MADE IN HIS IMAGE:

THE ORIGINS

OF

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S JEREMIAD

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Lacey P. Hunter

Drew University

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ABSTRACT

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Although there is an abundance of research on the American jeremiad, and its language in politics and culture, few of these studies apply a gendered lens to its use in American discourse. In particular, the existing literature on African American women and the American jeremiad is incredibly scant. *Made in His Image* explores the origins and markers of black women's jeremiadic discourse. This dissertation considers the ways in which African American women used the jeremiad to combat racism and sexism during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As I argue, nineteenth century black women began to use their traumatic experiences as black mothers, daughters, sisters, grandmothers, and laborers, to valorize their womanhood and bolster their right to agitate against discrimination of all kinds in the United States. This discourse, in turn, forged a unique jeremiadic tradition, one that allowed black women to undermine negative characterizations of them in the public sphere, while also interrogating the nation's socio-political norms.

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Introduction

> *"Me thinks I heard a spiritual interrogation – who shall go forth, and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman? And my heart made this reply – if it is thy will, be it even so Lord Jesus!"*[1]

The story of African American women's jeremiad begins in the 1830s, when the cross winds of a developing national identity, an evangelical Christian revolution, and the heightened visibility of African American religious and spiritual practice opened the door for free and enslaved women to narrate their stories publicly. The language of the American Revolution had become a staple in public discourse, and as the nation's territory expanded, revolutionary language was repeatedly evoked. Connected to this discourse was the underlying concept of the United States as an exceptional place—a "city on a hill" where the most democratic freedoms exist for the greatest number of people. The idea of the "city on a hill," and the language used to rehearse it, have forged what Perry Miller and Sacvan Bercovitch called the American jeremiad.[2] The jeremiad espouses the importance of freedom and links American democracy to divine purpose. It saturates American social, political, and economic discourse. In the years leading up to

[1] Reference to Maria Stewart's 1832 Boston Speech found in *Maria W. Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).

[2] The comparison of the United States to "a city on a hill" emerged in the writings of colonial New England governor John Winthrop. The phrase is most commonly taken from his seventeenth century speech "A Model of Christian Charity." Winthrop's reference drew from the New Testament parable in Matthew 5:14, which encouraged followers of Jesus to be examples for those around them. See for further reference Matthew 5:14-16 *KJV;* John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature,* ed. Nina Baym, (New York: Norton, 1999), 178-189; Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939); Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956); Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

the American Civil War, jeremiadic language helped to narrate powerful scripts about the political destiny of the nation. Despite competing visions for the country's future in northern and southern states, use of the jeremiad in both regions illustrate how central it was to American political thought in the Early Republic and Antebellum periods.[3]

In this larger context, African American women found a rhetorical strategy for resisting racial and gender oppression, which they layered with another powerful rhetoric—evangelical Christian discourse. While the language of the American Revolution underlined many public debates about the future of the new Republic and its identity, the Second Great Awakening complicated them. Specifically, as the United States expanded from 1803 to 1850, questions about statehood, slavery, political representation, and citizenship became deeply enmeshed in looming concerns about morality.

On a local level, waves of evangelical Baptist and Methodist preachers traveled the country, hoping to stir the souls of everyone they met along the way. Indeed, as these traveling ministers made their way into the small towns and busy cities of the United States, they garnered multiracial, multiethnic, cross-class audiences of men and women and made a deep impression on the country's diverse social and political landscape. For many people, however, the revivals and prayer meetings of the Second Great Awakening offered much more than conversion and religious zeal. Among the country's

[3] See Rush Welter, *The Mind of America, 1820-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975); Susan Mary Grant, *North Over South* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

marginalized groups, spiritual awakening was also the gateway to social resistance. African Americans, in particular, utilized the language of the Awakening in their efforts to achieve full social, political, and economic freedom.

The Second Great Awakening also facilitated burgeoning literacy rates in free and enslaved African American communities and provided them with opportunities for leadership.[4] While African American men assumed most of the new roles forged in light of the nation's "awakening," black women also reaped many of its benefits. Specifically, the shifting cultural context of the nineteenth century enabled several black women to step into the public forum as writers, speakers, and preachers in Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Ohio, Maryland, and Washington D.C. It was in this vein that black women like Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Sojourner Truth, and Maria Stewart spoke with authority on the wonders of God manifested through their public work. Though they often spoke in a wide range of religious, social and political contexts—some in prayer meetings and churches, others at suffragist and abolitionist meetings—each drew on the same themes of divine representation, spiritual authority, and purity to critique the racial and gender injustices of their day. Collectively, their reliance on themes of spiritual authority highlights a crucial element in black women's critiques of slavery and the failures of American democracy during the nineteenth century.

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[4] See for reference Ben Schiller, "Learning Their Letters: Critical Literacy, Epistolary Culture, and Slavery in the Antebellum South." *Southern Quarterly* 45, no. 3, (2008): 11-20; Heather Andrea Williams, *Self Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2005); Phyllis Belt-Beyan, *The Emergence of African American Literacy Traditions: Family and Community Efforts in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004).

Black women of the antebellum period who orated before "promiscuous" audiences—those that consisted of men and women—contributed to the growing religious sentiments blanketing the nation, and stood parallel to white women activists, preachers, and writers as ardent proponents of gender equality.[5] As they challenged inequality in the United States, these women contributed to a budding black intellectual culture. Similar to their male counterparts, they utilized religious language to persuade their audiences that slavery and racial oppression were social and political ills. In this tradition, African American women speakers, writers, and preachers also positioned themselves as representatives of a group whose suffering was divinely ordered. An outgrowth of African American biblical interpretation and the larger national narrative about the special position of the United States in world history, they imagined themselves as a new generation of Hebrew people waiting for divine justice.[6] Black freedom and equality in the United States represented the fruition of biblical prophecy and the realization of American revolutionary ideals. Incorporating these themes into their rhetoric, African American women inserted themselves into the early construct of what scholar Robert Bellah called American "Civil Religion," adding racial and gender equality as central tenants.[7]

Against the backdrop of a recalcitrant slave system, women like Lee, Truth, Elaw, and Stewart interlaced themes of the Great Awakening with the ideals of the American

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[5] Susan Zaeske, "The 'Promiscuous Audience' Controversy and the Emergence of the Early Women's Rights Movement." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, (May 1996), 191-207.
[6] For "African American biblical interpretation" see Vincent L. Wimbush, *The Bible and African Americans: A Brief History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
[7] Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 40-55.

Revolution to challenge the idea of black inferiority and female subservience. Black women speakers and writers presented themselves as angels of God, whose physical weaknesses were fully compensated by divine election and the manifestation of the divine in their works.[8] They contoured a unique discourse of liberation, undergirded by evangelical Christian theology and late nineteenth century women's suffrage and temperance movements. Embedded in the language of their writing and preaching was an emphasis on service to family, community, and country. Their contestation of racial and gender inequalities drew on a hybrid language that became their own jeremiadic expression.

As I use it here, the jeremiad is an African American intellectual tradition marked by its call for white Americans to end racial and gender oppression. It is simultaneously a lamentation about gendered and racial oppression and an expression of hope for a better future. This call was undergirded by an African American interpretation of biblical text—one that draws parallels between the Old Testament narrative of the ancient Hebrews, including the Hebrew exile in the Book of Jeremiah, and the descendants of enslaved African people in the Americas. As the United States began to establish its republican government, many African American intellectuals drew on this interpretation, reminding the nation that it could not call itself a virtuous country while enslaving and oppressing black people. For black women leaders, the language of the Jeremiad was especially powerful, allowing them to challenge racial and gender inequalities and create spaces for

[8] Reference to Zilpha Elaw, "Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels, and Labours of Mrs. Elaw" in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), 92.

themselves within the public sphere. In this way, African American women intellectuals employed the Jeremiad in their public oratory, and in their fiction and non-fiction writing. As I will discuss in the subsequent chapters, writing was an important venue for the development of African American women's jeremiad, and it helped garner national and international attention from a much broader base of intellectuals.

Intellectual life, however, was not all encompassing for many of the women discussed here. Indeed, it was often a conduit for their social and political activism. Nearly all of the women in this dissertation were also civil rights activists, suffragists, temperance advocates, teachers, and community leaders. Hence, I also argue that the adaptation of the Jeremiad among black women intellectuals produced an *enacted jeremiad*—an activist tradition prompted by the ideals of the African American jeremiad and marked by an attempt to undermine American racism and sexism through strategies of racial uplift. These strategies complemented progressive movements within the United States, allowing African American women leaders to extend their presence in the public sphere. More than this, however, the *enacted jeremiad* underscored the idea that African American women leaders had a divine responsibility in their communities and in the nation—or that their work represented the will of the Divine.

By the 1830s, African American women leaders like Maria Stewart, Jarena Lee, Sojourner Truth and Zilpha Elaw travelled throughout the major metropolitan areas of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Ohio, and Maryland. Their appearances at revivals, prayer meetings, public lyceum, masonic lodges, and political rallies coincided with the reemergence of Great Awakening sentiment in the nation, and

the subsequent rise of the National Women's Suffrage, Anti-Slavery, and Temperance movements. These larger campaigns provided African American women with the networks and platforms to challenge their oppression and build cross racial alliances. In particular, black women's collaborations with white women provided them with increased opportunities for public speaking, praying, preaching, and testifying.

Underlying their discourse was an emphasis on purity, sanctification, community motherhood, and spiritual authority.[9] Sanctification was particularly important in the narratives of many of the women I discuss. A process of spiritual rejuvenation that enables an individual to overcome sin, or negative behaviors and attitudes, sanctification purifies believers and draws them closer to God.[10] Black women intellectuals who shared their processes of purification, intentionally challenged the idea the racial and gendered stigmas attached to all African American women. As I will discuss in the subsequent chapters, black women intellectuals relied on these themes to tug on the consciences of their audiences and challenge the notion of an American "city on a hill" where sexual immorality permeated its society and racial injustice was the law of the land. Black women's *enacted jeremiad* also complemented and restructured the gender roles of the

[9] Here, I draw on Linda Kerber's "republican motherhood," an idea that emerged in American thought during the American Revolution and continued long after its conclusion. The Republican Mother, Kerber asserted, was the model of civic virtue and domesticity—a virtuous mother who educated her sons and a virtuous wife who acted as her husband's conscious when necessary. While African American women were not included in public discourse about republican motherhood, many black women leaders adapted the ideals of republican motherhood into the discourse of racial uplift. See Linda Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment-An American Perspective," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2, (Summer, 1976); Erica A. Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 8-25.

[10] For a detailed explanation of sanctification, see John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. 2007); Peter Stromberg, "Wesleyan Sanctification and the Ethic of Self Realization," *ETHOS* 43, no. 4: 423-443.

nineteenth century. Adopting the Victorian gender ideals of their day, black women emphasized femininity and family commitment, yet they also redefined feminine roles by insisting on their right to be heard alongside black men in the public forum. In their writing, public speeches, and sermons, they worked to balance the expectations of marriage and motherhood, while also challenging these norms by asserting that women were entitled to speak on their own behalf, and for their race, in religious and secular spaces. Most important in this balance, however, was black women's intentional reclamation of their racialized bodies in the emphasis on divine purity, sanctification, and godly authority. In this way, they undermined the stigma of hyper-sexualization. It is this divergence in the use of the jeremiad that makes it distinctive.

