundaries around the formation of intimate social and romantic relationships. Girls who attended integrated high schools faced bans when they attempted to attend proms.[124] While proms represented "the finer forms of association," they also represented distinct spaces that segregated girls based on fears regarding interracial relationships and reproduction.

Bans on interracial proms reflected a larger discourse around fears of miscegenation. "Anti-miscegenation laws" across the country rose during 1890-194 in an effort to dissuade interracial marriage.[125] These laws enacted strict limitations regarding

---

[124] "Massachusetts Hotel Draws Color Line: Deny School Students Admission to Prom," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), March 1, 1930 and "Race Students Attend Tilden Hi School Prom," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), June 22, 1935.
[125] Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern,* 88.

the intimate spheres of relationships between different races. In addition, these laws aimed to reproduce whiteness by dissuading white men and women from marrying outside of their racial group.[126] Although white and black youth danced together in the dance hall, this practice was generally discouraged, particularly within formal institutions.[127] Fears of interracial mixing contributed to the exclusion of African-American girls by white administrators at proms.

Literary representations of the prom during the New Negro Era highlighted the exclusionary nature of the event. While the visual images in the *Chicago Defender* examined the prom as a space for demonstrating muted sexuality, short stories in places such as *Opportunity* used the prom to analyze race, racism, and fears of intermixing. Published in the November 1923 issue of *Opportunity,* the short story "Cynthia Goes to the Prom" by Eric D. Walrond addressed segregated proms and their potential effects on African-American girls.[128] The text offers readers a view of black prom culture during the 1920s through the experiences of a high school girl and her friends. The protagonist, Cynthia, is described as a character who supports ideologies of color-blindness. One of her faults includes not reading black newspapers that her father brought home. Instead, she dismisses concerns regarding racial inequity. She attends a predominantly white high school where she is one of the few black students as well as one of the most popular people at school. She is deeply admired by her classmates, as peers "forgot about the color of her skin" and boys adored her.[129] At her prom, which occurs away from the

---

[126] Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1-14.
[127]Christopher J. Smith, *Dancing Revolutions: Bodies, Space, and Sound in American Cultural History* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 103.
[128] Eric D. Walrond, "Cynthia Goes to the Prom," *Opportunity,* November 1923, 342-343.
[129] Eric D. Walrond, "Cynthia Goes to the Prom," *Opportunity,* November 1923, 342.

school grounds, Cynthia receives treatment that causes her to re-evaluate her color-blind mentality.

When she arrives at the prom with several of her black peers, she faces hostility from adults and students. Despite being elegantly dressed as "gowned Cleopatras," Cynthia and her friends are almost turned away at the door. The coat woman refuses to check their coats, adding that the articles of clothing would need to be put on the floor. While Cynthia and her friends still attend the dance, she and her friends are subjected to stares from her peers. Her friends, previously cordial to her in school, ignore her at the prom. Rather than a space for dancing and joy, Cynthia's experience highlights the discrimination experienced at the prom for black adolescent girls.

While at the beginning of the story, Cynthia refuses to see race, by the end, her perspective changes. After leaving the prom, she notes that she plans to attend events centered on black advocacy and social change.[130] Through her physical presence, Cynthia plans on disrupting racial segregation at high school proms in the future. Her emergence as a young female activist also reveals her political awakening at the prom. Although Cynthia reflected values of beauty and educational success, she discovered that racism also limited the types of spaces that she could occupy—even ones viewed as respectable. The short story in *Opportunity* demonstrated the potential failure of respectable recreation.

However, girls continued to challenge institutions that segregated dances by race. In Philadelphia, the Residence School for Girls provided accommodation and recreation for girls. Only four African-American girls (Lena Johnson, Mabel Otterbridge, Eugenia

---

[130] Eric D. Walrond, "Cynthia Goes to the Prom," *Opportunity,* November 1923, 342-343.

Hines, and Margaret Warfield) stayed at the majority white school. In an effort to provide entertainment to the girls at the school, the staff organized dances. White adults, uneasy about the potential mixing of black and white students, told the African-American girls that that they could not attend. Instead, they offered the girls a chance to go out in Philadelphia and partake in other forms of amusement—a concession that the girls were not willing to make.

Weighing the costs of this venture, as well as the exclusionary nature of this request, Lena Johnson and her friends refused. Johnson, who the staff had previously reprimanded for receiving both white and black male callers, welcomed the chance to challenge the educational institution. Instead, Johnson informed one of the staff members that several of the girls would be attending the dance.[131] Johnson, who was described as a "fighter" as well as "militant" by the black press, organized her peers and identified the dance as a space to articulate her demands for equality. At least two girls attended the dance, challenging the discriminatory policies of the administration at the school.

When girls integrated their school proms, the *Chicago Defender* expressed pride in their actions. The paper covered Lauretta Beaty who attended her senior prom in 1922. She was also the only African-American graduate of her high school class, presumably making her the only black participant at her prom.[132] The article displayed an exuberant Beaty whose photograph centered under the words "Smilin Thru." While girls like Beaty challenged segregated proms, they were often expected to "smile through" any difficulties that they faced within these spaces. The caption, "Smilin" Thru" evoked the

[131] "Says 'Jim Crow' Won Out in W.P.A. School at YMCA," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), May 6, 1936.
[132] "Smilin' Thru," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), May 26, 1923.

resilience needed by African-American girls as they desegregated proms. As a student who gained admission into University of Chicago as well as was positioned as "prominent in the younger social set," Beaty's respectability most likely helped her integrate the prom. Her ability to smile through the process of integration also revealed what Darlene Clark Hine termed as "dissemblance," in which she could have displayed a positive disposition in order to mask emotions such as fear and discomfort.[133]

By challenging racial boundaries at the prom, girls used respectable recreation to combat ideas regarding interracial sexuality. While girls were taught to embrace proms as sites for marriage and future success, girls also highlighted the limits of respectability by noting the exclusionary tactics found within the event. Although the prom represented the ideals of respectable recreation, African-American girls still navigate racialized boundaries at formal dances connected to their bodies and fears of interracial sexuality.

Conclusion

As alternate spaces of social hygiene instruction, dance halls and proms instructed African-American girls on correct displays of sexuality through noting the consequences and benefits of "the downward path" and "the finer forms of association." Civic organizations, educators, and the black press viewed dances as transgressive and dangerous as well as respectable and necessary. As girls navigated dance halls and proms, they learned about sexual norms and expectations, embraced and rejected notions of class, and received messages about their future positions. Girls' challenge of

[133] Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 41.

respectable recreation also demonstrated their self-definition, determination, and character.

Alyce Jackson Alexander, forbidden by her parents to attend dances, reflected on the lessons that her family provided her in other areas of her life. She expressed gratitude that her parents had instilled within her a sense of "character." Defining character as "the way you carried yourself," Jackson's words also illustrated the role of mental hygiene in defining African-American girlhood.[134] In the next chapter, I examine racialized character education and the formation of New Negro Girlhood.

[134] Alyce Jackson Alexander, Oral History, OH2, African-Americans in Germantown Between the Wars, Germantown Historical Society.

Chapter 4-Mental Hygiene: The Character of the New Negro Girl

In 1933, the *Girls Guid*e, a manual written by Sallie W. Stewart and published by the National Association of Colored Girls (NACG) detailed the ways in which girls could develop ideal character. NACG, a junior version of the National Association of Colored Women, focused on uplifting the next generation of black clubwomen. Founded in 1930, the organization, open to girls between the ages of six and twenty-five-years, aspired to shape and mold the behavior of its members.[1] Through the manual, the *Girls Guide* could "install ideas of the finer womanhood at a young age," which remained one of the key objectives of the NACG. [2]

In order to help girls reach finer womanhood, the *Girls Guide* included suggestions that targeted the health of girls through "Personal Development." Personal development required attention to both physical and mental well-being. Under the category of health, the guide included the following recommendations: "yearly physical examinations, taking care of a common cold, going to bed promptly when ill, and the right mental attitude."[3] Almost as if anticipating a question from the reader about the purpose of mental fitness, the guide stated: "What have the above to do with Health and Hygiene? The state of mind has much to do with attitude and general health."[4] The right mental attitude, influenced by notions of character, formed visions of healthy African-American female adolescence.

---

[1] Sallie W. Stewart, *Girls Guide* (Washington D.C.: National Association of Colored Women, 1933). 10.
[2] Stewart, *Girls Guide,* 10.
[3] Stewart, *Girls Guide,* 18.
[4] Stewart, *Girls Guide,* 63.

The insistence of developing the right attitude contended that an emphasis on the physical, personal, and social hygiene of the individual was not enough. In order to create an optimal adolescence, girls also needed to focus on their mental development. Mental hygiene, otherwise known as mental health, targeted the mind through the prevention and treatment of mental illness and the promotion of mental well-being. Founded in 1913, the National Committee for Mental Hygiene galvanized a movement concerned with the mental development of citizens, particularly for youth. The mental hygiene movement encouraged parents, physicians, psychologists, reformers, and educators to speculate on the correct way to achieve optimal mental health for children, such as developing qualities such as stability, emotional regulation, and a positive disposition.[5] As Theresa R. Richardson asserts, mental hygiene during the interwar period increasingly focused on developing "the ideal type of child as normal" —the term "normal" indicated a state of mental well-adjustment.[6] African-American reformers directed African-American girls towards mental hygiene practices essential for creating their own ideal of normal black female adolescence.

In order to construct "normal adolescence," mental hygienists directed children and youth to pursue methods that would allow them to showcase their well-adjusted composition. One such area included character-building, a component of mental hygiene. Character-building focused on the cultivation of positive actions and habits, with an

---

[5] Theresa R. Richardson, *The Century of the Child: The Mental Hygiene Movement and Social Policy in the United States and Canada* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 3. For more on mental hygiene see Sol Cohen, "The Mental Hygiene Movement, the Development of Personality and the School: The Medicalization of American Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (1983): 123-149; Sharon Yvonne Wall, "Making Modern Childhood, the Natural Way: Psychology, Mental Hygiene, and Progressive Education at Ontario Summer Camps, 1920-1955," *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* (2008): 73-110; Tina Besley, "Social Education and Mental Hygiene: Foucault, Disciplinary Technologies and the Moral Constitution of Youth," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 34, no. 4 (2002): 419-433.
[6] Richardson, *The Century of the Child,* 130.

emphasis on developing moral and upstanding children and youth.[7] William White, a psychologist detailed the importance of character in his 1921 article "Childhood: the Golden Period of Teaching Mental Hygiene." He argued that the "plastic" nature of children proved conducive to beginning character-building at an early age.[8] According to him, the child could be a malleable subject fit for instruction on achieving the right type of internal traits. White feared that if character traits were not adjusted at an early stage, youth were at a greater risk of falling into delinquent behavior which would impede their growth into healthy adults.

American girls of all races could find directions on how to improve their character within formalized educational curriculums and social organizations. At times, the definition of character was slippery and malleable. However, central to its definition included the pursuit of developing a moral and strong sense of self-identity that also connected to the larger environment. An ideal character involved qualities such as honestly, practicality, and service to others that would not only improve one's self, but the environment and the people around them. Character mattered a great deal to adults, both black and white, during the early twentieth century. Character-building, a component of mental hygiene, could shape the mental development of youth, promote normal adolescence, and guide youth towards achieving adulthood.

However, black reformers were also aware of the necessity of character-building for their children and youth. Writing for the *Journal of Negro Education,* Sterling A.

---

[7] B. Edward McClellan, *Moral Education in America: Schools and the Shaping of Character from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999); Robert W. Howard, Marvin W. Berkowitz, and Esther F. Schaeffer, "Politics of Character Education," *Educational Policy* 18, no. 1 (2004): 188-215; James Leming, "Theory, Research, and Practice in the Early Twentieth Century Character Education Movement," *Journal of Character Education* 6, no. 2 (2008): 17-36.

[8] William A. White, "Childhood: The Golden Period for Mental Hygiene," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 98, no. 1 (1921): 56.

Brown expressed his discontent with the way that the character of African-Americans was portrayed within literature in his 1933 article *Negro Character as Seen by White Authors.*[9] He noted that African-Americans were described as violent, promiscuous, and servile, characteristics that had been circulated within literature and minstrel shows. Brown's work highlights the role of visual and literary culture in assigning negative characteristics of African-Americans while also noting their potential power on white audiences who might readily ascribe to these ideas. Character-building could be mobilized as a way to assert positive character in the face of racist stereotypes.