The distinctions of black women's jeremiadic expression form the basis of my dissertation. As I explore the meanings of the jeremiad for black women, I highlight the ways that they have used it to advance their specific struggle for freedom from the Antebellum period into the early twentieth century. My work is guided by three overarching questions: a) How did black women leaders and intellectuals participate in the jeremiadic tradition from the early nineteenth century into the twentieth? b) In what ways has the Jeremiad shown up in their public oratory and literature? and, c) How have black women's constructions of womanhood shaped and reshaped the American Jeremiad? Taken together, these questions offer an unexplored way of thinking about race, gender and citizenship as it has evolved for African American women from the Antebellum period into the twentieth century.

Literature Review

The most influential works on the American jeremiad are Perry Miller's *The New England Mind*, Sacvan Bercovitch's *The American Jeremiad* and Robert Bellah's "American Civil Religion."[11] Miller argues that the language of the jeremiad was employed by New England's second generation of Puritans to lament the cultural break down and moral decline of their colonies. Realizing that they failed to successfully accomplish the Puritan "errand" of creating an exemplary Christian society, they turned to social denunciation. Where Miller locates the inception of the jeremiad within the second generation of Puritans – and suggests that it was largely a rhetorical tool – he interjects that the first generation of Puritans had already begun employing the Jeremiad before they settled the New England territories. Bercovitch also argues that the Puritans used jeremiadic language to carve out early American identity. The narratives they told, inscribed colonists with heroic and pious characteristics, and, as the colonies developed, this practice continued. The ultimate result, Bercovitch notes, was the evolution of a historical trajectory that pegged the United States as a divinely chosen geographical space.

Robert Bellah's seminal article, "Civil Religion in America," offers a different perspective on the nation's self-inscriptions, by outlining its most logical outgrowth: civil religious ideology. Building on Bercovitch's work, Bellah contends that the use of

[11] See Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: Seventeenth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1939); Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953); Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978); Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America" *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 *(*Fall 2005): 40-55.

religious language enabled the founding fathers of the United States, and each generation of their successors, to draw on the colonial heritage of the nation without excluding those originally marginalized in early American society. Based loosely on the ideas of Jean Jacques Rousseau, Bellah explains, American Civil Religion encompassed four basic tenants: belief in God, belief in an afterlife, rewards for good deeds and justice for bad deeds, and the exclusion of religious intolerance.[12] Combined, he argues, these principles undergird America's sense of carrying on a unique tradition in global history and upholding its ideological position as the biblical city on hill. In this sense, the removal of the jeremiad from an exclusively Puritan religious environment expands its scope and reach. It is from this vantage point that scholars analyze the use of the jeremiad by those who occupied a completely different socio-cultural, economic, and political space in early American life.

Since the publication of Bellah's original article, many scholars have considered the jeremiad as a contemporary political and economic paradigm. A significant number have also examined the jeremiad as an important underlying thread in American literary traditions. Outside of African American intellectual history, however, research on the black jeremiad was virtually non-existent until Wilson Jeremiah Moses's seminal book, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*. Moses offered one of the earliest suggestions that there was a distinct black jeremiadic tradition in his chapter, "The Black Jeremiad and American Messianic Traditions."[13] The black jeremiad, he noted, focused largely on

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[12] See Jean Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2003).
[13] Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*: *Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 30-49.

white audiences, warning them against the evils of slavery and the impending doom of God's punishment if abolition was not enforced. After Emancipation and the death of Abraham Lincoln, Moses suggests that the black jeremiad declined and black messianic ideologies drove the African American liberation struggle well into the twentieth century. It was this last point that David Howard-Pitney and Willie Harrell Jr. challenged in their subsequent books.[14]

David Howard-Pitney argues that the African American jeremiad is rooted in the black Christian tradition, and that it extends from the colonial era well into the late twentieth century. His book rejects Moses's contention that the use of the jeremiad lost potency after Emancipation, positing that use of the rhetoric remains salient because racial oppression is still a lived African American experience. For Howard-Pitney, the importance of figures such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois and Martin Luther King, Jr. lay in the ways they drew on jeremiadic discourse. Howard-Pitney's black jeremiahs, therefore, differed from Moses's in that they were ultimately appealing to the millenarian strains of American Civil Religion, not fundamentally shifting American socio-religious or political ideals.[15]

Willie Harrell's study on the African American jeremiad extends Howard-Pitney's, positing that the African American jeremiad took root in the eighteenth century and progressed during the years of the Early Republic. Harrell contends that the black

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[14] David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005); Willie Harrell Jr., *Origins of the African American Jeremiad: The Rhetorical Strategies of Social Protest and Activism, 1760-1861* (North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2011.

[15] Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad*, 1-15.

jeremiad differed significantly from its mainstream counterpart. Mainly, he argues, the African American jeremiad called for the civil liberties of the oppressed, an aspect traditional jeremiadic ideology does not encompass. Harrell concurs with Howard-Pitney that black Americans used the jeremiad to bring national attention to their oppression. He asserts, however, that the importance of the black jeremiad is its use as a form of social protest in black intellectual discourse and literature. The development of this tradition, Harrell suggests, made room for generations of subsequent black intellectuals who continued the fight for black equality well into the twentieth century.[16]

Both Harrell and Howard-Pitney argue that black appropriation of the jeremiad formed the bedrock of the long freedom struggle and the basis of sites of resistance within African American communities. Each scholar, however, focuses explicitly on the writing and discourse of black men, such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois, devoting little attention to African American women. The minimal discussion of black women in their narratives leaves a considerable gap in understanding how black communities adapted the language and ideals of the jeremiad.

The absence of black women in both books also undercuts each scholar's ability to follow African American jeremiadic ideals as they surfaced in black churches. This is particularly important because churches were one of the spaces where African American women actively used the jeremiad to voice their specific socio-political critiques of American democracy. It was also one of the spaces where black women leaders and

[16] Harrell, *Origins of the African American Jeremiad*, 5-11.

intellectuals enacted the ideals of the jeremiad through racial uplift work. Even more than this, African American religious institutions provided a central space for black women to disseminate the ideas of the jeremiad through church literature and racial uplift work. Through their prayer groups, charities, and educational programs, black women leaders helped to bolster racial pride within their larger communities, even as they also encouraged the men and women within their communities to think critically about the racism and sexism that permeated American society. Church pamphlets represent another important venue through which African American women intellectuals could disseminate the ideals of the jeremiad, particularly when women's departments became more prominent within the broad spectrum of Afro-American Christian sects. This literature provided a community forum in which black churchwomen could reinforce African American interpretations of biblical scripture and the idea that black men and women were sacred people in the eyes of God.

Although no research exists to date about the influence of the jeremiad on black church literature, Laurie Maffly-Kipp offers some insight in her book, *Setting Down the Sacred Past.* [17] She notes that African American churches authored and maintained black historical narratives throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Within these narratives, she asserts, African Americans inscribed their near and distant African ancestors with exceptional qualities. In this way, they reclaimed their own place in global history long before the emergence of scholars like W.E.B. Du Bois or T. Thomas

[17] Laura Maffly-Kipp, *Setting Down the Sacred Past: African American Race Histories* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2010).

Fortune set about the task. Although Maffly-Kipp does not exclusively focus on the African American jeremiad, or women's role in engaging it, her book suggests that black women's church pamphlets, newsletters and other paraphernalia are an untapped source of their jeremiadic discourse. Her work also suggests that African American men and women of the Early Republic and Antebellum periods relied a great deal on their religious literature to undo the stigmatizing impact of racism for subsequent generations. Hence, it is no wonder that the activist networks, strategies, and traditions of African American men and women during the late nineteenth century grew out of their church communities. It was, in effect, this agitation that allowed black women the greatest paths of resistance to their oppression, and the most opportunities for leadership within their communities.

Church activism aside, neither Harrell nor Howard-Pitney dedicate much attention to the role of black women in the making or sustenance of the jeremiad in their communities at large. Howard-Pitney's discussion of black women is focused specifically on Ida B. Wells and Mary McCleod Bethune, but his arguments are ambiguous. Indeed, he contends both women can only partly be understood as black jeremiahs because they did not consistently or aggressively apply the jeremiad in their rhetoric. [18] Harrell's discussion of black women is devoted to Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and Frances Harper. He argues that "the function of black women Jeremiahs was parallel to that of other female improvement organizations of the time, to be precise, to

[18] Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad,* 116.

support the abolitionist lectures and its representative correspondents: men."[19] Each of these works suggest that no female Jeremiah could exist without a male counterpart, which overlooks black women's political exclusion and economic marginalization because of race and gender.

In a subsequent article on Maria Stewart, Harrell argues that Stewart's anti-slavery speeches were underscored by jeremiadic discourse that "linked religious, moral, political and social lamentations of the American democratic system and called her audiences to aid in the desensitizing of slavery and America prejudice."[20] While Harrell's study on Stewart as a black woman Jeremiah, adds to the relatively narrow canon of African American intellectuals included in black jeremiadic studies, his research isolates her from other black women Jeremiahs of her time. Specifically, Harrell's focus on the abolition movement in male spaces, like public lecture halls and masonic lodges, minimizes his ability to see Stewart alongside other African American women whose anti-slavery discourse was also rooted in the language of the jeremiad.[21] While the Abolitionist movement was dominated by male leaders, black and white women actively participated in abolitionist campaigns. The spaces in which men and women engaged in the movement, however, differed.[22] Accordingly, studies that focus specifically on the

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[19] Willie Harrell Jr., *Origins of the African American Jeremiad,* 94.
[20] Willie Harrell Jr., "A Call to Political and Social Activism: The Jeremiadic Discourse of Maria W. Stewart, 1831-1833," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 9, no. 3 (May 2008): 302. Harrell asserts that black women Jeremiahs did not emerge until the 1830s because the abolitionist movement was dominated by men.
[21] Harrell Jr., "A Call to Political and Social Activism," 302-303.
[22] See, for example Shirley Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists, A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* (Knoxville: TN, University of Tennessee Press, 1992); Jean F. Yellin and John C. Van Horn, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,

public sphere will capture a smaller number of women's voices. Harrell's work, therefore, is limited in its approach because it does not engage the interplay between the public and private spheres where, in the latter arena, women were more visible and vocal in their challenges to American inequalities.

In many ways, Howard-Pitney and Harrell suggest that the jeremiad is an inherently masculine ideology because of its male Puritan origins. This, however, omits the realities of black women's lives and overlooks the ways that their experiences forged a jeremiad unique to them. Hence, for me, it is important to lay out the markers of African American women's jeremiadic discourse, rather than building on a preset definition that gives race primacy over gender or vice versa. Similar to Howard-Pitney, Harrell, and Moses, I define the African American jeremiad as a call for social and political justice. My definition also coincides with each scholar's assertion that the black jeremiad is an intellectual tradition that positions African American people as a divinely chosen group and inscribes their suffering with sacred meaning. Additionally, my conception of the African American jeremiad is informed by Eddie Glaude, Valerie Cooper, and Herbert Marbury who emphasize the importance of African American biblical interpretation to their socio-political visionary discourse.[23] Consequently, one of

1994); and Erica L. Ball, *To Live an Anti-Slavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2012).

[23] Eddie Glaude, *Exodus!* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Valerie C. Cooper, *Word, Like Fire*: Maria Stewart, the Bible and the Rights of African Americans (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011); and Herbert R. Marbury, *Pillars of Clouds and Fire: The Politics of Exodus in African American Biblical Interpretation* (New York: New York University Press, 2015)

my central arguments is that African Americans' belief that their journey to freedom was divinely planned was integral to their use of the jeremiad.

My work bridges that of Moses, Howard-Pitney, and Harrell by engaging them with studies on black women's interpretation of the Bible. Drawing on the works of Katherine Clay Bassard, Betty Collier-Thomas, Mitzi Smith, and Carla Peterson, my project illustrates the importance of messianic thought in the black jeremiadic tradition.[24] For the black women intellectuals I will discuss here, messianic themes and references to spiritual transformation supported their calls for gender equality and their challenges to racial oppression. Early itinerant black women preachers, for example, frequently drew on messianic language as a means of substantiating their demands to be integrated into black church leadership, but also to root their socio-political power in a higher authority. Doing so allowed these women to reject racial and gendered hierarchies that denied them leadership roles, and sexualized them. Where black women leaders did not call themselves divine outright, they declared that they were purified, divinely chosen vessels. On this platform, they could effectively combat gendered and racialized stigmas about their bodies, character, and intellectual ability.

This dissertation also reinforces David Howard-Pitney and Willie J. Harrell Jr.'s contentions that the black jeremiad is an important strain in black intellectual tradition, and offers a few interjections to the field. I argue that the black woman's use of the

[24] Katherine Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998); Mitzi Smith, *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015).

jeremiad is marked by three important distinctions that make it worthy of separate consideration. Primarily, black women's use of the jeremiad entails an emphasis on racial and sexual oppression. Extending this, I contend that black women intellectuals utilized themes of divine authority and purity in their calls for social and political justice in order to establish their credibility before mixed audiences and to undercut public perceptions about their sexuality and personal character. Most importantly, however, I suggest that while black women did shape the African American jeremiad alongside black men, they did not always do so in the same spaces. Hence, their earliest realms of influence were spaces within their communities where they could exercise their leadership skills and independence, such as churches revivals, prayer meetings, women's clubs, lecture halls, as well as in the books, novels, and pamphlets they published. As I conceptualize it, each of these represents a part of the public sphere where African American women intellectuals expressed and enacted the Jeremiad.

While David Howard-Pitney and Willie Harrell both mention the use of the African American jeremiad as an important literary device and rhetorical tool, I see the two as interrelating cornerstones of black women's advocacy for community work and the politics of respectability that undergirds their public activism. Specifically, I suggest that black women's early tradition of utilizing themes of spiritual purity supported their public push in campaigns that addressed hyper-sexualization, sexual violence, and public shaming for the abuses against them. In this way, the jeremiad was not merely a language they espoused in drawing on the rhetoric of the Revolution and the Second Great Awakening, but rather a springboard for collective mobilization and activism. Still,

it is important to acknowledge that the women in this study did not all employ the Jeremiad in the same ways. While some relied exclusively on jeremiadic language in their writing and oratory, others combined the socio-political critique and prophecy of the Afro-American jeremiad with public engagement and outreach; in this way, they enacted the ideals of the Jeremiad.

Methodology

The writing, oration, and activism of early African American women intellectuals and their successors were important parts of their feminist tradition. Like many scholars before me, I frame the women of the nineteenth century as harbingers of a black feminist intellectual community that entered and changed the racial discourse of the public forum by the early twentieth. Here, the works of Katherine Bassard, Kristin Waters, Carol Conway, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Hazel Carby, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Deborah Gray White, Ruth Bowen, Bert Lowenburg, Carla Peterson, and Elsa Barkley Brown are important. Collectively, their research outlined the lives, intellectual production, and activism of women other scholars overlooked or forgot in their narratives about American intellectual history.[25] Their research is also invaluable for the rich source material and

[25] Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Evelyn B. Higginbotham, "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17, no. 2 (Winter, 1992), 251-274; Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Ruth Bogin and Bert J. Lowenberg, *Black Women in Nineteenth Century America: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1976); Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999); Carla Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African American Women Speakers and Writers in the North, 1830-1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Kristin Waters, et al., *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions (*Lebanon: University of Vermont Press, 2007); Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes Towards Black Women, 1880-1920* (New York: Carlson Publications Inc., 1990); Elsa Barkley Brown, "African American

instructive theoretical methodologies they lend. Carla Peterson's *Doers of the Word,* Katherine Bassard's *Spiritual Interrogations,* Valerie C. Cooper's *Words of Fire,* Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood*, and Kristin Waters and Carol Conway's *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions* have been especially helpful in thinking about the ways that black women's intellectual lives are distinct from those of other groups, and the ways that their ideologies inform gender constructions and reconstructions. For each of these scholars, black women's insertion of themselves into the public sphere, their appropriation of biblical text, and their insistence on defining womanhood on terms consistent with their realities, have produced a dynamic public discourse on race, class, and gender.

Similar to studies that have informed my work, this project is interdisciplinary and it gleans from the theological work of James Cone. His concept of black liberation theology is especially useful for understanding the motivation of black women whose efforts to champion civic equality was often dangerous because of the ways it alienated them from their communities.[26] Cone too leaves women out of much of his early work, but his argument that African Americans view God as having a particular concern with the poor and voiceless of a society is an important thread in the religious and political thought of the women discussed here. Nearly all of the women included in this study believed that God was specifically concerned with "the servants of servants," and this

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Women's Quilting: A Framework for Conceptualizing and Teaching African American Women's History," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* 14, no. 4 (Summer, 1989): 921-29.

[26] James Cone, *A Theology of Black Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994); James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975).

vision of the Divine provided all of the impetus for their public speaking and preaching.[27] Black women preachers, in particular, reinforced the idea that God had a special interest in them because of their vulnerability. In this way, they could effectively paint themselves as the weak and "broken vessels," those humans most prone to complete dependence on God's mercy and love, and therefore most likely to return that love and mercy to others in similar conditions.[28]

My dissertation is also guided by literary critic Edouard Glissant's concept of creolization. Glissant defines creolization as dual ways of knowing, the complex outgrowth of the occidental colonial experience and its memory for people of African descent. In his book *Caribbean Discourse*, and in his essay "Creolization in the Making of the Americas," Glissant asserts that the African experience in the Americas gave rise to a dual language that affirms an Afro-American identity in the largest sense possible by allowing its authors to define themselves as complex and whole—the greatest expression of lived diversity. Extending this, he posits that "people born as a result of creolization" are continually obliged to imagine and reconstruct their cultures from the echoes and shards of historical memory, tradition, folklore and systems of thought that permeate their societies. Consequently, he notes, this process forces creolized people outside of standard modes of knowing and being: producing "ambiguity, discontinuity, traces, and

[27] Reference to Maria Stewart's 1832 Boston Speech found in *Maria W. Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
[28] See for reference Psa: 51:8, 51:17, 34:18, Isa: 57:15, Jer. 23:9 in NKJV

remembering." Ultimately, he argues, creolization allows African people to "counter the massive assertions of the thinking associated with the conquest."[29]

I use Glissant's theory as a lens for sharpening my understanding of black women's spiritual discourse and practice. In many ways, the women I discuss exemplify his arguments about creolization and composite cultures. Whether they were free or enslaved, black women's identities in the early nineteenth century were grounded in a link to slavery and race. Yet the women I explore in this project also shared in a sense of themselves as sacred beings because of and despite their heritage. In this way, Lee, Stewart, Elaw, and Truth can all be viewed as expressing creolized Christian spirituality. As I argue here, their practice of Christianity paralleled the religious syncretism of the Caribbean. Specifically, the inclusion of trances, prophetic dreams, speaking in tongues, and shouting with traditional sectarian doctrine was a radical re-appropriation of Christian spiritual practice and assembly. Faith facilitated the survival of African American people during the Antebellum years, and long after. Yet it also facilitated a multivalent epistemology, rooted in African cultures and cosmologies, that does not separate spiritual and temporal realities. Consequently, the black women Jeremiahs in this study often talked about themselves, and other black women, as racialized, gendered and spiritual beings.

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[29] Edouard Glissant, "Creolization and the Making of the Americas," *Caribbean Quarterly* 4, no. 1-2, (March-June 2008); 87; Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989).

In studying the spiritual discourse of women like Stewart, Lee, Elaw and Truth as an expression of creolization, I maintain that we can better understand how faith and intellectual pursuit freed these women from systems of thought that declared them inferior and powerless. Even more than this, however, applying Glissant's theory to black women's spiritual practice and expression also makes clear the importance of the spirit world for many black women in the antebellum period—and certainly in the Post Emancipation years. This African way of knowing and believing in the world around them bolstered their sense of womanhood. It underscored their assertion that they were chaste, brave, and powerful—or "angels of god," that were "comely and black as Solomon's wife."[30] It bolstered their claims that miracles took place at their hands and, most certainly, it made their agitation for gender equality more potent.

Taken together, creolization theory, liberation theology and black feminist and womanist writings unveil the origins of black women's jeremiadic discourse. Yet they also open the door for a deeper interrogation of the ways in which African American women's jeremiad was informed by larger questions of gender norms as they connected to the nation's sense of morality. Additionally, these theoretical lenses allow me to capture a panorama of early African American women thinkers typically overlooked in historical scholarship because they are not viewed as "political" in the same ways. What I hope to illustrate here is that for many black women of early America, spiritual work was inherently political, and the most important political work was also spiritual. Indeed,

[30] Quotes taken from Zilpha Elaw, *Sisters of the Spirit*, 51 and 92.

my research emphasizes the ways in which black women maintained a spiritual discourse within their social and political work from the Antebellum period through the 1930s.

Chapter Outline

The four chapters of this dissertation offer a chronological narrative that follows black women's use of their jeremiad from approximately 1830 to 1940. The first two chapters draw from black women's spiritual narratives, sermons, club publications, and literature to help locate the origins of their jeremiad, and illustrate the ways that they employed it to challenge their oppression. In these chapters I consider the long nineteenth century, a period fashioned by the ideological winds of the late eighteenth century and effectively transformed by turn of the twentieth. In both chapters, I highlight black women's use of evangelical Christian discourse and American Revolutionary ideals to establish cooperative interracial alliances and to substantiate their claims for citizenship rights.

Chapter One locates the origins of African American women's jeremiad in the Antebellum period, and asks how and why black women developed their own jeremiadic language in the 1830s. Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Sojourner Truth, and Maria Stewart, are the central figures in this chapter. They represent the foundations of black women's jeremiadic tradition. This chapter also explores the impact of the Great Awakening and the national women's movement on black women's advocacy for abolition and gender equality. Each movement provided black women speakers and writers with the platform to carve out their discourse and to put it into practice in the only public forums available

to them – churches, lecture halls, abolitionist rallies, and masonic halls. Contesting demeaning characterizations of African American women in the public forum, these pioneers used their spaces of influence to reclaim a dignified womanhood through spiritual authority. Their work also offered a socio-political critique on slavery, racism, and gender inequality. While their commentary was not often explicit, African American women who challenged racial and gendered oppression set a powerful precedent for their intellectual progeny, those women who followed their example in the decades immediately after the American Civil War.