Character-building could also be used to articulate New Negro identities. As Cheryl Wall notes, in tracing the figure of the New Negro, Alain Locke embraced self-definition while also invoking the importance of "self-dependence" and "self-expression."[10] While he did not explicitly use the term mental hygiene, Alain Locke did use the language of group psychology. He argued that the group psychology of the New Negro should include the following: "positive self-respect and self-reliance" as well "a rise from social disillusionment to race pride." [11]Additionally, he affirmed that the New Negro was a "collaborator and participator in American civilization" while still aware of the disjuncture between "American social creed and the American social practices."[12] In order to construct the ideal black female normal adolescent, black reformers encouraged African-American girls to develop a positive sense of character by drawing upon New Negro ideas of selfhood.

---

[9] Sterling A Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," *Journal of Negro Education* 2, no. 2 (1933): 179-203.
[10] Cheryl A. Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 2. Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, & Black Urban Life* (Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
[11] Alain Locke, *The New Negro* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925, Second Printing 1927), 10.
[12] Alain Locke, *The New Negro,* 13.

Manuals such as the *Girls Guide* and *Pudge Grows Up* by Frances Williams and Wenonah Bond Logan (1936) from the Y.W.C.A. in addition to columns in the *Chicago Defender* disseminated information necessary for the formation of character for African-American girls.[13] These works built upon nineteenth and early twentieth centuries black manuals aimed at middle-class African-American communities in order to reproduce values, ideologies, and behaviors. As Michelle Mitchell argues, these texts focused on the "collective" futures of black citizens and aimed to build "race character" by articulating the value of the home, child-rearing, and sexuality.[14] Not just attuned to race, black advice writers realized "adolescence had gendered implications" and crafted their texts to shape ideas of femininity that would reflect middle-class values.[15]

During the New Negro Era, character building texts aimed at African-American girls hoped to create ideal black female normal adolescence through developing self-determination, building racial pride, and embracing American citizenship. African-American girls were encouraged to build and maintain a sense of self-determination by developing a positive mentality and a sense of self-control. Additionally, it could serve as a strategy to address the effects of racism. As a form of racial uplift, self-determination also demonstrated the ways in which individual qualities were imagined to benefit the collective progress of African-Americans, even at the expense of erasing racial and economic inequalities.

---

[13] Frances Harriett Williams and Wenonah Bond Logan, *Pudge Grows Up,* 1936, Box 568, Folder 17, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.
[14] Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005), 132.
[15] Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation,* 132.

African-American girls were also encouraged to develop a sense of racial pride within character-building. A positive character displayed a strong sense of self-esteem, which could be bolstered through racial pride. This often occurred through understanding the historical and contemporary achievements of others. An awareness of African-American history, particularly African-American women's history could increase a sense of self-esteem and racial pride in girls. African-American girls were expected to model their character after those who had exhibited exemplary behavior such as African-American clubwomen.

Character building texts aimed at African-American girls also instructed them to develop characteristics to display ideal citizenship. An embrace of citizenship could both affirm their rights while also revealing the ways in which these rights had been denied to them. African-American girls also demonstrated their citizenship by participating in civic actions within clubs and at large organized parades. By locating citizenship as an instrumental part of character-building, African-American adolescents could assert their right as American girls.

Character-building emerged as not only a self-improvement tool for one's individual qualities, but a strategy for articulating racial consciousness and national identity. As a component of mental hygiene, black reformers constructed their own interpretations of character which addressed the realities of both race and gender for their adolescent girls. African-Americans adults also used character to shape their own construction of the well-adjusted black adolescent, a figure who could showcase qualities of the ideal New Negro and American girl.

A 'Normal Adolescence'

During the interwar years, the mainstream mental hygiene movement identified the emotional and social well-being of youth as in need of medical and scientific intervention.

Founded by Clifford Beers, a former psychiatric patient, the National Committee on Mental Hygiene aimed to improve the lives of citizens suffering mental and emotional distress. Disturbed by the treatment that he and others had suffered in mental institutions, Beers organized the National Committee on Mental Hygiene to reform the types of care provided to those in need, which spurred a larger interest in mental hygiene work.[16] Although interested in the treatment of illnesses, proponents of mental hygiene devoted significant energy towards preventative care. By targeting adolescents, viewed as vulnerable for potential emotional instability, mental hygiene researchers and practitioners stressed the need for education and guidance for youth.

The field of mental hygiene directed its attention towards the moral and mental development of youth. Part of this was a growing awareness and unease of the figure of the juvenile delinquent, who participated in abnormal behavior such as stealing, loitering, and for girls, engaging in sexual activity.[17] Mental hygiene was, as Theresa Richardson argues, about defining the ideological parameters of childhood, rather than just treating mental ailments.[18] Mental hygiene identified the qualities necessary to be viewed as a good and productive adolescent, by crafting a narrative of "normal" behavior.

---

[16] Richardson, *The Century of the Child,* 45-48.
[17] Crista DeLuzio, *Female Adolescence in American Scientific Thought, 1830–1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2007), 135-136.
[18] Richardson, *The Century of the Child,* 1-15.

A focus on the normal adolescent also undergirds the child-study and child-guidance movement shaped by, for example, psychologist and educator G. Stanley Hall, author of the multivolume text *Adolescence* (1904).[19] Hall defined adolescence as a formative time of mental and emotional development. Primarily focusing on boys, Hall argued that the construction of a normal adolescence included developing peer relationships and self-identity while occasionally engaging in delinquent behavior and acknowledging sexual feelings.[20] As Kenneth Kidd notes, Hall's analysis of adolescence predominately centered on white boys, as Hall suggested that "girls can never leave adolescence behind."[21] In considering racial groups and their characteristics, Hall, along with others, relied upon the racist and damaging theory of recapitulation that equated savagery with non-white groups and civilization with whites.[22] Thus, while boys could engage in rough and "savage play" during adolescence, they would eventually grow out of it. Hall and his contemporaries viewed the category as savage as part of the permanent character of non-white groups. The racism within historical studies of adolescent mental development reveals how African-American youth were located outside of the spheres of "normal adolescence." While at first primarily preoccupied with white boys, the mental hygiene movement also later sought to define "normal" white female adolescence.

Doctors, educators, and health writers all dispensed their own interpretations and methods for constructing white normal female adolescence. As Crista DeLuzio argues,

---

[19] DeLuzio, *Female Adolescence,* 95.
[20]Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, "G. Stanley Hall's Adolescence: Brilliance and Nonsense," *History of Psychology* 9, no. 3 (2006): 186-197.
[21] Kenneth B. Kidd, *Making American Boys: Boyology and the Feral Tale* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 59.
[22] Thomas Fallace, "The Savage Origins of Child-Centered Pedagogy, 1871–1913," *American Educational Research Journal* 52, no. 1 (2015): 73-103. See also: Graham Richards, *Race, Racism, and Psychology: Towards a Reflexive History* (London: Psychology Press, 1997), 22-25.

mental hygiene's focus on the normal adolescent, crafted in opposition to deviant adolescents who were part of the "girl problem," could provide direction on the types of behaviors and qualities needed for ideal white girls. The process of defining normative qualities also allowed adults to "interpret and direct the entire universe of teenage girls' behaviors."[23] Adults hoped that the healthy, well-adjusted ideal girl would ultimately become the healthy, well-adjusted adult. These qualities identified the need for girls to articulate a strong sense of self-independence and self-expression as well maintain a yearning to marry and procreate.[24] While white girls were now folded into normal adolescence, mainstream mental hygiene still did not include African-American girls within the category.

In order to achieve normal adolescence for white boys and girls, organizations addressed the role of character. Youth organizations, from Boy Scouts to Girl Scouts to the Young Men's Christian Association and the Young Women's Christian Association embraced character building.[25] And yet, these organizations also practiced segregation as clubs refused entry to black youth and separated them by race. Ben Jordan argued that the Boy Scouts included lessons on "white male dominance" within its outdoor conservation program.[26] David Macleod noted the pervasive racism within these organizations,

---

[23] DeLuzio, *Female Adolescence,* 147
[24] DeLuzio, *Female Adolescence,* 146-195.
[25] For work on boys' organizations and character building, see Ben Jordan, "Conservation of Boyhood": Boy Scouting's Modest Manliness and Natural Resource Conservation, 1910–1930," *Environmental History* 15, no. 4 (2010): 612-642; David Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and their Forerunners, 1870-1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004) and Kenneth B. Kidd, *Making American Boys: Boyology and the Feral tale* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). For work on girls' character building, see: Susan A. Miller, *Growing Girls: The Natural Origins of Girls' Organizations in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Kristine Alexander, *Guiding Modern Girls: Girlhood, Empire, and Internationalism in the 1920s and 1930s* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017).
[26] Jordan, "Conservation of Boyhood," 614.

including minstrel shows and racist language, arguing "bigotry was commonplace among character builders."[27] Additionally, within my own research, I have identified similar language in a 1921 Girl Reserve book where club leaders encouraged girls to "have gingerbread and tea or lemonade, served by a colored mammy."[28] There was an urgency, then, by African-American reformers, both in these organizations and outside of them, to articulate a strong ethos of character for their youth, in order to show the ways that their children aligned with the mission of contributing to the United States while still building their self-esteem by highlighting their racial identity.

The language taken up by the mental hygiene movement allowed white researchers and educators to define ideal white and male female adolescence. Mental hygiene could, for black reformers, be used as a way to also define the characteristics of ideal black female adolescence. By also defining normal adolescence, they could also shape the essential characteristics needed for the positive mental and moral development of African-American girls.

An uneven terrain located African-Americans outside of mainstream mental hygiene work, causing black reformers to develop their own strategies by working with community groups and dispersing information in the black press. A national mental hygiene organization for African-Americans did not form until 1939. The organization's demands addressed the need for curative and preventative treatment**.** However, as Gabriel Mendes suggests, the organization was short lived and left no material evidence of

---

[27] Macleod, *Building Character,* 212.
[28] National Board of the Young Women's Christian Association, *The Girl Reserve Movement: A Manual for Advisors*, 1921, 165.

success of any of their demands. [29] Even major cities with substantial black populations offered few avenues of care. A Harlem clinic specifically geared towards the needs of black children and youth in New York did not arrive until 1946.[30] Historically black colleges and universities also faced a shortage of mental hygiene instruction.[31] For African-Americans, the unavailability of mental health care emphasized the disparities found in healthcare within the United States. While there was a clear need for more hospitals and community health centers for African-Americans, there was especially a dearth of mental health care resources. Instead, mental hygiene methods that sought to improve well-being, such as building character, often operated as African-American communities' only recourse.

The stigma associated with mental illness also impacted African-American communities' relationship to mental hygiene. Mental hygienists assured people that previously held notions of mental health as a marker of "wickedness" were incorrect.[32] Mental illness could reflect an association with deviant behavior, a category that black communities wanted to avoid at great lengths. A fear of being associated with aberrant behavior contributed to a discomfort with mental hygiene work. While researchers attempted to dispel the relationship between "wickedness" and mental health, stigma,

---

[29] Gabriel N. Mendes, *Under the Strain of Color: Harlem's Lafargue Clinic and the Promise of an Antiracist Psychiatry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 97. Also, see Anne C. Rose, *Psychology and Selfhood in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Martin Summers "Diagnosing the Ailments of Black Citizenship," in *Precarious Prescriptions: Contested Histories of Race and Health in North America* eds. Green, Laurie B. Green, John McKiernan-González, and Martin Summers (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2014).

[30] Dennis Doyle, "'A Fine New Child': The Lafargue Mental Hygiene Clinic and Harlem's African American Communities, 1946–1958," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 64, no. 2 (2008): 173-212.

[31] Paul B. Cornely, "Health Education Programs in Negro Colleges," *Journal of Negro Education* (1937): 568.

[32] Frankwood Williams, *Mental Hygiene: An Attempt at a Definition*, 1927, 11. Collections at Historical Medical Library, College of Physicians, Philadelphia.

combined with an awareness of the pathologizing of the black body by doctors and scientists, contributed to a mistrust of the medical complex and a reticence to seek treatment. Instead, black communities turned inward and developed theories around race and mental health.

Fueled by a moral panic around cities and newly arrived migrants, the urban space was imagined as a site that could potentially affect African-American adolescents' bodies and minds.

Some African-American researchers feared that the city could affect the mental well-being of citizens—as well as increase delinquency. Alan P. Smith, the author of "Mental Hygiene and The American Negro" (1931) argued that environmental factors could affect one's mental state.[33] In Smith's assessment, the urban space could heighten mental distress for city dwellers. Citing the role of the Great Migration, Smith addressed its potential impact on the internal state of African-Americans. The combination of a new environment, new modes of living, and an increased population could have detrimental effects.

African-American girls' groups also addressed the role of the environment on the mental and emotional health of their young members. During the New Negro Era, reformers worried about the impact of modernity on the current generation of girls and hoped that they could help girls adjust to a rapidly changing urban society. In the *Girls Guide,* author Sallie Stewart admitted that while, "physically we have kept in touch with the new inventions and have grown familiar with the countless scientific improvements,

[33] Alan P. Smith, "Mental Hygiene and the American Negro," *Journal of the National Medical Association* 23, no. 1 (1931): 1-10.

but mentally and emotionally, we have not become orientated to the new environment."[34] Stewart hoped that the manual could help girls build the mental and emotional skills to navigate their new environment as well as potentially avoid delinquent behavior.

A fear of delinquency also permeated Smith's work. He pathologized urban spaces and issued a harsh diatribe to them by calling certain cities "Negro ghettos." He also articulated his disapproval towards youth in cities who failed to respect "obedience or authority."[35]Smith's words highlighted the attitudes contained by middle-class African-Americans worried about the behavior and actions of working-class urban dwellers. As Hazel Carby notes, black reformers often connected the sexual behavior of women to their character.[36] His interpretation of urban space also paralleled the concerns of William Jones who in *Recreation and Amusement among Negroes in D.C.* stated that the city had a direct correlation to a person's character. He noted that spaces, such as the dance hall, could contribute to "character disorganization."[37] Linking character and respectability, black reformers reminded girls to pursue spaces and activities that could keep their minds and bodies morally pure.

African-American researchers also argued that racism affected the mental state of youth. During the 1930s, the American Youth Commission promoted research that centered the experiences of young people in the United States. In 1936, the American Youth Commission supported studies on the effects of "racial prejudice on African-

---

[34] Stewart, *Girls Guide,* 64.
[35] Smith, "Mental Hygiene and the American Negro," 1-10.
[36] Hazel V. Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (1992): 738-755.
[37] William Henry Jones, *Recreation and Amusement among Negroes in Washington, DC: A Sociological Analysis of the Negro in an Urban Environment* (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1927), 121.

American youth."[38] Works included *Negro Youth at the Crossways: Their Personality Development of Youth in the Middle States* (1940) by E. Franklin Frazier, in which he argued that social stratification in Washington D.C., as well as Louisville, Kentucky, contributed to black youth's personal development as they negotiated different spheres. He stated: "not only must they fit into the social and cultural world of the Negro, but they must also adjust themselves to the pattern of racial relationships which characterize this area."[39] For African-American girls, these experiences could affect their psyche as they navigated intraracial and interracial spaces.

However, unlike their white counterparts, African-American girls also needed to navigate racism during adolescence, themes raised by researchers during the 1920s and the 1930s. Unfortunately, racism was part of a "normal" adolescence for African-American girls. Scholars have examined African-American girls and their voices in the AYC. LaKisha Simmons notes how girls articulated the inequalities they faced, specially how "segregation constrained opportunities for black advancement."[40] As the American Youth Commission argued, African-American youth faced racial inequalities that affected their mental wellbeing. The role of black mental hygiene work did not require ignoring these realities, but it did position youth as personally responsible for overcoming them.

---

[38] Laila Haidarali, *Brown Beauty: Color, Sex, and Race from the Harlem Renaissance to World War II*. (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 226-227. Rebecca de Schweinitz also discusses the AYC in *If We could Change the World: Young People and America's Long Struggle for Racial Equality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 39-42. Marcia Chatelain also includes a discussion of the AYC in *South Side Girls* Marcia Chatelain, *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

[39] Edward Franklin Frazier, *Negro Youth at the Crossways: Their Personality Development in the Middle States* (Washington D.C.: American Council on Education, 1940), 38.

[40] LaKisha Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press Books, 2015), 130.

The development of character served as a way to address the effects of racism. In *Negro Youth at the Crossways,* E. Franklin Frazier noted the strategies that middle-class black parents and youth used to construct a strong sense of self-identity. He argued that middle-class parents built up a sense of "race consciousness and racial pride" within their children.[41]Additionally, he argued that middle class youth also "wish to maintain a certain degree of respectability" as they constructed their identities.[42] However, he also notes how this respectability involved a separation from the working class through displaying characteristics that marked a middle-class status, such as avoiding derogatory language. This work mirrored the sort of classism viewed in other areas of hygiene, such as social hygiene and the separation of social classes in dance spaces.

Scholars such as Stephanie Shaw have also analyzed the history of character-building within the home. Early twentieth century black parents hoped that the development of positive character could help their daughters secure social, educational, and economic success. [43] Shaw defines character as loyalty, accountability, and responsibility, as well as displaying "good manners." [44] These qualities could provide young black women with the ability to reflect good upbringing as well as "counteract negative stereotypes of African Americans." In addition, families also taught their daughters to value "achievement in *both* public and private spheres."[45] African-American women had to work outside the home and needed to privilege identities as wives and

[41] Frazier, *Negro Youth,* 60.
[42] Frazier, *Negro Youth,* 57.
[43] Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 15.
[44] Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be,* 29.
[45] Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be,* 29.

mothers and identities as workers—a lesson that communities dispensed to adolescent girls.

African-American women who founded schools such as Nannie Burroughs, Mary McCleod Bethune, and Charlotte Hawkins Brown included character education within their curriculum.[46] As Sarah Bair aptly notes, studies of the history of character education tend to ignore African-Americans, especially African-American women. African-American educators prepared girls to survive racism once they left the carefully curated curriculum and environment of their schools by developing a sense of racial pride. However, women such as Charlotte Hawkins Browns also pointed to the role of "good manners" by suggesting that the right kind of behavior could gain favor with whites, a viewpoint critiqued by others, including W.E.B. DuBois.[47] The influence of these educators extended past their schools, as evidenced by their presence in African-American girls' manuals published by the NACG and the Y.W.C.A., which would often include them as models of good character.

The responsibility for teaching character did not solely rest with adults. African-American girls such as Cecelia Anita Hazard also informed others of its importance. In 1928, Hazard wrote a prize-winning essay on character that gained widespread attention in the *Chicago Defender.* As a student at St. Augustine's College in North Carolina, she had also recently won a public speaking contest at her school, making clear the promise of her oratory and literary skills.[48] In her essay in the *Chicago Defender*, Hazard

---

[46] Sarah D. Bair, "The Struggle for Community and Respectability: Black Women School Founders and the Politics of Character Education in the Early Twentieth Century," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 37, no. 4 (2009): 570-599. See also: Iris Carlton-LaNey and Vanessa Hodges, "African American Reformers' Mission: Caring for our Girls and Women," *Affilia* 19, no. 3 (2004): 261-263.
[47] Bair, "The Struggle for Community and Respectability," 585.
[48] "Character Education Essay Wins Contest for Young Southern Student," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), April 14, 1928.

outlined the necessity of character, a value that she believed was essential to her academic and personal life. Hazard's essay was printed prominently, on the top of the second page of the *Defender,* reaching a large segment of readers across the country. Character, she noted, required careful attention to the "inner self, morals, ideals."[49] Defining character as the pursuit of independence, openness to learning, and an active embrace of cheerfulness, her essay echoed widely held understandings of character.

Hazard's essay included not only an explanation of character, but a suggestion regarding where girls could develop a strong sense of self-identity. According to her, "progressive literary, cultural, and social clubs" were instrumental for the development of character."[50] While she does not name these clubs, these could include Young Women's Christian Associations (Y.W.C.A.), Bud Billiken Clubs, or the National Association of Colored Girls (NACG). These clubs identified character as a necessary component for black adolescent girlhood. For example, the National Association of Colored Girls included a motto for members in their manual the *Girls Guide,* which stated:

> "My character is what I am, if not in the eyes of others, then in the eyes of my own conscience. Good thoughts in my mind will keep out bad thoughts. When I am busy doing good I shall have no time to do evil. I can build my character by training myself in good habits."

African-American girls' clubs provided physical and intellectual "spaces"—through literary manuals—for their members to work on character development collectively. By centering the role of organizations, Hazard's words emphasized the value of collective spaces in which girls could form intergenerational connections with African-

---

[49] "Character Education Essay Wins Contest for Young Southern Student," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), April 14, 1928.
[50] "Character Education Essay Wins Contest for Young Southern Student," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), April 14, 1928.

American women. The national natures of these organizations also allowed these messages to be dispersed to a wide range of girls. Texts produced by the Y.W.C.A. and the NACG as well as messages circulated within *Chicago Defender,* hoped to develop a sense of positive character for African-American youth. By constructing the normal and well-adjusted black female adolescent girl, texts addressed to African-American girls detailed the relationship between positive character development and racial consciousness.

As scholars have noted, periodicals such as *The Brownies' Book* helped facilitate this goal by providing young readers with examples of influential African-Americans, publishing fiction about black children, and spotlighting the accomplishments of young African-Americans.[51] While developing a positive racial identity remained a key goal of African-American girls' character education, texts also encouraged girls to view themselves as part of a national identity. As Katherine Capshaw argues, the work of New Negro children's literature in the late 1930s and early 1940s hoped to "combat prejudice by asserting black children's American character."[52] Additionally scholars such as Anne Carroll Elizabeth have also noted how New Negro writers and artists argued that their contributions to American arts and culture had, in fact, marked them as American.[53] Character-building encouraged girls to define themselves through the lens of racial and national identity, as both African-American and American girls.

---

[51] Katharine Capshaw, *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (Champaign: Indiana University Press, 2004), 25-52. For other work on children's race and literature during the 1920s and the 1930s, see: Rudine Sims Bishop, *Free Within Ourselves: The Development of African-American Children's Literature* (Portsmouth: Reed Elsevier Inc), 21-43; Violet J. Harris, "Race Consciousness, Refinement, and Radicalism: Socialization in The Brownies' Book," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1989): 192-196.

[52] Smith, *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance*, 166.

[53] Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 122-155.

Advice read by African-American girls on character emphasized the importance of adolescence to future happiness and success in life. Directed at African-American girls, *Pudge Grows Up* (1933) by Frances Williams and Wenonah Bond Logan combined advice on beauty with character-building. The title's focus on "growing up" centers on the role of adolescence as the text functions as a way to help girls develop into women. The manual is narrated by Cousin Sue, a young adult woman who provides advice to her cousin Pudge, who symbolizes the imagined girl reader, in the form of guidance and activities. The manual assured the reader that they could view Cousin Sue as a guide to help them transition to adulthood, while identifying the importance of internal characteristics such as intelligence, punctuality, and race consciousness.[54]

Character-building for African-American girls cited the importance of values such as racial pride, respectability and civic duty, values embraced by members of the National Association of Colored Girls. The ways to achieve the correct character emerged in the motto of the NACG: "Honor God, Cultivate My Mind, Keep My Body Healthy, and Lift My Race as I Climb."[55] Borrowing from the official motto of the NACW "Lift My Race As I Climb," the words reminded girls that their paths were intertwined with that of their senior organization and with their race.**[56]** The ideologies of racial uplift embedded in the mottos also directed middle-class African-American girls and women to uplift their working-class sisters, an implication that also suggested the classed undertones of character instruction.

---

[54] Frances Harriett Williams and Wenonah Bond Logan, *Pudge Grows Up,* 1936, Box 568, Folder 17, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.
[55] Stewart, *Girls Guide,* 40.
[56] Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1999), 69-70.

Girls could also access character-building within co-educational organizations. African-American girls not only read the *Chicago Defender* but also were encouraged to join the children's club associated with the newspaper, the Bud Billiken Club. Bud Billiken, a fictional character authored by various writers during the tenure of the column, found a place as a spokesperson for the children's pages, also known as the *Defender Junior.* Billiken also became a symbol for the national readership of the *Chicago Defender* and was associated with events that drew tens of thousands of spectators such as the Bud Billiken Picnic and Parade. Membership in the club functioned in two ways: girls could join an abstract community of readers, defining their membership by reading articles and writing letters to the *Chicago Defender's* Junior Pages. As Paige Marie Gray notes in her survey of the *Defender Junior*, the voice of the child remained key. Bud Billiken, the fictional child-editor, would provide messages or advice to young readers. However, most of the content came from children's letters.[57] Girls could also join physical Bud Billiken Club chapters, which were located all over the country. The Bud Billiken Club, through its emphasis on collective character building, affirmed the role of the black press in uplifting African-American children's racial identity.

However, the *Chicago Defender* also suggested a difference in character-building for boys and girls. For example, a 1923 *Chicago Defender* article titled "Character

[57] Paige Gray, *Cub Reporters: American Children's Literature and Journalism in the Golden Age* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019), 108-207. Gray's analysis primarily examines children's poetry in the children's pages and their role in facilitating creative expression and attitudes towards race and gender. While she emphasizes the importance of *Defender Junior's* array of children's letters from different geographic regions, I argue that the *Defender* also did enact a project that, while attuned to local places, concerned itself with developing a national identity. In addition, while Gray analyzes the Bud Billiken Club as a space within the newspaper, I also expand upon the role of physical Billiken clubs that African-American girls belonged to.