Chapter Two follows the progression of black women's jeremiad post-Emancipation to examine the ways women of color drew on its rhetoric between 1865-1890. This chapter is dedicated to well-known figures like Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Mary Church Terrell, but also to lesser known figures such as Josephine St. Ruffin and Nannie Helen Burroughs. In their work and public activism, they combined the early ideas of Lee, Elaw, and Stewart, and advocated social behaviors that helped black women attain political freedoms. That is, these women adapted the jeremiad to their construction of womanhood even as they utilized the Victorian era gender norms of their time to give their rhetoric and activism credence. Here, I diverge somewhat with scholars who argue that black intellectuals of the late 19th century could not be spokespersons for all blacks since their Victorian ideals and class separated them from the black masses.[31] I contend

[31]Specifically, I draw on the arguments of historians such as Bruce Dickerson, *Black Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition1877-1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) and V.P. Franklin, *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of the African American Literary Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). Both scholars argue that

that black women found in Victorian social customs another mode of resistance that they combined with notions of American exceptionalism. The convergence of these themes in black women's thought undergirded their jeremiad and stabilized it as a central thread in their intellectual communities.

Black women's *enacted jeremiad* during the nineteenth century spurred dynamic intellectual communities throughout the North, but it also made numerous political inroads for subsequent generations. Consequently, the efforts of African American women during and after the Reconstruction Era forged a platform for new generations of women who adapted the jeremiad and appropriated it in response to the challenges of their socio-political realities. Thus, the black women writers, speakers, and activists who emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century assumed more prominent places in American religious and secular culture. Chapters Three and Four unpack these changes and their larger implications for the meaning of the Jeremiad.

The third and fourth chapters are driven by two important shifts I see in the form and function of black women's jeremiad. Primarily, the turn of the century marked a pivotal cultural moment for African Americans throughout the United States. This context made room for black women to express their discourse using popular culture as a mode of resistance. Specifically, black women writers and artists garnered national attention, and used this platform to modify the jeremiadic rhetoric of their predecessors. Equally important, however, is that the early twentieth century was also a critical moment

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African American intellectuals were not just elites separated from their communities, but rather that they embodied and articulated the values existent in many black communities.

in African American religious history because of its geographical, denominational, and political changes. The combined impact of the Great Migration and the rise of Holiness-Pentecostal, and messianic ministries opened new venues for African American women preachers to build on the traditions of their nineteenth century foremothers. The final chapters of my dissertation address how each of these potent markers forged significant changes in the ways black women engaged the jeremiad.

In Chapter Three I argue that black Holiness-Pentecostalism, and the growing popularity of faith healing leaders, offered one potent venue for jeremiadic expression. African American women were important benefactors of the rise in black Pentecostal movements, since these organizations typically rejected the formal hierarchies of Baptist and Methodist organizations. Within Holiness-Pentecostal movements, black women could assume leadership positions previously denied them and use their positions to attack racial and gender prejudice inside and outside of the church. In the context of the Great Migration, black women used the church to push for racial justice and gender equality. The rising numbers of black women moving into the nation's cities gave greater urgency to calls for the protection of their civic rights. It also made women like Bishop Ida B. Robinson and her Philadelphia ministry, Mt. Sinai Holy Church of America, powerfully attractive to working class African American men and women who moved from the South to the urban north during the Great Migration.

Building on the discourse of her predecessors, Robinson encouraged women to advocate for themselves, and promoted women as figures of spiritual authority within the church. The structure of her ministry, and its satellite organizations, disrupted a largely

male dominated Pentecostal movement and undermined the political influence of black male preachers. Although there is not much information on Robinson's political views, the structure of her ministry offers useful insight into her perspective on power and gender equality. Perhaps most telling, however, is that Robinson, unlike her the women who preceded her, claimed to be a spiritual healer, which gave her added influence over her congregations and ministers. Robinson's status as a faith healer and bishop was an affront to the gender norms within black churches but, in the long run, her organization did not achieve the influence of black women's clubs and sororities. I attribute this to the emergence of new gender politics that swept the nation in the early twentieth century and suggest that this cultural shift bolstered the importance of another venue black women used to express their jeremiad: literature. Mount Sinai is also important because of the way it signals a transition in the spaces where black women intellectuals employed the jeremiad in the twentieth century. Namely, it points to the beginning of a secularized use of the jeremiad. Here, I use the term secular to reference the spaces outside of the established church and its auxiliary institutions. Even so, black women who drew on jeremiadic discourse outside of the African American church continued to rely on African inspired spirituality and themes of purity in protest of racial and gender discrimination.

The cultural backdrop of the 1910s and 1920s was instrumental in modernizing black women's jeremiadic discourse; this is the entry point of Chapter Four. Many young African American women, unconvinced by the older generation's views on womanhood, were drawn to the blues woman image. The cultural phenomenon of blues, and its prominent female artists, struck a chord with young black women who had never known

slavery. This generation of women matured in an industrialized nation, pursued greater educational opportunities, and had high hopes for their prospects in the urban north. Their realities, however, were glib. Educated women in the North and South faced minimal employment opportunities, deteriorating housing, racism at every turn, and the threat of sexual violence and molestation inside and outside of their communities. The idea that black women could or should aspire to the middle-class ideals of women like Mary C. Terrell or Josephine St. Ruffin was out of touch with their lived experiences. Accordingly, they embraced the new image of black women who celebrated their beauty and sexuality unapologetically.

Black women's reclamation of their bodies in public performance saturated black communities with new energy and engendered lively debate about black femininity and racial progress. Nonetheless, the spiritual discourse of the nineteenth century was not lost on black popular culture. Many literary writers used their work to articulate the sacredness of black womanhood, while bridging the gap between black secular and religious culture. Chapter Four examines two women whose writing exemplifies this bridge work: Marita Bonner and Zora Neale Hurston. Influenced by the winds of Negritude and the New Negro Movement, Hurston and Bonner questioned the virtues of American democracy and challenged black women's continued subjugation despite the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. Their writing invoked moral authority to contest their conditional freedom in the United States. Although Bonner and Hurston both died without much acclaim, their works marked the dawn of a sharp turn in black women's jeremiadic discourse – one that engaged the contemporary world through

artistic expression and challenged the wisdom of their predecessors. Nonetheless, black women intellects who contoured new jeremiadic expressions in the early twentieth century, built on the traditions of its founders in their use of spirituality as a potent theme in their work.

In connecting black women to the divine or the supernatural, as they contested inequality, this generation of women maintained the early efforts of nineteenth century women to reclaim their bodies and their character in the public forum. More than this, however, black women like Bonner and Hurston enabled their successors to challenge the imbalances in America's socio-political and economic systems on new grounds. In telling their own stories, on their own terms, black women in the early twentieth century gave themselves a unique place in the American narrative. Their voices in American popular culture helped them to further the work of women like Truth, Elaw, Lee, and Stewart by challenging racial and gender oppression. As they did this, these intellectuals cemented the platform their foremothers built just a century earlier, even as they nuanced the definitions of black womanhood to challenge racism and sexism on new terms. Consequently, from the antebellum period to the Great Migration, African American women used their marginalized spaces to resist oppression.

Viewed in the larger context of the long African American civil rights struggle, this thread in black women's intellectual traditions is lost. Muted by the towering voices of figures like Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois, and black male-dominated sacred and secular institutions, black women are obscured, and the black freedom struggle appears implicitly about the freedom of black men. Yet a close

inspection of black women's spheres of influence demonstrates that their concepts about racial identity and womanhood were solidified by their distinct experiences as citizens of the United States. The dual oppression they experienced as African Americans and women forged a new expression of the American jeremiad. By inscribing themselves with sacred qualities, black women positioned themselves as central figures in the "city on a hill." Indeed, the importance in understanding the distinct jeremiadic expression of African American women lies in the ways that it has always challenged the national narrative about freedom and equality.

Black men used their jeremiad to reject racial inferiority, affirm African American identity, demand civic rights, and—with few exceptions—to reinforce their own dominance in black communities. For black women, however, the Jeremiad was also about refuting invisibility in their communities and beyond them. Their jeremiad was a reclamation of black bodies and an insistence on determining what would happen to them, their families, and communities. The declaration that they were mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives—who were also angels of God—was also a declaration that they belonged to themselves. Indeed, it was an assertion that black women leaders retained the right to defend themselves, their families, and their race publicly. This assertion remains central to American visions of democratic freedom, and is also a critical part of black women's continued fight for equality.

Chapter 1

"Exhibiting as did the bride of Solomon comeliness with Blackness"[1]

The emergence of African American women's jeremiad took root during the Antebellum era, when religious awakening and political debates converged frequently. In the overlap of the nation's spiritual and secular ideals black women's voices surfaced among a cacophonous symphony of social and political groups debating the fate of the United States. As I argue here, this moment was pivotal in the development of African American women's political agitation, religious leadership, and intellectual traditions. Yet the roots of black women's jeremiad are also figurative, and the discourse defies the neatly divided historical periods in which it emerged. In many ways, African American women's jeremiad is nestled in expressions of spirituality adapted by black women as the United States carved out its identity after the American Revolution and before the Civil War. Indeed, for African American women of the Early Republic and Antebellum periods, spirituality was the gateway to nearly all conceivable forms of resistance to oppression. Put simply, it was one of the most apt modes of survival in slavery and freedom. In this way, it is also accurate to say that for black women, the jeremiad was born out of the spiritual belief and expression of Africans in the early Americas. The spiritual syncretism of early Afro-American faith, born out of the collision of cultures throughout the Americas, enabled many African people to survive the trauma of the Middle Passage. Consequently, hybrid black spiritual

[1] Zilpha Elaw, *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Colour* (London, 1846), iv.

expression in the United States represents a critical aspect of African American creolization, even as it also reveals a vital space of agency for African American people in the early United States.[2]

A surface inspection of black women's use of spiritual language illustrates that they were influenced by the religious culture of American society. Yet what makes their use of Christian evangelical themes different from that of other Americans is that they imbued the rhetoric of the Second Great Awakening with their own sense of racial and gender equality. In this respect, they radically shifted Christian rhetoric to challenge white racial dominance and male hegemony. Spiritual discourse was also ideal for African American women's resistance because spirituality provided all African American people with a place of refuge, transcendence and resistance in Antebellum America.

Nonetheless, the very nature of racism and sexism after the American Revolution forged a religious tradition among black women that celebrated them as uniquely positioned to embody and house the supernatural. Vulnerable to economic, social, political, and sexual exploitation in and outside of their communities, African American women viewed themselves as the proverbial "broken vessel."[3] This humbled state, left them entirely dependent on the mercy of the Divine, and therefore, most likely to carry out divine instruction. For women like Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, and Zilpha Elaw, divine inspiration was pivotal to their activism and intellectual development. While each woman employed the jeremiad in her own way, all relied on a language of purity and transformation to point out the inequality every woman of color faced. Stewart, Truth, Lee, and Elaw used their narratives to reinforce Jesus's teaching that "the last shall be first and the first last."[4] That is, each of these women used their public narratives to

[2] Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion And Black Radicalism* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972)
[3] See for reference Psa: 51:8, 51:17, 34:18, Isa: 57:15, Jer. 23:9 in NKJV.
[4] See Matt: 20:16 NKJV.

tell stories about how they overcame the challenges of low socio-economic status, racism and sexism. The narratives of the black women Jeremiahs discussed here, typically entailed extended periods of hardship or suffering they overcame through salvation. Coming through their periods of distress, in turn, denoted their process of purification and underscored the claims that they were chosen by God.

As I contend, the efforts of black women Jeremiahs in the first half of the nineteenth century provide deeper insight into the ways black women viewed themselves as citizens and women. When they did not call themselves divine outright, Lee, Stewart, Truth, and Elaw declared that they were purified and divinely chosen. Speaking under the authority of God they could effectively combat racialized stigmas about their bodies, character and intellectual ability. Within the context of the Antebellum period, these women speakers, writers, and orators found a socio-political atmosphere rich with opportunities to re-define themselves. Consequently, they a critical foundation in the development of black women's jeremiad. Through the work of Lee, Stewart, Elaw, and Truth, black women claimed a space for themselves in the "city on a hill." Hence, uncovering the roots of black women's jeremiad involves a close inspection of their spiritual discourse and the pivotal moment that made this conversation audible to white audiences throughout the North.

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At the turn of the nineteenth century, the United States was still a relatively fragile political nation-state. The War of Independence ended merely seventeen years prior, and the Constitution passed, with trepidation, five years later in 1789. For the men who led the nation through its fight for independence, and those who authored its mantra of freedom, liberty, and

equality, the United States was very much an active experiment.[5] For most Americans, however, the country's democratic experiment was a success. While every citizen was not happy with the regional impacts of the war, nor continued British presence through the first decade of the nineteenth century, many believed no greater nation existed than their own. Indeed, the Antebellum period is arguably the most pivotal era in the articulation and rehearsal of this notion. More so than the actual Revolutionary period, the developments of the first three decades of the nineteenth century seemed to prove that the United States stood for the ideals first espoused just a half century prior.[6] Accordingly, the overlapping Early Republic and Antebellum periods are crucial for understanding how the United States came to believe so unequivocally in its own promise. They also offer great insight on the progression of American jeremiadic discourse throughout the nineteenth century.

By 1820, the nation experienced rapid geographic and economic expansion, political stability, and scientific and spiritual enlightenment swept the country. Seemingly, evidence was everywhere; the United States was truly a special place. Whether they believed the nation was a divinely selected "city set upon on a hill," or simply a political beacon for the rest of the world, it was clear that nothing else like it existed. As the country continued to expand, and organize new states through the first half of the century, Americans grew more confident in the strength and validity of their political ideals. In popular culture, national figures of the Revolutionary period

[5] For a full discussion on the disappointments and frustrations of the Constitutional framers after the Convention of 1787 see Richard B. Bernstein, *The Founding Fathers Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Geoffrey R. Stone, *War and Liberty* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009).
[6] For an excellent analysis of American popular thought during this period, see Rush Welter, *The Mind Of America, 1820-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press,1975).

underwent an apotheosis, and Americans were encouraged to view the War for Independence as a sacred event.[7]

An editorial in the *Augusta Chronicle* commemorated the country's independence by including full excerpts of Thomas Jefferson's letters and personal memoir in the July fourth issue of 1829. The editors asserted, "We do not know that we could offer anything more valuable or interesting to our reader, on this the Anniversary of our National Independence, than the following extracts from the 'Memoir and Correspondence' of the sainted and illustrious Jefferson." The article also offered Jefferson's sentiments on his contemporaries, who were heavily engaged "in the holy work of the Revolution."[8] In a letter to the editor of the *Daily National Journal,* one observer boasted that in the United States, "the spirit of independence, the freedom of opinion, and the liberty of action, which have caused so much trouble to other countries, are entirely suppressed."[9] Advocating increased free trade throughout the country, a man argued,

> *"The policy of our government, with respect to home industry, is like everything else in the country, upon a grand and magnificent scale. It is predicated upon the rapid approach of the millennium, and contemplates the human race as already forming one family."*[10]

Indeed, by the 1830s, declining British, French, and Spanish presence in the U.S. made the expression of American exceptionalism and jeremiadic rhetoric much more significant in popular discourse. The ideology that the United States was a special, even divinely chosen, country saturated American social, political, and economic dialogue. It reaffirmed many

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[7] For a detailed discussion on this see Welter, *The Mind of America*, 3-45; Janice Hume, *Popular Media and The American Revolution: Shaping Collective Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Sarah J. Purcell, *Sealed With Blood: War, Sacrifice and Memory in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).
[8] Editorial, *Augusta Chronicle* Saturday, July 04, 1829.
[9] Letter to Editor, *Daily National Journal* January 08, 1830.
[10] Marald, letter to the editor, *Daily National Intelligence,* Saturday, November 20, 1830.

Americans' belief that their country was at the pinnacle of global progress. In the words of C. C. Greenup Esq, "looking at our country as she is connected with others abroad…what nation on earth stands fairer?"[11] As the nation molded its identity, the American people inscribed themselves with qualities that distanced them from the European "old world," while also embellishing its greatest ideas as their own. Here was a nation that did not simply espouse ideas, it lived and embodied them in its politics and faith. From its foremost intellectuals to its yeoman farmers, American society personified progress.[12]

The presidential campaign and subsequent election of Andrew Jackson amplified these beliefs, along with the rise of the Democratic party. Jackson's campaign drew heavily on the idea that the country belonged to the common man, to free men, and that aristocratic privileges were a detriment to national progress. He also emphasized the virtues of American democracy and the success of the Revolutionary War. In his first speech to Congress he praised the country, noting "it is to me a source of unfeigned satisfaction…that we are at peace with all mankind, and that our country exhibits the most cheering evidence of general welfare and progressive improvement." If only other nations would follow in the American example. "Turning our eyes to the other nations," he mused, "our great desire is to see our brethren of the human race secured by the blessings enjoyed by ourselves, and advancing in knowledge, in freedom, and in social happiness."[13]

Democratic ideologies struck a chord with many Americans, and defenders of Jackson and the party sprung up in many states. As William James McNeven wrote to the editors of the

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[11] C. C. Greenup, Oration, *Floridian & Advocate* (Tallahasee, FL) Tuesday July 20, 1830. Issue 48.
[12] Welter, *The Mind of America*, 9-13; 31-36.
[13] Andrew Jackson, "First Annual Message," December 8, 1829. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29471.

Daily National Intelligencer "the Democratic party was founded on the purest principles."[14] A citizen defending democrats against Whig opposition in the *Vermont Patriot and State Gazette* complained that they persisted in "their old schemes of building up and perpetuating aristocratic institutions in this country and endeavoring to put down Democratic citizens and democratic principles."[15] In the next year, an anonymous advocate in the same paper wrote "the democratic republicans of the United States are, in principle and practice, Union men, liberal minded men, ready to do justice to every interest…and…they number an overwhelming majority of freemen of the Union."[16]

While Jackson and the Democratic Party harped on the Revolutionary ideals Americans held so dear, their appeals to democratic sentiment among the nation's working class white men had unintended consequences. Namely, they offered abolitionists, women suffragists, Whig party challengers, Christian evangelicals, Native Americans and African Americans plenty of ammunition for pointing out inconsistencies in their political platform.[17] Consequently, while the majority of Americans felt that their country exemplified historical progress and political strength, the nation's development also prompted criticism of the ways the United States had not fulfilled its providential mandate.

Despite a significant number of critics within American society, most of the dissenting voices agreed with the idea that the United States was a place where the joys of political freedom were unprecedented. Still, they warned against the dangers of too much self-congratulation. For those concerned about the nation's development, economic expansion, slavery, and budding

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[14] William James McNeven, Letter to the Editor, *Daily National Intelligencer,* Tuesday April 8, 1834.
[15] Letter to the Editor, *Vermont Patriot and State Gazette,* Monday October 27, 1834.
[16] Letter to the Editor, *Vermont Patriot and State Gazette***,** Monday, May 04, 1835.
[17] See Welter, *The Mind of America*, 344-348; James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 155-176.

western industry, denoted materialism, greed, and exploitation. Most worrisome, however, was the fear that the nation's morals were in serious decline. Anxiety about the nation's moral destiny undergirded larger concerns about the development of American urbanization, immigration, and industrialization. As one man explained, "a republican government cannot exist long without national morality." Issuing further warning, he explained, "where a people reject the moral government of God, we have…his word that he will rule them with 'a rod of iron.'"[18] Criticizing the Indian Removal policies of the Jackson administration, another citizen wrote "let us no more pretend that we are a magnanimous, a just, or even civilized people." [19] Anti-Slavery Society member, Francis Jackson, lamented "the alarming state of our guilty land."[20] The theme of guilt surfaced in many Americans criticisms of their society, particularly those who worried about how the nation would fair in light of what many believed was a fast approaching millennium.[21] No matter where they surfaced, criticisms from dissenting groups relied on the language of freedom and equality to challenge their marginalization in the country.

For dissident groups, such as abolitionists, the United States was still a good distance from its desired epochal place in history, and full realization of democratic ideals rested on the manifestation of their freedom. After all, freedom was precarious for many Americans, all of whom took their turns reminding the nation that the goals of the American revolution were not realized until it included them. Here, use of the jeremiad was potent and compelling. What better way to fight for a more inclusive democracy than to call the nation's attention back to its unfulfilled revolutionary work? Perhaps the most frequent appeals to revolutionary sentiment came from abolitionists. Debating the merits of violent slave rebellion, an abolitionist writing in

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[18] "The Danger to be Apprehended from the Prevalence of Infidelity in Our Country," *Western Intelligencer* (Hudson, OH) Thursday, January 7 1830. Issue 49.
[19] Tamanend, letter to the editor, *Boston Courier*, Thursday January 14, 1830.
[20] Francis Jackson, letter to the editor, *The Liberator,* Saturday November 28, 1835.
[21] Welter, *The Mind of America,* 19-21.

The Liberator argued that anti-slavery advocates were not responsible for slave retaliation. Instead, he contended, "the whole history of our nation is nothing but one long and loud appeal to slaves throughout the world to arise and assert their freedom at the sword point."[22] The editors of *The Colored American* asserted, "American slavery in the eye of reason is a system of injustice…it deprives the slave of his inalienable rights." Issuing warning, they wrote, "these are our great national sins…and unless Christians confess…God will destroy the church and the nation."[23]

Critics of the United States sustained contentious national debates. Was this a country of unfettered freedom and liberty? What did either word truly mean in the face of a still developing nation? And, most importantly, what did it mean to be an American if you did not enjoy the freedoms associated with the country? While poor white men were increasingly gaining political strength in the country, white women were socially, politically, and economically oppressed. Free African Americans across the country faced similar forms of oppression. Limited to domestic service jobs, and vulnerable to racial violence and intimidation, they lived on the margins of American society. Even more than this, the expansion of chattel slavery in the South left many free and enslaved African Americans fearful that they would be kidnapped and sold—or resold—into the growing plantation societies of Louisiana, Alabama, Texas, and Mississippi. Native Americans also faced a gruesome reality, as the Jackson administration actively pursued policies of displacement and extermination throughout the 1830s.[24] Despite their exclusion from the national dialogue about the nation, women and African Americans included themselves –

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[22] Wickliffe, letter to the editor, *The Liberator*, Saturday October 10, 1835.
[23] Editorial, *The Colored American*, June 22, 1839.
[24] Two excellent studies on Native American removal policies and Native responses to them are Darcy MacNickle, *Native American Tribalism: Indian Survivals and Renewals* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973); Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 41-69.

often aligning politically on issues of temperance, universal suffrage, and abolition. In doing so, both groups found themselves at a critical juncture in American democratic ideology and Christian evangelical revival. This juncture, in turn, provided them with the ability to speak and write for public audiences and rally against the social, economic, and political injustices that affected them most.