Building" noted that "if the boy is perfect in moral character, the perfect morality of the girl is assured."[58] The article, which encouraged boys to join the Boy Scouts, pointed to organizations as key areas to develop character. However, this denied African-American girls the agency to construct their own character. Instead, the writer insinuated that girls lacked the control and moral fortitude to construct their own character.

By the 1930s, the *Chicago Defender* embraced co-educational forms of character-building as Bud Billiken addressed his messages to both boys and girls. While African-American girls and boys still participated in separate social organizations, like the Y.W.C.A. and the Y.M.C.A., the *Chicago Defender's* project of addressing them as a collective noted the salience of the category of race, particularly due to the growing role of youth in the fight for "civil and political rights" during the 1930s.[59] In 1935, Bud Billiken instructed readers to do the following: "Abide in the faith of race consciousness. Teach and live the thought that you belong to one of the greatest races on earth. That it is an honor to be a black boy or a black girl."[60] In order to boost self-esteem and racial pride for readers, the advice given by Bud Billiken put positive racial identity at the center of character-building for African American youth.

Self-Determination

In order to define a normal adolescence, black reformers encouraged girls to build qualities that could properly reflect an ideal and well-adjusted girl. Self-determination

---

[58] Character Building," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), May 26, 1923.
[59] Rebecca De Schweinitz, *If We Could Change the World: Young People and America's Long Struggle for Racial Equality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 2.
[60] "Bud Urges Billikens to Make 1936 Banner Year," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), December 28, 1935.

proved an essential component for character. Central to self-determination included governing and regulating the individual self. In 1940, the Y.W.C.A. of Southwest Belmont in Philadelphia asserted that organizations, especially their own, possessed the responsibility to aid in the character development of girls. Staff noted that girls' organizations could help with "forming right attitudes" as well as "developing a sense of purpose," qualities that individual girls could nurture within group settings.[61] Y.W.C.A. leaders hoped that self-determination could help girls develop a positive attitude. Additionally, it could also provide them with the tools to navigate racism in their lives.

Articles in the *Chicago Defender* encouraged their readers to focus on developing a sense of determination. Dr. Alex Hershfield, a contributing physician to the *Chicago Defender* argued for the importance of mental hygiene, not only as a necessary part of health care, but also as a way to develop positive attributes and resilient attitudes. In 1928, Hershfield directed readers to connect mental hygiene to self-mastery especially regarding "impulses, desires, moods, and emotions." In achieving this self-control, the author assured readers that they could "adapt to social and economic conditions."[62] This type of message deviated from the rhetoric in the mainstream white mental hygiene movement. Instead, his message targeted the negative lived experiences of his black readers, who faced segregation, inequality, and poverty.

His words acknowledged the socio-economic factors in the lives of readers of the *Chicago Defender*—an acknowledgement that would come to shape African-American girls' mental hygiene instruction. In order to fight against oppression and succeed in life,

---

[61] **"**Minutes of Junior Activities Committee," 1940, Box 4, Folder 46, YWCA Southwest Belmont, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University.
[62] "Practice Mental Hygiene to Control Impulses," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), July 28. 1928.

African-Americans reading the *Chicago Defender* were instructed to maintain a sense of self control. By drawing a connection between mental wellbeing and social and economic conditions, the *Defender* believed that a strong sense of self-determination could serve as a buffer against the effects of racism and lead to greater fulfillment. However, self-control was not enough.

Readers were also instructed to make concerted efforts towards achieving and demonstrating a positive mindset. Hershfield stated: "to meet life with smiles is the ultimate object of mental hygiene."[63] Self-determination could help build a positive mentality. Hershfield argued that "a normal mind backed by hope and courage masters every condition, no matter how hopeless it may seem."[64] Readers of his column received the message that preserving one's mental health could equip them with the skills to emotionally navigate their daily lives. His words, written in 1928**,** a time in which many African-Americans living under Jim Crow perhaps did feel hopeless, imagined mental hygiene as a site of resilience and uplift.

The *Girls Guide* mirrored this advice. In order to construct an ideal mental attitude, the manual included a "moral code" for girls to follow. The girls were instructed to abide by the following: "If I Want to Be a Happy and Useful Citizen, I must:" followed by a list of actions that addressed values of honesty, cleanliness, and intellect. The words "happy" and "useful" suggested that African-American girls were expected to still display positive attitudes, even as they argued for the rights citizenship should

---

[63] "Meet Life With Smiles, Object of Mental Hygiene," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), October 20, 1928.
[64] "Meet Life With Smiles, Object of Mental Hygiene," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), October 20, 1928.

guarantee.[65] Girls were encouraged to remember that "I must be brave enough and strong enough to control what I think, and what I say and what I do, and I must always be hopeful because hope is power for improvement."[66]

By emphasizing the role of hope and self-improvement, girls were directed to use individual actions to survive against racism, echoing the advice of Dr. Hershfield in the *Chicago Defender.* However, this push towards self-determination was also about finding ways to not only survive the mental toll of racism, but also find ways towards achieving goals in the face of insurmountable obstacles. As scholars have noted, a sense of self-determination was critical to the work of the National Association of Colored Women. [67] By centering on achievements, the National Association of Colored Girls also encouraged girls to pursue success that could allow them to uplift themselves, as well as use their actions to uplift others.

However, this embrace of self-determination could also minimize the role of inequities. In 1936, the *Chicago Defender,* the paper spotlighted Corine Gordon, a teenage girl who was also a member of the Bud Billiken Club. Gordon had recently moved to Chicago from Mississippi in order to pursue a better education. The paper applauded her for her work ethic, as she primarily devoted time to her studies while avoiding nightlife. As a result of her work, she achieved high marks and graduated high school early. Gordon reminded readers "poverty, color, and texture of the hair have nothing to do with it, if you are determined to rise let no one pull you down."[68] Gordon's

---

[65] Stewart, *Girls Guide, 41.*
[66] Stewart, *Girls Guide, 41.*
[67] White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994*, 69-70 and Cooper, Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 33-55.
[68] "How the Defender helped Dixie Girl Get an Education" *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), October 10, 1936.

story illuminates the tensions within self-determination and character-building. While it could serve as a useful buffer against racism, it also engaged in the same type of rhetoric that the white middle class could use to deny inequalities. Self-determination could be both uplifting and still emphasize an individualist mentality that ignored the racism within the lives of African-Americans.

Middle-class African-Americans who believed that they had succeed on their own accord could deploy the argument of self-determination and racial uplift. Gordon, who embraced this ideology, could be viewed as the type of ideal normal adolescent who succeeded due to her own willpower. However, in order to build a strong sense of self-esteem character building texts also emphasized the role of racial pride. These arguments did not necessarily negate each other. One could embrace one's racial identity and still strongly believe in the values of self-determination. Varied individualist and collectivist messages about black social progress emerged within character-building texts, while still articulating the importance of racial pride.

Racial Pride

Manuals and literature directed at girls referred to the actions of African-Americans who had come before them in order to include lessons on racial pride within character building. In fact, E. Franklin Frazier realized the significance of these lessons in his studies of African-American youth in *Negro Youth at the Crossways.* He noted how "children of the middle class are better acquainted with the achievements of Negroes and have more knowledge of outstanding leaders," a process in which parents believed could

craft "a sense of personal dignity."[69] Girls were taught to envision themselves as interconnected with past struggles and achievements of African-Americans, especially African-American women who came before them. If the purpose of character was to inspire the correct forms of conduct, reformers believed girls needed to learn about the accomplishments of African-American women. Through the process of teaching history as well as the contemporary achievements of African-American women, character building could instill a sense of positive racial identity as well as help girls argue for access to the category of full citizenship.

During the New Negro Era, African-American writers and educators addressed children and adolescents through historical work. As Katherine Capshaw argues, African-American children's pageants countered the inaccuracies regarding depictions of black history that students faced in their textbooks.[70] Rather than viewing their history as either non-existent or aligned with racist tropes that evoked characteristics of "primitive" or "savage" life, African-American authored plays attempted to rectify the types of curriculum dispensed to youth. However, as Capshaw notes, these historical pageants also tried to "protect children from the trauma of black historical memory" by avoiding explicit discussions of racism and slavery.[71] The fear of traumatizing black children suggested that narratives of the past could directly influence mental well-being. However, as I examine, works directed at African-American adolescents did not necessarily shy away from these discussions, using the examples of those who had challenged racism as key models of ideal character.

---

[69] Frazier, *Negro Youth,* 60.
[70] Smith, *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance*, 83-106.
[71] Smith, *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance, 92.*

Adults dispelled racist interpretations of black history by highlighting and uplifting accomplishments in order to bolster the self-esteem of youth. The establishment of Negro History Week in 1926 illustrated the power of historical narratives and its relationship to young people's identity.[72] Created by Carter B. Woodson, a professor at Howard University**,** Negro History Week hoped to teach young African-Americans about their past in order to combat assumptions that African-Americans had not contributed to the nation. He was also acutely aware that, without intervention "all credit for human achievements will be ascribed to one particular stock," referring to white Americans.[73] Woodson argued that white-authored history encouraged a view of black inferiority and addressed the need to teach African-American history in order to correct this injustice.

Woodson also viewed age as an important category of analysis in the formation of Negro History Week. He feared that by not teaching the history, one could remain in a childlike state. Woodson argued that "not to know what one's race has done in former times is to continue always a child."[74] Cognizant of the racism that constructed Africans-Americans as child-like, Woodson believed that a deep knowledge of history could combat this stereotype. In order to progress from childhood to adulthood, Woodson pointed to history as a necessary part of collective identity formation. However, the child also remained a critical subject for instruction during Negro History Week. The malleable child was viewed as an ideal student for learning about historical information. History served as a way to differentiate one's self from the figure of the child as well as a way to

---

[72] For scholarship on Woodson, see: LaGarrett King, Ryan M. Crowley, and Anthony L. Brown, "The Forgotten Legacy of Carter G. Woodson: Contributions to Multicultural Social Studies and African American History," *The Social Studies* 101, no. 5 (2010): 211-215 and Jarvis Givens "'There Would Be No Lynching If It Did Not Start in the Schoolroom:' Carter G. Woodson and the Occasion of Negro History Week, 1926–1950," *American Educational Research Journal* 56, no. 4 (2019): 1457-1494.
[73] Carter G. Woodson, "Negro History Week," *The Journal of Negro History* 11, no. 2 (1926): 240.
[74] Carter G. Woodson, "Negro History Week," *The Journal of Negro History* 11, no. 2 (1926): 239.

build up a child's self-esteem. By incorporating lessons on history, African-American girls' character education incorporated a strong sense of racial consciousness and pride.

African-American youth themselves also noted the importance of these figures. E. Franklin Frazier noted that "Negro youth…are inspired with hope by Negroes who have surmounted handicaps of poverty and race and achieved some distinction in the white as well as Negro world."[75] According to Frazier, youth cited Booker T. Washington, Mary Bethune, George Washington Carver, and Joe Louis as historical and contemporary influences.[76] Additionally, by viewing adults as role models and aligning their character after them, youth could "develop confidence in their own possibilities."[77] Researchers and writers identified the significant actions of historical and contemporary African-American adults as ways to build racial pride as a component of character.

In order to teach youth about history, African-Americans authored their own books. Texts such as *Colored Girls' and Boys' Inspiring United States History* (1921) advised its young readers to develop racial consciousness through learning about African-American history. The author William Henry Harrison acknowledged that he was "Race pridely hurt" when he realized the lack of African-Americans in American history texts and resolved to fix this for black youth.[78] The exclusion of African-American history was not just a matter of a flaw in educational instruction; there were also ramifications for black children's self-esteem. In *Colored Girls' and Boys',* Harrison provided young

---

[75] Frazier, *Negro Youth, 94*.
[76] Frazier, *Negro Youth,* 183.
[77] Frazier, *Negro Youth, 94*.
[78] William Henry Harrison, *Colored Girls' and Boys' Inspiring United States History: And a Heart to Heart Talk about White Folks* (Allentown: Searle & Dressler Company, Incorporated, 1921), 5.

readers with examples of black politicians, scientists, poets, and artists in order to trace historical and contemporary African-American achievements.

However, *Colored Girls' and Boys' Inspiring United States History* often focused on the accomplishments of men. While women are mentioned and heralded within his text, coverage of men greatly outweighed that of women. In attempting to build racial pride, African-American girls found alternate avenues to pursue character education. While still noting the accomplishments of African-American men, African-American girls' manuals centered the experiences of African-American women in order to provide readers with models of character that reflected their race and gender.

History emerged as a salve to encourage African-American girls to build their character and boost their self-esteem by recognizing past accomplishments of black citizens in the United States. In order to bolster their racial pride, readers of African-American girls' manuals were encouraged to research, learn, and articulate the contributions, struggles, and successes of others. In *Pudge Grows Up,* a section aptly titled "Racial Heritage" centers the role of historical figures and racial identity formation. *Pudge Grows Up* reminds young black women that they had not "sprung up…from Mother Nature."[79] Instead, girls were to learn and understand the long history of African-Americans in the United States. The manual directed girls to understand their history by identifying six influential African-Americans: at least three who lived during slavery and three who lived during reconstruction. The manual insists on mapping a long genealogy of black progress and argues for the recognition of black contributions to the United States during slavery and reconstruction.

---

[79] Frances Harriett Williams and Wenonah Bond Logan, *Pudge Grows Up,* 1936, 13, Box 568, Folder 17, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.

By tying their character to women who lived during slavery and reconstruction, *Pudge Grows Up* acknowledged the historical significance between these two periods. This type of instruction also ran counter to the need to shield children from discussions of slavery or racism. Instead, adolescents who were viewed as possibly mentally more equipped to handle this type of inquiry could examine the lives of those who lived during enslavement and, as the narrator described, the "hectic, trying, and thrilling days" of Reconstruction.[80] By addressing the ways in which African-Americans fought against a terrible and inhumane system of slavery and the Black Codes of Reconstruction, as well as naming African-Americans who lived during this period, girls were taught that their identities were connected to survival and social activism.

Girls' character-building during the New Negro Era also rested on the collective work of historical actors. Those reading *Pudge Grows Up* were prompted to reflect upon the following question regarding the history of African-Americans in the United States: "What have they made possible for us?"[81] The question does not merely require girls to recover the names and deeds of historical figures. Instead, the question prompts girls to participate in a deep exploration of the effect of historical accomplishments in their own lives. The question of possibility, especially in regarding to historical memory, allowed girls to envision their current paths are intertwined with the actions of women in the past.

Girls in literary novels during the New Negro Era also connected their character with the lives of historical African-American women. In *There Is Confusion,* a 1924 novel by Jessie Fauset, the protagonist Joanna Marshall is painted as a determined, fierce,

---

[80] Frances Harriett Williams and Wenonah Bond Logan, *Pudge Grows Up,* 1936, 13 Box 568, Folder 17, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.
[81] Frances Harriett Williams and Wenonah Bond Logan, *Pudge Grows Up,* 1936, 13 Box 568, Folder 17, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.

and ambitious young women living in New York City. Throughout the course of the novel, Joanna's sense of character defines her as she moves from girlhood to adulthood. Not only restricted to manuals from girls' organizations, certain examples of New Negro literature also focused the relationship between character-building and racial consciousness.

In order to craft a strong self-identity, *There is Confusion* argues for the need to develop one's racial identity. As a child, one night before bed, Joanna asks her father: "Didn't colored people ever do anything, Daddy?"[82] Her question, suggesting the lack of African-American history taught in school, hints at the themes that Negro History Week was founded upon. Listing women such as Harriet Tubman, Phyllis Wheatly, and Sojourner Truth, her father presents Joanna with names of people she could draw upon for inspiration. His use of African-American history serves as a vehicle to promote a strong and assured sense of self-confidence within his daughter.

After listening to her father, Joanna proclaims to herself: "I can't be great like those wonderful women, Harriet and Sojourner, but at least I won't be ordinary."[83] The exchange between Joanna and her father, which occurs at the beginning of the novel, draws upon historical figures in order to establish the importance of intergenerational work. New Negro Girls such as Joanna referred to the actions of women such as Tubman, Wheatly, and Truth in order to build their racial pride and aspire towards identities that rejected the label of "ordinary." The discussion between Joanna and her father symbolized the work of character-building manuals directed at African-American girls that urged readers to view their lives and those of their foremothers as interconnected.

---

[82] Jessie Fauset, *There is Confusion,* 1924. Reprint. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), 14.
[83] Jessie Fauset, *There is Confusion,* 14.

The names of historic African-American women also provided the foundation for the formation of groups within girls' organizations. Understanding the character of club women did not merely come from rote memorization. Instead, the *Girls Guide* insisted on the embodied practice of memory. Girls organized themselves in groups that bore the names of black clubwomen from the past. The first several letters of each of these women's names formed the basis of the groups:

Mary Church Terrell and Josephine Silone Yates =Marjos

Margaret Murry Washington and Mary B. Talber = Marymays.

Halle Q. Brown and Mary McLeod Bethune = Halmars.

Lucy Thurman and Elizabeth Carter Brooks=Lucels.[84]

In organizing themselves based on the figures and ideals of black women who reflected self-determination and community activism, girls created relational connections with a long legacy of historical women. The process of naming allowed girls to view their bodies, and the actions performed as a group, as interconnected with women such as Mary Church Terrell and Margaret Murry Washington. The clever naming-technique also connected the women to each other. Girls learned that while women such as Halle Q. Brown and Mary McLeod Bethune may have pursued different forms of advocacy, their work still encompassed a common goal to uplift African-Americans.

Manuals also instructed African-American girls to recognize black women's intellectual and civic contributions as banded together with their own individual and collective identities. [85] The *Girls Guide* compelled girls to view the lives of clubwomen

[84] Stewart, *Girls Guide,* 14.
[85] Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 11-31.

as significant to their own personal development. By commemorating women such as Mary Church Terrell and Mary McLeod Bethune, girls could feel pride in figures who displayed character. This process of recognizing historical models encouraged girls to mirror characteristics of clubwomen who represented respectability, leadership, and racial pride.

African-American girls' character-building also pointed to the lives of influential clubwomen as essential to the United States. Girls reading the *Girls Guide* were told to "Acclaim the women of your race as among the grandest figures of the twentieth century."[86] By claiming that black women were some of the "grandest figures of the twentieth century," the actions and accomplishments of African-American women were viewed as essential contributions to the nation. This type of character-building argued that African-American girls were American girls, whose foremothers and fathers played an instrumental part in the history of the United States.

Character-building for African-American girls not only relied upon recognizing historical achievements. Contemporary achievements of African-Americans also helped girls develop their racial identity. In order to display African-American achievements, African-American girls' manuals encouraged girls to construct a scrapbook. Girls' scrapbooking represented an ideal character-building activity as the *Girls Guide* compelled its readers to "make and keep a scrapbook that will mirror your character."[87] While the *Girls Guide* does not state what materials readers should place in their scrapbook, *Pudge Grows Up* provides concrete directions. Girls reading *Pudge Grows*

[86] Stewart, *Girls Guide,* 6.
[87] Stewart, *Girls Guide,* 16.

Up created a scrapbook based on influential African-Americans in the following fields: "educators, social workers, politicians, athletes, social reformers, artists, and scientists."[88]

Character-building activities such scrapbooking provided a visual assemblage of black achievement for African-American girls. As Jasmine Nichole Cobb notes in her study of African-American women's friendship albums, scrapbooks also encouraged the display of the "optics of respectability."[89] By researching images of respectable and influential African-Americans, girls used visual culture to identify models of characters. Through the process of collectively creating a scrapbook with other participants, African-American girls drew upon the actions of those who impacted a variety of academic and professional fields. As a visual form of racial uplift, African-American girls' scrapbooks, it was hoped, would inspire girls to achieve their own accomplishments.

In order to construct their scrapbooks, girls relied upon African-American newspapers for materials. *Pudge Grows Up* instructed girls to research possible "outstanding living American Negroes" in the black press and add those clippings to their scrapbooks. Through this process, the black press emerges as a crucial source that could feed their social growth and character development. Newspapers such as *Chicago Defender* served as one of the few places girls could read about the achievements of African-Americans on a daily basis.

Girls' actions in local clubs mirrored the advice given by *Pudge Grows Up.* In 1937, girls at a Y.W.C.A. club in Winston-Salem, North Carolina composed a scrapbook on "Negro Achievement." Girls used black newspapers and magazines as well as *Time*

---

[88] Frances Harriett Williams and Wenonah Bond Logan, *Pudge Grows Up,* 1936, 12, Box 568, Folder 17, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.
[89] Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century*. (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 77-80.

magazine and *The New York Times* to create their own display of images that included celebrities, historical figures, athletes, artists, and politicians. As a recognition of the club's accomplishment, the Y.W.C.A.'s National Committee on Colored Work sent additional magazines to the girls so they could continue scrapbooking. Girls expressed satisfaction with their endeavor and wrote to Frances Williams, author of *Pudge Grows Up*: "We are proud of what we have done and realize that it has helped us become more familiar with the race."[90] The scrapbooks symbolized both the sense of accomplishment girls felt as well as the scrapbook's role in constructing an archive of African-American achievement.

The scrapbooks also built upon arguments regarding the role of citizenship within the formation of African-American girls' character education. As Ellen Garvey argues, African-American adults used scrapbooks in the nineteenth century to document their achievements and note their fitness for citizenship.[91] While she briefly addresses the work of the *Chicago Defender* in encouraging youth to make scrapbooks through the lens of celebrating achievements, I extend her argument by noting that children used scrapbooks to also access claims to full citizenship. By asserting that lives of contemporary black citizens added to the success of the nation, scrapbooks served as material evidence that documented their achievements and progress. Scrapbooks also could help define African-American girls as *American* girls. If African-American girls could argue that their foremothers, as well as contemporary figures, had contributed to

[90] Frances Williams, "Techniques in Race Relations," Box 537, Folder 2, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.
[91] Ellen Gruber Garvey, *Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 131-171.

the United States, it could not only bolster their character, but their claims to the rights of citizenship too.

Citizenship

Character-building for African-American girls encouraged them to assert their rights as citizens as well as demonstrate the qualities necessary to be viewed as exemplary citizens. Citizenship education, often viewed as a part of character education during the 1920s and the 1930s, encouraged youth to view their actions as contributing to the moral good of the nation.[92] Texts encouraged girls to reflect upon the values of citizenship and how they could achieve these qualities. Additionally, African-American girls participated in civic actions, in both clubs and parades, while demonstrating their rights as citizens. In doing so, they displayed their status as New Negro and American girls.

The figure of the future citizen featured prominently within mainstream mental hygiene work. As Theresa Richardson notes, in the 1930s the Rockefeller Foundation devoted a significant amount of funding towards mental hygiene education for youth in order to develop "future adults" who would acclimate easily to "social change."[93] Adults hoped to encourage adolescents to embrace American democracy, centering citizenship within concepts of self-identity. As Rebecca de Schweinitz notes, researchers became

---

[92] Jeremiah E. Burke, "Character Education for Citizenship," *Religious Education* 25, (1930): 223; William L. Hughes, "Character Building and Health: The Role of Physical Education," *The Journal of Health and Physical Education* 7, no. 1 (1936): 9-57; Myrtle L. Wright, "The City of Make Believe: A Project in Character-Building and Citizenship," *The Elementary School Journal* 26, no. 5 (1926): 376-386; For a study on the history of citizenship education, see Tova Cooper, *The Autobiography of Citizenship: Assimilation and Resistance in US Education* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015.

[93] Theresa Richardson, "Rethinking Progressive High School Reform in the 1930s: Youth, Mental Hygiene, and General Education," *American Educational History Journal* 33, no. 1 (2006): 85.

increasingly worried about the denial of rights of citizenship and the effects of racism on black youth during the 1930s and 1940s. Without proper guidance, fears emerged that youth could engage in delinquent or anti-democratic behavior.[94]

African-American girls' manuals acknowledged constraints within the formation of citizenship. The *Girls Guide* noted that for African-American girls, "even when she tries to be a good citizen," racism and segregation, especially within federal and state facilities marked her as a lesser subject. However, even in the face of rampant racism, girls were still expected to maintain a measured response. The manual cautioned girls against the use of anger by warning them to "not seek to obtain positions or privileges by physical force but by persistent mental attitude," combining self-determination with an awareness of the rights of citizenship. [95]

African-American girls themselves also articulated the value of citizenship in the *Chicago Defender*. In 1933, a member of the Bud Billiken Club, Edythe Rodgers of Florida, described citizenship as dependent upon the following practices: "love our country, our flag, and keep the laws of the land." These actions could help "safeguard our health," alluding to the relationship between the self and the body politic of the nation. Rodgers noted that these habits would create "good American citizens."[96] Her description of citizenship could have resembled rhetoric espoused by her white peers. And yet, her words still mark the painful truths of the Jim Crow era. African-American girls still struggled to access the rights of citizenship, even as they named the qualities and participated in the activities necessary to demonstrate it.

---

[94] De Schweinitz, *If We Could Change the World,* 81.
[95] De Schweinitz, *If We Could Change the World,* 20-42.
[96] "Girl Billiken Gives Citizenship Advice," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), October 7. 1933.

Citizenship in African-American girls' character education emerged as a way to claim access to the category of American as well as a way to use civic action to contest racism in the United States. While "the spirit of Billikens" included "devotion to country," the Bud Billiken Club, like others for African-American girls, also tied in citizenship with social action. [97] In 1932, the *Chicago Defender* stated that the Bud Billiken members could "serve as the reserve forces" to fight for "justice and equality for all mankind."[98]African-American girls reading the paper were to build their character in order to help in the larger struggle for civil rights.