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On its own, politics left little room for the voices of women or African Americans, but the rise of the Second Great Awakening created a new platform for them in the public forum. Evangelical preachers and writers disparaged the moral state of the country, arguing that the continued success of American society rested on Christian principles and political leaders who upheld them. Deviation from this basis, they contended, threatened the very fabric of the country's welfare. The culmination of their public work surfaced in a series of temperance movements and revivals that sprung up across the United States. Traveling preachers, missionaries, writers, exhorters, and prayer groups mushroomed in nearly every state and territory, garnering widely diverse followings and converts.[25]

Women and African Americans flocked to evangelical meetings, often going on to found their own movements and organizations based on Christian evangelical beliefs. It is here that African Americans and women found a critical platform to argue for their respective causes. Both groups argued for an all-inclusive universal suffrage, and for the abolition of slavery

[25] For a thorough study on the impact of the Second Great Awakening for women and African Americans, see Barry Hankins, *The Second Great Awakening and The Transcendentalists* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2004); Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Carol Lasser and Stacey M. Robertson, *Antebellum Women: Private, Public, Partisan* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010). Richard Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) is also an important work on the interplay of evangelical thought and American politics during the antebellum period.

throughout the nation. African Americans, in particular, argued for increased access to education, better labor conditions, and greater civic equality for free people of color. Many, with few exceptions, also rallied against African colonization efforts, which they viewed as insidious attempts to expunge the country of its free black population. Using the networks and resources available through evangelical organizations, women and African Americans gathered new skills and aligned themselves more succinctly with a growing voice in American politics.[26] As religious and political sentiments became more intertwined, both groups found they could exert considerable influence on American politics. Maintaining this influence, however, meant that all challenges and critiques of American society were necessarily couched in moral language, or "moral suasion."[27] This was particularly important for American women – white and black – whose presence in the public sphere was deeply contentious. Political debate and public activism were masculine arenas that all women navigated through themes of domesticity and the use of moral arguments.

The hybridity of political discourse during the Antebellum period provided a broad new platform for white women and African Americans, but even this new space in the public forum left out a further marginalized group – African American women. White middle class women ran and organized the largest women's rights groups of the early nineteenth century, and black women members seldom held positions of leadership. Basing their claims for increased rights and public representation in a language of "virtue" and domesticity, white women's activism in

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[26] Free African Americans' antebellum activism has a vast historiography, but Rita Robert's *Evangelicalism and The Politics Of Reform In Northern Black Thought, 1776-1863* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010) and Leon F. Litwack's *North Of Slavery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) have been most helpful to me in this project. See also Nancy Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984).

[27] Lebbeus Armstrong, *The Temperance Reformation* (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1853) provides a full definition of moral suasion and Tunde Adeleke explores black use of this rhetorical strategy in his Essay "Afro-Americans and Moral Suasion: The Debate in the 1830's" *The Journal of Negro History* 83, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 127-142.

the "private sphere" moved gradually into the public. As public speakers, white women asserted that they were the guardians of "virtue," and consequently, the vanguard against and oppression. Their heightened visibility in public mirrored a rise in women's charitable organizations, reform societies, suffrage and temperance movements between 1830 and 1850. Virtue and domesticity were also endemic to the construction of white womanhood throughout the nineteenth century. It was the platform on which they stood as respectable symbols of American freedom and democracy. It was also the social etiquette that undercut any seeming threats to white masculinity.[28] Marked by their socio-economic status, and racial identity, however, black women were typically outside of these definitions. Even free middle class women of color faced the social stigma of race attached to their gender. For all black women, displays of respectability garnered public scorn and ridicule. Consequently, the ideals that created more room in the public sphere for white women, were a help and hindrance for black women.[29]

Conversely, abolitionist groups and African American mutual aid organizations were dominated by black and white men. Here too black women hardly ever held any positions of considerable influence. African American men assumed the dominant role as representatives of the race. When black men worked alongside women, many expected women to show deference and take on submissive roles within activist organizations. In particular, black women often faced social pressure to live up to middle class ideals and uphold motherhood and marriage as their primary work.[30] Consequently, African American women were dually excluded from the

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[28] Lasser and Robertson, *Antebellum Women,* 56-73; Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood" *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 155-174.
[29] Jasmine Nichole Cobb's recent study *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2015) provides excellent insight on the nineteenth century public image of black women. See also Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom,* 132-136.
[30] See Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes Towards Black Women, 1880-1920* (New York: Carlson Publications Inc., 1990).

venues most likely to help them resist the oppression they faced in and outside of their communities. Even so, they found ways to insert themselves into the national dialogue. Relying mostly on networks of other black women, religious and secular organizations within their communities, and cross alliances with white women, they too interjected their perspectives, experiences, and criticisms of democracy in the public sphere. For African American women, however, spiritual language and moral persuasion were central components of their calls for equality. They were also critical parts of black women's rhetorical and enacted jeremiad.

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Despite their marginalization, black women were equally susceptible to the powerful narratives of American exceptionalism. Like most Americans they believed the United States was a special place. How then did they view themselves in the "city on a hill"? For free and enslaved women, the answers to those questions lay in their spirituality. Spiritual belief and practice offered all African Americans the only space of affirmation and resistance where whites could not interfere. The intensely private nature of spiritual life allowed black men and women to be fully vulnerable. It affirmed their humanity and reassured them that freedom was possible and inevitable. More than this, spirituality established socio-political platforms for women like Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, and Zilpha Elaw; who used their public presence to decry inequality.

Spiritual practice enabled black women to speak uninhibited by social constraints. It also provided various means of organization and kinship networks. At the height of the Antebellum period, when spiritual belief collided with national political discourse, African American women had ideal conditions for developing their own intellectual and oratorical traditions of protest. Joining the chorus of Christian evangelicals who argued that the country was in moral declension

allowed black women to travel, orate, and agitate against racism and sexism. While their numbers grew incrementally, those who directly challenged the political inequality embedded in the New Republic helped pave the way for the intense activism, intellectual production, and public speaking of others long after the Civil War.

African American women who appealed to the jeremiad viewed themselves as microcosms of the nation itself. They represented the progress of a great series of African people who had fallen from grace. As Maria Stewart argued, people of African descent "sprung from one of the most learned nations of the whole earth, from the seat, if not the parent of science."[31] Many even saw their condition in the United States as divinely ordered. Their suffering was meaningful; enduring it was essential to the success of future generations, and in the three decades before the outbreak of the Civil War, freedom was theirs for the taking. In the words of Sojourner Truth, "the promises of the Scriptures were all for black people, and God would recompense them for all their sufferings."[32]

Just as Americans believed that no greater sign of progress and freedom existed on the earth than in the development of their national history, African American women believed that no clearer sign of African redemption existed in the world than in the progress of their race. Still, black women speakers, writers and activists argued there was much work to be done for freedom and equality. This sense that social and political injustice necessitated action added to African American women's use of the Jeremiad as an intellectual tradition, facilitating collective

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[31] Maria W. Stewart, "An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall. Lecture, Boston, February 27, 1833," reprinted in *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 58.

[32] Sojourner Truth, "Proceedings at the Anti-Slavery Celebration, Framingham, MA, July 4, 1854," *The Liberator*, July 14, 1854. For a detailed discussion on early African American interpretations of slavery and the Bible see Riggins Renal Earl, *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993); Eddie S. Glaude, *Exodus!* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

activism. Their conviction that they were godly representatives sent black women into free and enslaved states. For all of the women in the chapter, public speaking was not enough. They lived their ideals—even when it crippled them with depression or illness. More than this, Stewart, Truth, Lee and Elaw worked as educators, suffragists, abolitionists, and temperance advocates within black communities to prepare them for the social equality they believed was inevitable in American society.

To these intellectuals, the moment was teeming with spiritual signs and promise. Complementing this, was the growing convergence of spiritual practices across the nation that affirmed Afrocentric ways of communing with the divine.[33] Though many Americans viewed the United States, and its government, as organically protestant Christian, the country was in fact deeply pluralist. Most Americans were not strict adherents of any one faith, but rather, multi-religious. Combining bits and pieces of orthodox religious ideology with various modes of spiritual practice, the nineteenth century was a religious panorama that spanned everything from occult practice and psychic readings, to self-proclaimed healers, and prophets. In the 1830s and 1840s, the largest segments of this pantheon were protestant Christian groups like the Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians, and Mormons. In their teaching, writing and preaching during the Antebellum period, protestant evangelicals embraced new doctrines that emphasized faith healing, sanctification, spiritual perfection, trances, and prophetic visions and dreams.[34]

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[33] See John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969); John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1970); Albert J. Raboteau *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Bert Hamminga, "Epistemology from the African Point of View," *Knowledge Cultures: Comparative Western and African Epistemology* eds. Anthony Appiah, et al. (New York: Radopi, 2005), 57-85.

[34] For an excellent discussion on Antebellum American religious life see Jon Butler, *Awash in A Sea of Faith*: *Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

These new developments in the religious world, formed the foundation on which African American women built their own platform—one that worked to undermine racial and gender discrimination throughout American society. The emergence of charismatic preaching in the Methodist and Baptist movements of the Second Great Awakening ushered many African American women into these denominations. More than this, however, the combined focus on purity and transformation opened a profound door for them once they converted. Nearly all African American women were marred by their socio-economic positions; racial stigma only deepened their oppression. Most Americans viewed enslaved women as innately masculine, unintelligible and licentious. The nature of slave labor and the prevalence of interracial rape and breeding all seemed to confirm black women's public debasement. Compounding this was the hyper-focus on sexual immorality in antislavery campaigns. Abolitionists' efforts to shame slaveholders ultimately furthered the oversexualized image of black women.[35]

Free black women were equally burdened by hypersexualization. Few northern states freed their black populations completely at the beginning of the nineteenth century; most adopted gradual abolition legislature that took twenty to thirty years to implement.[36] Consequently, nearly all free blacks in the North were born very poor and African American women were much more likely to be contracted in domestic labor from their childhood into their adulthood in order to gain freedom. While domestic service was not identical to slavery, it was viewed in much the same way by most American whites. More than this, African American girls and women in servitude

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[35] These strategies are fully explored in Gregory D. Smithers, "American Abolitionism And Slave-Breeding Discourse: A Re-Evaluation" *Slavery & Abolition* 33, no. 4 (2012): 551-570; Ronald G. Walters, "The Erotic South: Civilization And Sexuality In American Abolitionism" *American Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (1973); Pamela Bridgewater, *Breeding A Nation: Slavery, The Thirteenth Amendment and The Pursuit Of Freedom* (Boston: Southend Press, 2010).