The embrace of youth activism in *Chicago Defender* could also be found within other girls' clubs which promoted social and political action. While in New York, the narrator Sue of *Pudge Grows Up* visited the national headquarters of the NAACP and described its significance to readers. Upon learning about the work of the NAACP, girls were encouraged to form a meeting in order to learn about work done within the organization. The manual also directed girls to start a "Junior NAACP within the YWCA."[99]

While it is difficult to know the direct impact of the guidance found in *Pudge Grows Up,* girls at the Y.W.C.A. did engage in forms of activism. In 1935, members at the Y.W.C.A. in Harlem "sent one thousand and fifteen hundred signed letters to the President and to our own congressmen" in support of the Costigan-Wagner Anti-Lynching Bill, a cause also taken up by the NAACP.[100] Through hard work and late

---

[97] "Those Billikens," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), August 20, 1932.
[98] "Those Billikens," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), August 20, 1932.
[99] Frances Harriett Williams and Wenonah Bond Logan, *Pudge Grows Up,* 1936, 15, Box 568, Folder 17, YWCA of the USA, SCSC.
[100] Letter from Mrs. Ernest Alexander to Miss Roelof, 1935, Box 535, Folder 1, YWCA of the USA, Smith Special Collections, SCSC.

hours spent writing letters, young women wrote to elected officials in order to sway their opinions on the bill. Through exercising their civic potential, young African-American women could also point to their roles as citizens who could argue for equal treatment in the United States.

African-American girls also used public parades to also display their citizenship. Not only restricted to social clubs and a newspaper sections, Bud Billiken also included a parade held in the summer of Chicago. Beginning in 1929, the annual Bud Billiken Parade attracted adult and child readers of the *Chicago Defender* from across the country. Elizabeth Gagen examines how parades for immigrant youth connected their bodies to displays of nationality while erasing their ethnic heritage during the turn of the century. [101] However, the Bud Billiken Parade encouraged a display of both their racial and national identities.

During the parades, large numbers of children marched down the streets as adults observed. Girls' organizations such as the Y.W.C.A., Girl Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, and National Association of Colored Girls participated in the event in addition to several boys' groups such as the Boy Scouts.[102] In 1931, more than 10,000 children marched in the Bud Billiken parade, some accompanied by their parents. The participants traversed down South Parkway in Chicago in front of a crowd of 35,000. Two years later, the parade drew around 50,000 spectators. The presence of African-American youth marching down the streets awed observers as one remarked: "Never before in the history of Chicago had children between the ages of 4 and 16 stepped out upon the boulevard of

[101] Elizabeth A. Gagen, "Making America Flesh: Physicality and Nationhood in Early Twentieth-Century Physical Education Reform," *Cultural Geographies* 11, no. 4 (2004): 417-442.
[102] "50,000 Hail the Chicago Defender," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), August 26, 1933.

a great city with greater assurance and more exuberance than was shown in that parade."[103] The identification of qualities such as assurance and exuberance illustrated how the parade could equip children with a positive self-identity. African-American girls asserted their presence within the city of Chicago as they demonstrated their connections to character-building organizations such as the Y.W.C.A. and the NACG.

The parade also combined the performance of character with calls for the recognition of their rights as citizens. During the 1931 parade, Robert Abbott founder and editor of the *Chicago Defender*, addressed the crowd of youth and their positions as future leaders, stating: "I am happy to see you youthful and healthy children who are to take on the burdens of the future. You are the foundations of and represent what the race is to be tomorrow."[104] As they marched down the city streets, girls were invited, along with their male peers, to become part of a project of advancing the goals of equality for African-Americans in the United States. The healthy bodies of youth, combined with their character, posited them as ideal figures of progress who were also well-suited to advocate for the rights of those in their community.

In order to fully represent the race, Abbott informed youth marching in the parade of their rights as citizens. Abbott declared that: "As citizens, you should fight for your place to live and for a voice in the government…fight for what is right and for your status in the government as made and guaranteed by the federal and state constitutions of this country." [105] His words, directed at girls and boys in the parade, reminded them of their political duty. Youth were expected to challenge racism within the United States by

---

[103] "50,000 Hail the Chicago Defender," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), August 26, 1933.
[104] "A Message to Youth," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), August 22, 1931.
[105] "A Message to Youth," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), August 22, 1931.

making evident the discrepancies between practices and constitutional rights to freedom and liberty. Abbott articulated and affirmed the racial and national identities of youth, as they marched down the streets as both New Negros and Americans.

During the Bud Billiken Parade, African-American girls and their male peers received the exact same messages. African-American youth were to view themselves as citizens who were to fight for equal access to the ideals of the nation. As they marched together, girls and boys were to work together in order to build their character and reflect notions of citizenship. When reflecting upon the sight of seeing the youth march down the street an observer remarked: "It saved the race."[106] The observer's quote featured prominently on coverage of the parade shortly after, demonstrating the ways character-building and the visibility of the healthy young bodies worked together as a form of racial uplift.

Conclusion

Black mental hygiene work asserted the importance of crafting a normal black female adolescence. Through character-building, adults directed girls to develop qualities that could aid in the development of a healthy and well-adjusted adolescent. Girls were encouraged to connect their individual identity with collective projects of African-American progress. African-American girls who demonstrated good character by researching historical achievements, marching in cities, and participating in civic actions held the responsibility for the racial uplift of their own communities. Mental hygiene also allowed girls to shape their character to reflect notions of citizenship. African-American

[106] "50,000 Hail the Chicago Defender," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), August 26, 1933.

girls articulated their pride in their racial identity—as well as their position as American girls who were worthy of equal rights and treatment.

Epilogue

In the spring of 1942, African-American girls at the Southwest Belmont Y.W.C.A. in Philadelphia gathered for the association's annual celebration. The health education director, Ann Marquess, expressed her pleasure in the number of girls and women who had gathered to honor the work of the association. The celebration, drawing from an array of different groups at the center, took place in the gymnasium. Before the event, great care had been taken to make sure that the gymnasium was "decorated befitting a patriotic celebration."[1] The United States was currently fighting in World War II and the space of the gymnasium reflected the association's support for their country.

During the celebration, Marquess reported that young women demonstrated the "Hale America 'Keep Fit' exercises."[2] Organized by the United States' Division of Physical Fitness in the Office of Defense, the "Hale America" program encouraged participants to strengthen their bodies for the benefit of the nation. As girls conducted their exercises, they wore a Health Emblem from the Hale America program on their clothing as a marker of commitment. After the performance, a representative for Hale America asked for girls "co-operation and support in their endeavors."[3] Hale America, which preceded the development of the President's Council on Physical Fitness in the

---

[1] Narrative Report for the Health Education Department, 1942, Box 4, Folder 38, YWCA Southwest Belmont, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA.
[2] On Hale America, see Robert H. Coates, "Hale America-The Wealth of a Nation is the Strength of Its People," *Physical Educator* 2, no. 2 (1941): 81-82 and Elizabeth Halsey, "The Role of College Women in War,"*The Journal of Health and Physical Education* 13, no. 5 (1942): 283-314.
[3] Narrative Report for the Health Education Department, 1942, Box 4, Folder 38, YWCA Southwest Belmont, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA.

1950s, symbolized an embrace of stronger rhetoric regarding the physical body, health, and conceptions of American identity and citizenship.[4]

The celebration at the Southwest Belmont Y.W.C.A. symbolized the end of the New Negro Girl. As Davarian Baldwin argues, World War II contributed to the decline of New Negro identity as the United States embraced a "democratic myth of color-blind inclusion."[5] No longer did black reformers encourage girls to display New Negro identities, which clashed with the image of racial harmony that the nation wished to reflect. The United States increasingly espoused the ideals of equality and rights for all, aware that Jim Crow practices may have also illuminated their hypocrisy in the fight against fascism and anti-Semitism. Additionally, during the 1940s, African-Americans were still migrating in mass numbers to escape the violence of the rural South as part of a second wave of the Great Migration.[6] As Baldwin suggests, color-blindness was, in fact, a myth. However, it was a myth that the United States eagerly circulated. Instead, girls were to display their American identities during the early years of the 1940s.

Across the country, African-American girls were now learning to explicitly connect their body to the nation. In 1942, African-American Girl Reserves at a Y.W.C.A. in Chicago attended a lecture on "nutrition and diet," "exercises" and "mental hygiene."[7] These areas of hygiene would have been familiar to most girls at Y.W.C.A.s during the 1920s and the 1930s. However, discussions on beauty and hygiene were absent, perhaps

---

[4] On the work of the history of the fitness council, see Matthew T. and Thomas M. Hunt, "The President's Council on Physical Fitness and the Systematisation of Children's Play in America," *The International Journal of the History of sport* 28, no. 11 (2011): 1496-1511.
[5] Davarian L. Baldwin, and Minkah Makalani, eds. *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance Beyond Harlem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 20.
[6] Marcia Chatelain, *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 13.
[7] "Girl Reserves Study Health at Meeting," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), March 21, 1942.

noting the difficulty in upholding a consumer culture during the rationing of goods during wartime. While the types of hygiene had not drastically changed, their ideologies had taken a new direction. The theme of the lecture "Health for Defense" encouraged girls to view their bodies as symbols of patriotism and nationality. While these messages might not have been new for white youth who had been assured that their health was important to the United States, these messages were certainly new for African-Americans.[8]

Discussions of health and the nation also expanded from smaller clubs to larger public demonstrations. In 1943, about three thousand African-American youth in Washington D.C. participated in a "Victory through Physical Fitness" event. The event, organized by black educators within the District of Columbia's Health, Physical Education, and Recreation Department gathered youth from all over the city, including girls from Armstrong High School, Dunbar High School, Cardozo High School, and Howard University. One of the aims of the event included "to demonstrate the acceptance of the Negro for the promotion of wartime morale."[9] Through health practices, girls demonstrated their capacity to contribute to the United States.

During the event, African-American girls, like their peers at the Southwest Belmont Y.W.C.A., also demonstrated Hale America's Keep Fit Exercises. Additionally, girls at Howard University showcased their "Danish gymnastics," most likely done under the instruction of physical education director Maryrose Allen Reeves who had heralded

---

[8] During the 1918-1919, the Children's Year in the United States declared "The Health of the Nation is the Power of the Nation." However, within this image, only young white children were depicted. Francis Luis Mora and United States Committee On Public Information, Division Of Pictorial Publicity. The Health of the Child is the Power of the Nation (New York: The W. F. Powers Co., 1918), https://www.loc.gov/item/2002719770/.

[9] Clarence Davis, "Washington Demonstrates Physical Fitness," *Journal of Health, Physical Education, Recreation,* 14, no. 9 (1943): 198.

the simple and graceful exercises within her own program.[10] While boys had also participated in the event, the organizers noted that "it became manifest that the rather natural mistake had been made in featuring girls in rhythmic and colorful demonstrations to the partial exclusion of boys."[11]

While possible that it was an unintentional omission, the mistake also illustrated the significance of African-American girls' healthy bodies compared to their male peers. During the 1920s and the 1930s, the healthy bodies of African-American girls symbolized an adherence to respectability, especially through the physical body. African-American girls could demonstrate the ideals of beauty, through active bodies and attention to their hair and skin. African-American boys, who were not encouraged to take up strict beauty routines, could not access this form of racial uplift. Additionally, boys' embrace of physical hygiene and strength may have been seen as threatening to white audiences, who feared black muscularity. While outside the scope of this project, the history of African-American boys' health, which is also woefully understudied, also merits scholarly inquiry.

African-American girls' bodies symbolized visible forms of racial uplift, reflecting the work of the New Negro Era. Messages during the New Negro Era constructed the black female adolescent healthy body through individual and collective types of hygiene work. Through bodily discipline and self-improvement, messages disseminated to African-American girls transformed them into symbols for their own

---

[10] Allen included Danish exercises as one of the physical activities that could improve "health, expression, grace, poise, and strength" in "The Development of Beauty in College Women through Health and Physical Education," 1938, Box 160-4, Folder 4, Maryrose Allen Reeves Papers, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

[11] Clarence Davis, "Washington Demonstrates Physical Fitness," *Journal of Health, Physical Education, Recreation,* 14, no. 9 (1943): 198.

racial and national communities. As they marched in the nation's capital, they reflected the values of American girlhood through blending physical fitness, patriotism, and health.

During "Victory through Physical Fitness," girls sung two songs: The National Anthem, the Star-Spangled Banner, and Lift Every Voice and Sing, the National Negro Anthem. The positioning of these two songs together illustrated the realities behind the lives of girls at the event hosted by health educators in Washington D.C.. The ideals of the National Anthem did not necessarily extend to African-Americans and required the addition of the Negro Anthem. Notions of health still reflected tensions of what it meant to hold both African-American and American identities. While African-American female adolescents were no longer New Negro Girls, they would also soon become Civil Rights Girls, once again using the display of the visible, healthy, and respectable body to claim access to the rights of equality and childhood.

Bibliography

Manuscript Collections

The College of Physicians Medical Library, Philadelphia, PA
Germantown Historical Society, Philadelphia, PA
Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.
    Maryrose Reeves Allen Papers
    Howard University Yearbooks
    Howard University Newspapers
Special Collections Research Center, Smith College, Northampton, MA
    Y.W.C.A. of the USA Records
Special Collections Research Center, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA
    Y.W.C.A. Southwest Belmont Records
Social Welfare Archives at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN

Periodicals

The Brownies' Book
The Chicago Defender
The Crisis
Half-Century Magazine
Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life

Academic Journals (As Primary Sources)

Journal of Social Hygiene
Journal of Negro Education
The Journal of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation

Primary Sources

Black Women Oral History Project. Interviews, 1976-1981. Jessie Abbott. OH-31. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Accessed at https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:RAD.SCHL:10039841.

Booklet for the Junior-Senior Prom 1927, Ambrose Family Papers, Tennessee State Library Virtual Archives, Accessed at https://cdm15138.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/Fisk/id/291.

Du Bois, W.E.B.. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches.* Chicago: A. C. McClurg & co, 1903.

Frazier, Edward Franklin. *Negro Youth at the Crossways: Their Personality Development in the Middle States* Washington D.C.: American Council on Education, 1940.

The Girl Graduate, Her Own Book, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Beatrix Burneston, Accessed at http://collections.si.edu/search/detail/edanmdm:nmaahc_2012.94?q=url%3Aedanmdm%3Anmaahc_2012.94&record=1&hlterm=url%3Aedanmdm%3Anmaahc_2012.94.

Harrison, William Henry. *Colored Girls' and Boys' Inspiring United States History: And a Heart to Heart Talk about White Folks*. Allentown: Searle & Dressler Company, 1921.

Jones, William Henry. *Recreation and Amusement among Negroes in Washington, DC: A Sociological Analysis of the Negro in an Urban Environment*. Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1927.

Locke, Alain. *The New Negro.* New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925, Second Printing 1927.

National Board of the Young Women's Christian Association, *The Girl Reserve Movement: A Manual for Advisors* New York: YWCA of the USA, 1921.

Program Offerings, The Phyllis Wheatley Branch of the Y.W.C.A., 1939. Box 1, Folder 3, Oakland Public Library. Accessed at https://oakland.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/digitalFile_2ead6ac0-6c29-42be-8050-a53845cdff90/.

Rugen, Mabel. "Chapter IX: Physical Hygiene and Health Education." *Review of Educational Research* 10, no. 5 (1940): 464-471.

Stewart, Sallie. *Girls Guide.* Washington D.C.: National Association of Colored Women, 1933.

Smith, Alan P.. "Mental Hygiene and the American Negro." *Journal of the National Medical Association* 23, no. 1 (1931): 1-10.

War Work Council of the National Board of the Young Women's Christian Association, "Camps for Every Girl," *War Work Bulletin,* July 25, 1919.

White, William "Childhood: The Golden Period for Mental Hygiene." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 98, no. 1 (1921): 54-60.

YWCA of the City of New York Newsletter, April 1, 1930. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. Accessed at http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b057-i227.

Secondary Sources

Alexander, Eleanor. *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow: The Tragic Courtship and Marriage of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Alice Ruth Moore*. New York: NYU Press, 2001.

Abate, Michelle Ann. *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008.

Anderson, Daniel. "'The Discipline of Work and Play': WEB Du Bois, the New Negro Intelligentsia, and the Culture of Sports." *Studies in Popular Culture*29, no. 2 (2006): 21-38.

Arnett, Jeffery Jensen. "G. Stanley Hall's Adolescence: Brilliance and Nonsense," *History of Psychology* 9, no. 3 (2006): 186-197.

Azzarito, Laura Petra Munro, and Melinda A. Solmon. "Unsettling the Body: The Institutionalization of Physical Activity at the Turn of the 20th Century," *Quest*56, no. 4 (2004): 377-396.

Baily, Beth. *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

Bair, Sarah D. "The Struggle for Community and Respectability: Black Women School Founders and the Politics of Character Education in the Early Twentieth Century." *Theory & Research in Social Education*37, no. 4 (2009): 570-599.

Baldwin, Davarian. *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance Beyond Harlem.* Edited by Davarian Baldwin and Minkah Makalani. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Baldwin, Davarian. *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, & Black Urban Life.* Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Best, Amy. *Prom Night: Youth, Schools and Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

Brooks, Scott N. and Dexter Blackman. "Introduction: African Americans and the History of Sport—New Perspectives." *The Journal of African American History* 96, no. 4 (2011): 441-447.

Brumberg, Joan *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*. New York: Vintage, 1998.

Bundles, A'Lelia Perry. *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam CJ Walker*. New York: Washington Square Press, 2001.

Cahn, Susan. *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Women's Sport*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015.

Cahn, Susan. "From the 'Muscle Moll' to the 'Butch' Ballplayer: Mannishness, Lesbianism, and Homophobia in US Women's Sport," *Feminist Studies* 19, no. 2 (1993): 343-368.

Cahn, Susan. *Sexual Reckonings*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012.

Capshaw. Katharine *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.

Capshaw, Katherine. "Childhood, the Body, and Race Performance: Early 20th-Century Etiquette Books for Black Children." *African American Review*4 0, no. 4 (2006): 795-811.

Carby, Hazel V. "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context." *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (1992): 738-755.

Carey, Miya. "That Charm of all Girlhood": Black Girlhood and Girls in Washington, DC, 1930-1965." dissertation, Rutgers University, 2018.

Carroll, Anne. *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.

Chaline, Eric. *The Temple of Perfection: A History of the Gym*. London: Reaktion Books, 2015.

Chapman, Erin D. *Prove It on Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular Culture in the 1920s.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Chatelain, Marcia*. South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

Cobb, Jasmine Nichole. *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century*. New York: NYU Press, 2015.

Collins, Patricia. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Cooper, Brittney C. *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women.* Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017.

Cottrell, Debbie Mauldin. “The Sargent School for Physical Education." *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* 65, no. 3 (1994): 32-37.

Couturier, Lynn. “‘Play With Us, Not Against Us’: The Debate About Play Days in the Regulation of Women's Sport.” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 25, no. 4 (2008): 421-442.

Craig, Maxine Leeds Craig. *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2002.

Curwood, Anastasia Carol. *Stormy Weather: Middle-Class African American Marriages Between the Two World Wars*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

DeLuzio, Christa *Female Adolescence in American Scientific Thought, 1830–1930*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2007.

Doyle, Dennis. “‘A Fine New Child’: The Lafargue Mental Hygiene Clinic and Harlem's African American Communities, 1946–1958.” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 64, no. 2 (2008): 173-212.

Elizabeth, Anne. *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.

Fallace, Thomas. “The Savage Origins of Child-Centered Pedagogy, 1871–1913.” *American Educational Research Journal* 52, no. 1 (2015): 73-103.

Farrell, Amy Erdman. *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat body in American Culture*. New York: NYU Press, 2011.

Fass, Paula S. *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Freeman, Susan. *Sex Goes to school: Girls and Sex education before the 1960s*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

Gagen, Elizabeth A. “Making America Flesh: Physicality and Nationhood in Early Twentieth-Century Physical Education Reform.” *Cultural Geographies* 11, no. 4 (2004): 417-442.

Gaines, Kevin K. *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

Gallon, Kim. “Silences Kept: The Absence of Gender and Sexuality in Black Press Historiography.” *History Compass* 10, no. 2 (2012): 207-218.

Ganze, Cheryl R.. *The 1933 Chicago World's Fair: A Century of Progress*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2012.

Garvey, Ellen Gruber. *Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012,

Gill, Tiffany. *Beauty Shop Politics: African-American Women’s Activism in the Beauty Industry.* Champaign: University of Illinois, 2010.

Gray, Paige. “Join the Club: African American Children's Literature, Social Change, and the Chicago

Defender Junior." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (2017): 149-168.

Grundy, Pamela. *Learning to Win: Sports, Education, and Social Change in Twentieth-Century North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

Gudelunas, David. *Confidential to America: Newspaper Advice Columns and Sexual Education*. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Haidarali, Laila. *Brown Beauty: Color, Sex, and Race from the Harlem Renaissance to World War II*. New York: NYU Press, 2018.

Hamlin, Kimberly A. "Bathing Suits and Backlash," in *There She Is, Miss America: The Politics of Sex, Beauty, and Race in American's Most Famous Pageant,.* edited by Darcy Martin and Elwood Watson. 27-52. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Hardesty, Jacob. "Moral Outrage and Musical Corruption: White Educators' Responses to the 'Jazz Problem,'" *History of Education Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (2016): 590-617.

Hartmann, Saidiya. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2019.

Hegelson, Jeffery. "Who Are You America but Me? The American Negro Exposition, 1940" in *The Black Chicago Renaissance*, edited by Darlene Hine Clark and John McCluskey Jr. 126-146. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

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

Higuchi, Hayumi "The Billiken Club: 'Race leaders' Educating Children (1921-1940),"*Transforming Anthropology*13, no. 2 (2005): 154-159.

Hine, Darlene Clark. "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14.4 (1989): 912-920.

Hine, Darlene Clark. *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.

Holland, Jerome. *Black Recreation: A Historical Perspective*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002/

Jensen, Robin. *Dirty Words: The Rhetoric of Public Sex Education, 1870-1924*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

Jones, James H, *Bad Blood*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993.

Jordan, Ben. "Conservation of Boyhood": Boy Scouting's Modest Manliness and Natural Resource Conservation, 1910–1930." *Environmental History* 15, no. 4 (2010): 612-642

Kidd, Kenneth. *Making American Boys: Boyology and the Feral Tale*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

Lansbury, Jennifer. *A Spectacular Leap: Black Women Athletes in Twentieth-Century America*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2014.

Lindsey, Treva B. *Colored No More: Reinventing Black Womanhood in Washington*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017.

Lord, Alexandra M. *Condom Nation: The US Government's Sex education Campaign from World War I to the Internet*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009.

Lowe, Margaret. *Looking Good: College Women and Body Image, 1875-1930*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2003.

Macleod, David. *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and their Forerunners, 1870-1920*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.

Marling, Karal Ann. *Debutante: Rites and Regalia of American Debdom*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004.

Martin, Carol. *Dance Marathons: Performing American Culture of the 1920s and 1930s*. Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 1994.

McBee, Randy. *Dance Hall Days: Intimacy and Leisure Among Working-Class Immigrants in the United States*. New York: NYU Press, 2000.

Mendes, Gabriel N. Mendes. *Under the Strain of Color: Harlem's Lafargue Clinic and the Promise of an Antiracist Psychiatry*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015.

Miller, Allison Miller. "Am I Normal? American Vernacular Psychology and the Tomboy Body, 1900–1940." *Representations* 122, no. 1 (2013): 23-50.

Miller, Patrick B. "To 'Bring the Race Along Rapidly'" Sport, Student Culture, and Educational mission at Historically Black Colleges During the Interwar Years." *History of Education Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (1995): 111-133.

Miller, Susan Miller. *Growing Girls: The Natural Origins of Girls' Organizations in America*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007.

Mitchell, Michele *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005.

Mjagkij, Nina and Margaret Spratt, *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and the YWCA in the City*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.

Mobily, Kenneth E. "Eugenics and the Playground Movement." *Annals of Leisure Research* 21, no. 2 (2018): 145-160.

Moran, Rachel. *Governing Bodies: American Politics and the Shaping of the Modern Physique*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018.

Muhammed, Gholnecsar E. and Marcelle Haddix. "Centering Black Girls' Literacies: A Review of Literature on the Multiple Ways of Knowing of Black Girls." *English Education*48, no. 4 (2016): 299-336.

Nash, Ilana. *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006,

Pascoe, Peggy. *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Patterson, Martha H. *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

Pearson, Susan J.. "'Infantile Specimens:' Showing Babies in Nineteenth-Century America." *Journal of Social History* 42, no. 2 (2008): 341-370.

Peiss, Kathy. *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

Peiss, Kathy. *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn of the Century United States.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011.

Petrzela, Natalia Mehlman "Thanks, Gender! An Intellectual History of the Gym," in *American Labyrinth: Intellectual History for Complicated Times,* edited by Raymond Haberski Jr., and Andrew Hartman. 86-103. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018.