[36] See James Oliver Horton *Free People of Color* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993); James J. Gigantino, "'The Whole North Is Not Abolitionized': Slavery's Slow Death In New Jersey, 1830–1860" *Journal Of The Early Republic* 34, no. 3: 411-437; Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom By Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and its Aftermath* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

were often subject to the same types of physical and sexual abuse as their legally enslaved counterparts in the South—particularly since many white employers required live-in service from their domestic workers.[37] Life as a domestic was also rife with arduous labor, leaving many free black women too physically impaired to continue working in their mature adult years. As a result, most were dependent on the kindness of friends, family, or religious institutions. Their inability to work or care for themselves as they aged often amplified the public scorn they faced.[38]

The language and ideologies of the Second Great Awakening, however, provided a space of redemption, transformation, and possibility. Indeed, the intersections of American religious and political life during the Antebellum period complemented Afrocentric philosophies that linked the spiritual and secular.[39] This philosophical outlook on the world undergirded the discourse of black women Jeremiahs and bolstered its importance as a part of their social and political protest. In prayer meetings and revivals, many African American women developed the oratorical and writing strategies that helped to challenge their exclusion in and outside of black communities. The informal training provided through Baptist and Methodist church outreach fostered cross racial alliances, abolitionist support and educational opportunities unavailable to African American men and women anywhere else. Consequently, the religious movements of the Second Great Awakening were the only viable spaces in which black women Jeremiahs could call for justice from a larger white audience and be heard alongside white women and black men.

As they voiced their criticisms of American democracy, black women intellectuals infused their writing and oratory with themes that fit neatly into the Judeo-Christian and

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[37] Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) ; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within The Plantation Household*: *Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).
[38] Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 26-47
[39] See John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy,* 29-47.

republican ideals of their larger society. These motifs represent the core elements of their jeremiadic discourse. The most prominent of these was personal salvation, which distanced black women from the social ills and vices associated with their labor and their presence in the public sphere. The second theme was sanctification, a process of purification that denoted complete transformation—thereby undermining racial stigmas about black female bodies. The third was spiritual or divine authority, which indicated a transcendence of physical and emotional hurdles by refuting the idea that women should be innately subservient. Claiming divine authority asserted that power derived from women's bodies, and that it could not be determined or controlled by men. Charting their course through each of these stages of spirituality allowed African American women to speak from positions of power, without fear of violence or judgement. For women like Stewart, Truth, Lee, and Elaw, the work was far greater than the pains of their labor. In their spiritual narratives and community activism each woman set a foundational brick in the formation of African American women's jeremiad.

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Born free and poor in 1803, Maria Miller was orphaned at five years old and hired as a domestic servant in Hartford, Connecticut for most of her childhood. Although her labor contract was completed in 1818, Miller was forced to continue domestic work into her twenties to support herself. In 1826, she married James W. Stewart, taking on both his middle and last names. James Stewart was a war veteran and activist whose personal business and political engagements in Boston afforded his wife the opportunity to share in the dynamic exchange of ideas among Boston's small black elite. It also gave her keen insight into their lifestyles and political opinions. Most impactful, however, was her relationship with David Walker, who influenced Maria Stewart's oratorical style and her passionate challenges to American slavery and European imperialism in Africa. Stewart became a student and mentee of Walker and carried his mantle as

an ardent anti-slavery advocate long after his death. James Stewart died merely three years after they married in 1829, and David Walker passed away one year later. Distraught and heart-broken, she struggled with her faith, but soon found her political voice in renewed spirituality.

In her 1831 pamphlet *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality,* Stewart explained that her husband's death deepened her sense of spirituality and not long after she "made a public profession of [her] faith in Christ." Stewart's renewed dedication to God emboldened her to champion "the cause of God and [her] brethren." Stewart's political career began to flourish after the publication of her early writing, but she also faced heightened resistance to her public calls for racial equality in Boston. Still, she persisted. Now was the time to "prove to the world that though your skins as shades of night, your hearts are pure, your souls are white." [40]

Speaking on the degrading nature of slavery, Stewart positioned herself as one of the earliest African American women abolitionists in the country. Drawing on the themes of African American exceptionalism, found in David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored People of the World,* she added that black women were essential to securing and sustaining black freedom.[41] Stewart emphasized the importance of black mothers in the education of their children, and therefore the race. "O, ye daughters of Africa," she petitioned, "arise…distinguish yourselves…show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties."[42] For Stewart, African American people had all the potential and capability of American whites, and moral instruction along with civic training was the key to racial empowerment and progress. Keenly aware of white resistance to black civic equality, she repeatedly invoked the jeremiad in protest of slavery. Yet she also

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[40] Maria W. Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality" reprinted in *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer* ed. Marilyn Richardson, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1987), 29.
[41] David Walker, *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* ed. Peter P. Hinks (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).
[42] Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality," 30.

employed it as a means of warning American whites against their prejudice and reminding African Americans that their time of redemption was at hand. In one of her early lectures she lamented "O, America, America! Thou land of my birth! I love and admire thy virtues as much as I abhor and detest thy vices."[43] In a published prayer she cautioned, "O, ye great and mighty men of America…you may kill, tyrannize, and oppress as much as you choose, until our cry shall come up before the throne of God…in his own time, he is able to plead our cause against you."[44]

In all of her work Stewart challenged African Americans to take on the mantle of the country and assert their liberty and equality. Convinced that the time was opportune for blacks to redeem themselves, she argued that they would soon proclaim to white America "...our souls are fired with the same love of liberty and independence with which your souls are fired." [45] Still, she argued, it was up to all African Americans to claim their place in the nation. While Stewart believed in the importance of racial cooperation, she was also adamant about the centrality of African American people to the realization of racial equality in the United States. Her urgency reveals an underlying concern about the complacency of many white Americans with slavery and black oppression. If African Americans could not rally national support for full black equality from white Americans, they would have to rely on each other. Yet Stewart's language here also points to her belief in African American exceptionalism. This is clear in her admonition to African American men. Stewart boldly challenged black men to "show forth the powers of your mind…[for]…it is not the color of the skin that makes the man, but it is the principles formed within the soul."[46] Noting "our fathers bled and died in the revolutionary war," she asked, "where

[43] Ibid., 43.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid., 40.
[46] See note 40.

is the man that has distinguished himself in these modern days by acting wholly in the defense of African rights and liberty?"[47]

Stewart insisted that African American people continue to demand an end to slavery and to use self-help and biblical instruction to demonstrate black value in the country. Her position on this, however, was not well received. This was due in large part to her sharp criticisms of middle class African American men. In a speech to the First African Masonic Hall Stewart quipped, "had those men among us who had an opportunity turned their attention as assiduously to mental and moral improvement as they have to gambling and dancing, I might have remained quietly at home and they stood in my place." Calling her audience to action, she argued, "It is no use for us to wait any longer...let every man of color, who possess the spirit and principles of a man, sign a petition to Congress to abolish slavery and grant you the rights and privileges of common free citizens."[48]

In her rebuke of free, middle class, black men, Stewart was directly challenging accepted gender norms and disrupting the social expectation that black women should uphold domesticated and submissive attitudes – which she acknowledged with sarcasm. Even so, she undermined the notion that black men were the best suited to lead and represent the race in the public sphere. It wasn't long before Stewart's militancy placed her at odds with African American men and women who viewed her efforts as unbecoming and improper. Ultimately, Stewart conceded to the pressures to play a less active role in public agitation, but this did not dissuade her from contesting the gender bias against her.

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[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid., 57-62.

Just before she ended her public speaking career in 1833, Stewart defended her right to speak, drawing on spiritual narrative discourse to reject sexist views about women in leadership positions. This choice is interesting for two reasons. On one hand, Stewart's use of spiritual narrative demonstrates the importance of spirituality to African American women's political activism during the nineteenth century. On the other, it illustrates the ways in which Stewart benefited from the concurrent work of the only other black women orators of her time – itinerant preachers and abolitionists. In response to the criticism she received, Stewart reprimanded the black male leaders of her Boston community, and reminded them that God had chosen her for political leadership, not men. Drawing parallels between herself and the biblical Hebrew prophets, she warned her critics that African Americans could not ask white Americans for equality if they did not practice equality in their own communities. In this way, Stewart cast herself as a Jeremiah of her day, warning African American male leaders about the potential consequences of their hypocritical attitudes towards women leaders.

Spiritual narrative discourse is visible in much of Stewart's work during the 1830s, but was most pronounced as she protested gender discrimination. In her many contributions to *The Liberator,* for example, she detested rejection of her political speeches by comparing herself to the prophets of the Old Testament. Encouraging herself, and her readers to remain steady in the work of God, she declared "shake the dust off your feet."[49] Stewart's admonition here was powerful. It allowed her to assume a masculine position of authority as an apostle by invoking the words of Jesus. In its original context, Jesus warned his disciples that they would not be accepted in every city or village where they taught. Hence, he instructed them to "shake off the dust of your feet" as a symbolic gesture to God that symbolized a coming Divine Judgement for

[49] Maria W. Stewart, Untitled Poem, *The Liberator* May 19, 1832. Stewart's poem references Matt: 10:14-16 *KJV* where Jesus instructs his disciples about how to respond to those who rejected their message.

unrepentance.[50] Stewart's choice of scripture is also bold in that she was applying it to the political opposition she faced from within her own community, similar to the biblical narrative of Jeremiah.[51] Stewart's intentional portrayal of herself as a social prophet and disciple, to reprimand black male leaders suggests that she saw herself as God's chosen. Yet it also reveals the ways in which she saw black male hypocrisy as a hindrance in racial progress. In this sense, the jeremiad worked for Stewart as a warning about gender inequality within black communities and larger issues of national inequality in the United States.

Stewart's appeal to black women's jeremiad is even more clear in her 1833 farewell speech to the free black community in Boston. In it she framed herself as divinely selected and divinely inspired. Similar to many black women preachers, she noted that her early life was sinful because she had not yet given herself to God. As she described it, "I had been like a ship tossed to and fro." She then explained that salvation transformed her, and God's personal call inspired her devotion to social and political equality. Stewart's description of her salvation offered her the opportunity to undermine negative stereotypes about poor free African Americans. The resulting transformation of salvation however, made her ideal for leadership. She told her audience "the Spirit of God came before me and I spake before many."[52]

Stewart attributed her gift for public speaking to the manifestation of God's power working through her, a theme found specifically in the narratives of itinerant black women evangelists. Reinforcing this idea, she explained, "I have every reason to believe that it is the Divine influence of the Holy Spirit operating upon my heart that could possibly induce me to

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[50] Ibid.
[51] See for refence J. Philip Hyatt, *Jeremiah: Prophet of Courage and Hope* (New York: Abington Press, 1958); William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah: A Fresh Reading* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012); Jeremiah 1:1-19 *KJV*.
[52] Stewart, "Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston," 66-67.

make the feeble and unworthy efforts that I have."[53] And in a final rebuke of her critics, she offered a brief history lesson. Women in many societies of antiquity were viewed as sacred.[54] "If such women as are here described have once existed," she told them,

> *Be no longer astonished then, my brethren and friends, that God at this eventful period should raise up your own females to strive by their example both in public and private, to assist those who are endeavoring to stop the strong current of prejudice that flows so profusely against us at present. No longer ridicule their efforts, it will be counted for sin.*[55]

Stewart's use of spiritual themes to affirm her authority as a public speaker and intellectual was an important piece of her challenge to the sexism she experienced. In fact, within this same speech she criticized her audience for their doubts about the spiritual and intellectual abilities of black women. "Let us talk no longer of opposition," she quipped, "till we cease to oppose our own."[56] Prejudice and discrimination were not in line with freedom, and in the context of African American communities, it represented a threat to the progress of the entire race. This idea is repeated in the narratives of her evangelistic contemporaries as a means of insisting that civic freedom and equality for African American people in the United States could not be accomplished without gender equality.