Porter, Eric Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activist*s. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Purkiss, Ava."'Beauty Secrets: Fight Fat': Black Women's Aesthetics, Exercise, and Fat Stigma, 1900–1930s." *Journal of Women's History* 29, no. 2 (2017):14-37.

Richardson, Theresa. *The Century of the Child: The Mental Hygiene Movement and Social Policy in the United States and Canada*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1989.

Richardson, Theresa. "Rethinking Progressive High School Reform in the 1930s: Youth, Mental Hygiene, and General Education." *American Educational History Journal* 33, no. 1 (2006): 77-87.

Richardson Mattie Udora. "No More Secrets, No More Lies: African American History and Compulsory Heterosexuality," *Journal of Women's History*15, no. 3 (2003): 63-76.

Roberts, Blain. *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women: Race and Beauty in the Twentieth-Century South*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2014.

Robertson, Nancy Marie. *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906-46*. Champaign: University of llinois Press, 2007.

Rooks, Noliwe M.. *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996.

Rooks, Noliwe M. *Ladies' Pages: African American Women's Magazines and the Culture that Made Them* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004.

Rutkoff, Peter M. and William B. Scott, "Pinkster in Chicago: Bud Billiken and the Mayor of Bronzeville, 1930-1945." *The Journal of African American History* 89, no. 4 (2004): 316-330.

Schrum, Kelly. *Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls' Culture, 1920-1945*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004.

de Schweinitz, Rebecca. *If We could Change the World: Young People and America's Long Struggle for Racial Equality*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Sentilles, Renée M. *American Tomboys, 1850-1915*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018.

Shaw, Stephanie J.. *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Sherrard-Johnson, Cherene. *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007.

Simmons, Christina. “African Americans and Sexual Victorianism in the Social Hygiene Movement, 1910-40,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4, no. 1 (1993): 51-75.

Simmons, Christina. *Making Marriage Modern: Women's Sexuality from the Progressive Era to World War II*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Simmons, LaKisha. *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

Smith, Christopher J. *Dancing Revolutions: Bodies, Space, and Sound in American Cultural History.* Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019.

Smith, Shawn Michelle. *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Smith, Susan Lynne. *Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: Black Women's Health Activism in America, 1890-1950*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995.

Stavney, Anne. “‘Mothers of Tomorrow,’ The New Negro Renaissance and the Politics of Maternal Representation.” *African American Review* 32, no. 4 (1998): 533-561;

Stone, Andrea. *Black Well-Being: Health and Selfhood in Antebellum Black Literature*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016.

Strange, Lisa S. “The Bicycle, Women’s Rights, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton." *Women's Studies*31, no. 5 (2002): 609-626.

String, Sabrina. *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*. New York: NYU Press, 2019.

Thiel-Stern, Shayla. *From the Dance Hall to Facebook: Teen Girls, Mass Media, and Moral Panic in the United States, 1905-2010*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014.

Tice, Karen. *Queens of Academe: Beauty Pageantry, Student Bodies, and College Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Verbrugge, Martha. *Active Bodies: A History of Women's Physical Education in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Vertinsky, Patricia. “‘Weighs and Means’: Examining the Surveillance of Fat Bodies through Physical Education Practices in North America in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries.” *Journal of Sport History* (2008): 449-468.

Vertinsky, Patricia and Gwendolyn Captain. “More Myth than History: American Culture and Representations of the Black female's Athletic Ability.” *Journal of Sport History* 25, no. 3 (1998): 532-561.

Walker, Susannah. *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007.

Walker, Susannah Walker, “‘Independent Livings’ or ‘No Bed Of Roses’?: How Race and Class Shaped Beauty Culture as an Occupation for African American Women from the 1920s to the 1960s,” *Journal of Women's History* 20, no. 3 (2008): 60-83.

Wall, Cheryl A. *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

Weinbaum, Alys Eve, Lynn M. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger, Madeleine Yue Dong, and Tani E. Barlow. *The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

Weisenfeld, Judith. *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905-1945*.Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Welky, David B. "Viking Girls, Mermaids, and Little Brown Men: US Journalism and the 1932 Olympics." *Journal of Sport History* 24, no. 1 (1997): 24-49.

Wendling, Lauren A. "Higher Education as a Means of Communal Uplift: The Educational Philosophy of W.E.B. Du Bois." *The Journal of Negro Education* 87, no. 3 (2018): 285-293.

White, Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994*. New York: WW Norton & Company, 1999.

Wilson, James. *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.

Wiltse, Jeff. *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Wolcott, Victoria. *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*. Raleigh: UNC Press Books, 2013.

Wolcott, Victoria *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle over Segregated Recreation in America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.

Wolcott, Victoria. "'Bible, Bath, and Broom'": Nannie Helen Burroughs's National Training School and African-American Racial Uplift," *Journal of Women's History* 9, no. 1 (1997): 88-110.

Wushanley, Ying. *Playing Nice and Losing: The Struggle for Control of Women's Intercollegiate Athletics, 1960-2000*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004.

Zimmerman, Jonathan. *Too Hot to Handle: A Global History of Sex Education.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

SAMANTHA WHITE

329 Cooper Street
Camden, NJ, 08102
USA
Phone: (609) 647-6431
Email: samantha.white@rutgers.edu

Education

PhD Rutgers University-Camden, Childhood Studies Expected Date: May 2020

Dissertation: *Shaping the Body: African-American Girlhood and Health, 1919-1940*

Committee: Susan Miller (Chair), Lynne Vallone, Kate Cairns, Amira Rose Davis (Pennsylvania State University)

Exam Fields: Girlhood Studies, Children's and Young Adult Literature, History of African-American Childhood and Youth

MEd University of Minnesota, Youth Development May 2015
Graduate Portfolio: *Youth, Diversity, and Residential Outdoor Camping*
Semester Abroad: Cross-Cultural Experiences in Education and English Teaching in Brazil, Feira de Santana, Bahia, Brazil.

BA Clark Atlanta University, French Language and Literature May 2011
Semester Abroad: Liberal Arts and Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Universite Rennes II, Rennes, France

University Teaching Experience

Rutgers University-Camden
Instructor, Department of Childhood Studies
Gender and Education, Spring 2019
Gender and Education, Summer 2018 (online)
Youth Identities, Spring 2018

Teaching Assistant, Department of Childhood Studies
Youth Identities, Fall 2017
Introduction to Childhood Studies, Spring 2017
Ethnographies of Childhood, Spring 2016
Youth and Sport, Fall 2015

Duke University and Stanford University
Program Director, Sports and Environmental Education in China
Athletes for Civic Engagement, 2016-2018

Research Experience

Next Generation Community Leaders, Research and Evaluation Team
February 2019-Present
Provided data analysis and logistics for youth participatory action projects on health in New Jersey.

Department of Childhood Studies, Rutgers University-Camden, Research Assistant
Fall 2018, Supervisor: Kate Cairns
Transcribed interviews on youth and environmental action in Camden, New Jersey.

Fall 2016, Supervisor: Dan Cook
Researched interdisciplinary studies of children's play.

Publications

White, Samantha "*Ebony Jr!* and the Black Athlete: Meritocracy, Sport, and African-American Children's Media," *Journal of Sport History,* (Accepted for Publication)

White, Samantha "Sport," *SAGE Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood Studies,* (Accepted for Publication).

White, Samantha. "Negotiating Female Athletic Identity Through the Works of R.R. Knudson," *Aethlon: Journal of Sport Literature,* (2017).

White, Samantha. "Race, Class, Space, and Memory at Wo-Chi-Ca: A Look at Radical Leftist Summer Camping," *Child & Youth Services,* (2015).

Book Reviews and other Writings

White, Samantha. "Review: *The Criminalization of Black Children: Race, Gender, and Delinquency in Chicago's Juvenile Justice System, 1899-1945* by Tera Eva Agyepong," *Boyhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* (2019)

White, Samantha. "Review: *Women on the Move: The Forgotten Era of Women's Bicycle Racing* by Roger Gilles," *H-Net Humanities,* (2019).

White, Samantha. "Book Review: *Asian American Basketball* by Joel S. Franks," *Sport in American History* (2017).

White, Samantha. "*Ebony Jr!* and the Black Child's Literary Sporting Imagination," *Sport in American History,* (2016).

Invited Lectures

Keynote: "Beauty Queens: Black Girlhood and Pageants in the 1930s," Girls' Studies Symposium, York University, November 2019.

"Outdoor Recreation and Leisure in the United States," The American Center, United States Consulate, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, August 2015.

"Discussing Intersections with Wazina Zondon: Queerness, Family, and Identities," Macalester College, St. Paul, Minnesota, April 2015.

"HBCU Alumni Panel," Minneapolis Historically Black College and University Fair, 2014-2015.

P**resentations**

Roundtable: "Growing Up, Rising Up: Youth, Activism, and Resistance," American Studies Association, Honolulu, November 2019.

"Shaping the Body: African-American Girlhood and Health, 1919-1940," Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, August 2019.

"'Bounding Health, Grace of Motion, and Dignity of Bearing': The Emergence of Women's Athletics at Howard University," Organization of American Historians, Philadelphia, April 2019.

"To Build a Body of Character: African-American Girls, YWCAs, and Physical Culture," International Girls Studies Conference, University of Notre Dame, February 2019.

"Race, Sport, and Black Childhood: The Black Athlete and the Olympics in Ebony Jr!," American Studies Association, Atlanta, Georgia, November 2018.

"Ebony Jr! and the Black Athlete: Race, Sport, and Children's Media in the 1970s," National
Association for the Study of Sport History, Winnipeg, Canada, May 2018.

"Geographies of Athletic Black Girls in *The Fits,*" American Studies Association, Chicago,
Illinois, November 2017.

"Sport, Recreation, and Black Girlhoods in Philadelphia's YWCAs." Society for the History
of Childhood and Youth, Camden, New Jersey, June 2017.

"Black Girlhoods, Home, and Resistance in Paule Marshall's Brown Girl, Brownstones," Diverse Unfreedoms Conference, Camden, New Jersey, March 2017.

"Labor, Resistance, and Protest Among Athletes at Historically Black Colleges and Universities," International Society for the History of Physical Education and Sport, Paris,
France, June 2016.

"Negotiating Female Athletic Identity Through the Works of R.R. Knudson," Sport Literature Association Conference, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, June 2016.

"Radical Outdoors: History of Leftist Interracial Camping**",** History of Youth Work Conference, Minneapolis, Minnesota, June 2014.

Honors and Awards

Smith College, Smith College Special Collections Fellowship, 2019-2020

Rutgers University, Dissertation Fellowship, 2019-2020

Rutgers University, Gender Studies Research Fellowship, 2019-2020

Rutgers University, Sengstack Fellowship, 2018

Ithaca College, FLEFF Diversity Fellow, 2018

National Association for the Study of Sport History, Roberta Park Grant, 2018

Rutgers University Professional Development Grant, 2017-2018

Rutgers University-Camden, Travel Grant, 2015-2017

Universite de Paris-Est, International Summer School for Sport Researchers, 2017

Sport Literature Association Lyle Olsen Graduate Essay Winner 2016

Aldo Leopold Foundation Rising Land Ethic Leader, 2014

UNCF/UMN Graduate Fellowship, 2013-2015

Clark Atlanta University Provost Scholarship, 2007-2011

Phi Delta Phi, French Honor Society, 2011

Professional Service

Journal of Childhood Studies, Manuscript Reviewer
American Studies Association, Member
Children and Youth Studies Caucus, American Studies Association, Co-Chair, 2018-present

University Service

Founder and Facilitator, University Wide Dissertation Writing Group, Rutgers University-Camden, 2018-Present

Member, Graduate Student Advisory Council, Rutgers University-Camden, 2016-Present

President, Graduate Student Organization, Rutgers University, Department of Childhood Studies, 2016-2017

Co-Chair, Evaluation and Assessment Committee and Social Media Manager, Upper Midwest Queer People of Color Conference, University of Minnesota, 2014-2015

Co-Chair, Programs and Speakers Committee, Women of Color Conference, University of Minnesota, 2013-2014

Teaching Experience, PreK-12

West Philadelphia Cooperative Preschool
Substitute Teacher, 2015-2017

Minneapolis Public Schools
Associate Educator (High School/Middle School), 2013-2015

Colegio Heylos, Bahia, Brazil
Assistant Teacher (Middle School), 2014

Lycée St. Charles, Marseille, France
High School Teacher, 2012-2013

Greenbrier Learning Center, Arlington, Virginia
Elementary School Educator, 2011-2012

Community Involvement

10 Billion Strong, San Francisco, CA, Advisory Board Member, 2019-Present
Philly Thrive, Philadelphia, PA, Child and Youth Services, 2019-Present
Philly Childcare Collective, Philadelphia, PA, Member, 2016-Present
Clark Park Soccer, Coach, Philadelphia, PA, Member, 2015-2017

Languages

English: Native Language

French: Intermediate