The lines between abolitionists and preachers were very fine. Particularly since the 1830s saw a sharp increase in debates over black freedom, and African colonization, black speakers in abolitionist societies and religious meetings frequently drew from the same discourse of morality to substantiate their claims that racial oppression was a social evil.[57] It is no wonder then that

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[53] Ibid.
[54] Sarah B Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocen Books, 1975).
[55] Stewart, "Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston," 69.
[56] Ibid., 71.
[57] Ronald G. Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal: American Abolitionism after 1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Michael P. Young, *Bearing Witness against Sin: The Evangelical Birth of the American Social Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

Stewart responded to her opposition by straddling the line between her role as a political thinker and activist, and her self-perceptions as a divinely elected clarion of justice. Her spiritual dialogue in defense of herself was standard for her times, and it clearly demonstrated her meticulous study of history, American politics, and biblical exegesis – an incredible testament to her literacy. Nonetheless, Stewart's spiritual defense was equally important because of the way it asserted her rights as a public intellectual and reinforced her status as a lady among Boston's free black elite.

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Sojourner Truth is one of the most well-known African American political speakers of the nineteenth century. Born a slave in New York in 1797, Truth spent a significant portion of her adult life in very harsh conditions. Known primarily for her work as an abolitionists and suffragist, her early life as an itinerant preacher is often overlooked. It was here, however, that her political career began to bud. Her travels in New York and Connecticut offered her the opportunity to connect with several Christian sects, and to engage white and black communities as a public speaker. While Sojourner Truth did not write her own narratives, she crafted a narrative for her audiences through public performance. In her songs, stories and speeches, Truth relied on spiritual discourse to establish herself as a woman of God before white audiences, but she also used this discourse to criticize racism and sexism in American society. Underscoring her public oratory, however, was Truth's physical appearance before audiences. She wore simple, dark colored, Quaker style, dresses and covered her hair in bonnets and scarves. Truth's self-presentation challenged public ideas about black womanhood and underscored her spiritual authority. Yet she also defied nineteenth century constructions of traditional womanhood by referencing her body as a criticism of slavery and gender discrimination. Pointing to her tall muscular frame, she mocked the idea that women were fragile in nature. Truth also rejected the idea that her experiences made her less of a woman, and she used her life's story as a means of

humanizing herself and other enslaved women.[58] In particular, she shared the painful experiences of her childhood and the struggles she faced as a mother. Truth's vulnerable and transparent oratory symbolized her representation as a "broken vessel," one whose endurance of suffering produces spiritual purification and draws them closer to the Divine. Her personification of both purity and divine selection bolstered her construction of womanhood and her challenge to racial inequality.

Like many enslaved women, Truth met God through another woman, her mother Betsey, who taught her that prayer was a refuge. Although she struggled with her faith as a young woman, prayer was her sanctuary, and her earliest socialization was mitigated by a deep sense of spiritual cognizance. In the memoir *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, which she dictated to Olive Gilbert, Truth describes mother as a woman whose primary comfort was in her faith. The narrative explains, "when her mother's work was done, she would sit down under the sparkling vault of heaven, and calling her children to her, would talk to them of the only Being that could effectually aid or protect them."[59] In Truth's adult years, she believed God took special interest in her. Through prayer she found salvation. Still, like all black women, she associated true salvation with full freedom and transformation.

Following the instruction of her mother, she often prayed for freedom in exchange for her good behavior. The continued severity of her conditions, however, proved "she could not be good in her present circumstances."[60] The narrative underscores this point by affirming that Truth

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[58] Carol Mattingly, *Appropriate[ing] Dress: Women's Rhetorical Style in Nineteenth Century America* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 110-130.
[59] Sojourner Truth and Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828* ed. Francis W. Titus (Chapel Hill, N.C.]: Academic Affairs Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2001) http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/truth84/menu.html.
[60] Ibid., 61.

could not live up to any high moral standards under the brutality of slavery. Even kind slaveholders sold their slaves, which meant that no enslaved person could trust that they had a stable home with the families they worked for. The dangers of being resold during the Antebellum period were particularly high as the slave system of the deep South expanded and became more lucrative. Truth suggested that harsh labor conditions, physical and sexual abuse, and fears that they would be sold deeper into the South encouraged sinful behavior in slave communities—an idea she reinforced by sharing the sinfulness of her early life and her own feelings of distance from God. Truth's suggestion that slavery kept enslaved people at a distance from God buttressed anti-slavery arguments that the institution of slavery was immoral. In the context of the 1850s, when sectional arguments became more enmeshed in political debates over slavery, the suggestion that the system was immoral had far reaching implications. Truth's story suggested that slaveholders and their slaves were corrupted by the system of slavery. For that matter, her discussion about the abuses of slavery in the South also implicated Northern white political leaders, whose acquiescence to the South's demands to keep the institution had led to its expansion. Hence, Truth's biography provided a compelling narrative about the dangers of slavery for the entire country.

Much of Truth's emphasis morality laid in the details about her journey to salvation. Her story implied that slavery was immoral because it denied enslaved people access to God. She pointed to this in *The Narrative,* as she detailed feelings of depression related to her belief that enslavement made her less worthy of saving than white slaveholders. Truth's feelings of inferiority prompted a fear that God would not hear her prayers. Yet, Truth also reinforces the idea that she was called by God as she introduced her mother "Mau Mau Bett." Although her mother feared each of her children would be sold away, Truth tells her audience that "Mau Mau Bett" leaned heavily on a sense that her concerns were echoed throughout the cosmos. That is,

Truth's mother believed that God heard her prayers because she and her children were so vulnerable, and she conveyed the importance of prayer to her daughter. As she detailed these early spiritual lessons, Truth suggests that humble spiritual training as a young person signaled her suitability for the political work she saw as divine in her maturity.

Truth's story transitioned as it described the beginnings of her salvation. Her major conversion was prompted by a vision "beaming with the beauty of holiness and radiant with love." She believed the vision was Jesus, bridging the gap between God and herself. Feeling redeemed, Truth spent the rest of her time in slavery working to deepen her relationship with God—who she now viewed as her personal friend. In salvation, she found greater comfort and kinship with others. Like so many enslaved African American women, this was central to transcending her conditions. After she "walked away by daylight," Truth believed she saw God's favor despite continued difficulty.[61] Persisting in her faith, *The Narrative* revealed that she adopted various strains of religious doctrine from Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, and even the teachings of New York's Prophet Matthias. Her preaching career, though fairly short-lived, took off after 1835 when she left The Kingdom of Mount Zion, where Matthias was the co-founder and leader.[62] By then, Truth viewed herself as a prophetic speaker – an idea she maintained on

[61] Ibid., 43.

[62] Sojourner's religious affiliations are detailed throughout her *Narrative*, but her peculiar relationship with Prophet Matthias and his organization merit special attention. Truth worked as a domestic laborer in the home of Elijah Pierson, a founding member of New York's Kingdom at Mount Zion church in 1832. Pierson, and his co-founder Robert Matthews, both claimed to be divine prophets. Truth joined their religious commune, working first in Pierson's home and then in Matthews'. In 1834, Pierson died of food poisoning, when he and Matthews insisted that prayer was the only medicine he needed. Matthews was accused of poisoning Pierson and put on trial. In the interim, however, two of the Kingdom's financial backers accused Truth of poisoning Pierson. Acquitted of any charges, Truth left the organization in 1835, but sued her accusers for defamation. She won her case, and went on to travel as an itinerant preacher—then claiming to be a prophet. See Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *The Kingdom Of Matthias: A Story of Sex and Salvation in 19th-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

her speaking tours. By 1850, when *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* was published, she began to publicly challenge slavery, racism, sexism, and immorality across the country.

Nearly all of Truth's speeches began with some recounting of her life story. Each one implicitly connected her to the shame of slavery, then countered that by signaling her sanctification process. This process of purity, or trial by fire, culminated in the hard-won freedom of her family, and in Truth's reconnection to two of her siblings. Including this family history in her public addresses and personal narrative was essential to substantiating her respectability. On the surface, the story of Truth's journey from slavery to freedom, and the details of the fight to secure that freedom for herself and her family, demonstrated the importance of the basic human necessitates she was denied as a slave laborer. It also illuminated the centrality of motherhood, marriage and community to Truth's sense of freedom. More than this, however, *The Narrative* undermined the stigma of race and slavery that marked her as a newly freed woman in a state that was wrought with tension over black freedom.

In another sense, Truth's biography reinforced the message that she was a pure woman. Olive Gilbert praised her for having "purity of character, an unflinching adherence to principle, and a native enthusiasm, which under different circumstances, might easily have produced another Joan of Arc.[63] Truth's purity, and the centrality of overcoming adversity in her public speaking, made her preaching and anti-slavery speeches even more persuasive. In fact, most of the people who observed her emphasized her charisma and a seeming mysticism in the way she captivated audiences.[64] Truth was a skilled public speaker who weaved Christian teachings, comedy, song, and storytelling into her oration. Though little is known about her sermons as an

[63] Sojourner Truth and Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 51.
[64] Suzanne Pullon Fitch and Roseann M. Mandziuk, *Sojourner Truth as Orator: Wit, Story, and Song* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 31-95.

itinerant preacher, the hymns she composed and sang before giving many of her anti-slavery and suffrage talks highlight the importance of Afro-American biblical interpretation and slave music traditions to Truth's socio-political protest.

The inclusion of these songs before Truth's speeches reveal their dual nature. In one sense, Truth's songs reflected her immersion in the nineteenth century evangelical Christian tradition. In another, these songs were steeped in Truth's sense of herself as a spiritual authority. Even more than this, however, Truth's songs demonstrated the ways in which black spiritual music was also political in nature. The use of slave spirituals as protest music helped Truth to speak for enslaved communities and with them. Yet her word play and emphasis on collective freedom also reflect the ways in which many free and enslaved African Americans identified with the Old Testament narratives about the Hebrew people and their descendants. The song "I Bless the Lord I've Got My Seal" praises the Old Testament's character David, but it also notes that the vocalist has been divinely chosen to overcome the giant. With only one verse sung in refrain, the song boasted, "I bless the Lord, I've Got My Seal…to slay Goliath in the field."[65] In another song, Truth echoed her own life story in verses that proclaimed,

> *she pleadeth for her people,*
> *a poor down-trodden race,*
> *who dwell in Freedom's boasted land,*
> *with no abiding place.*

Here, Truth drew an obvious contrast between the nation's ideals and its practices, but she also appealed to the jeremiad in this hymn. If liberty was the country's foundational principle, slave labor was antithetical to it. In the second verse of the same hymn, Truth argued that she was fighting for African Americans to "…have their rights restored/for they have long been toiling/and yet had no reward." Truth's commentary here is a subtle reference to the ideology of

[65] Ibid., 209. See also Truth and Guilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 119.

natural rights. Her use of the word restored implies that people of color lost their rights, rather than suggesting they never had any rights. Yet Truth's focus is not merely on the plight of the race. She also emphasized the plight of enslaved women – mothers in particular. Blurring the lines between herself and all enslaved women, the song continued,

> *While she bears upon her body*
> *The scars of many a gash*
> *She pleadeth for her people*
> *That groan beneath the lash*[66]

Most interesting in this stanza is that Truth was also drawing on the same language used to describe her mother in her biography. When "Mau Mau Bett" is introduced we learn that "at times, a groan would escape her, and she would break out in the language of the Psalmist – 'Oh Lord, how long?'"[67] This implicit reference becomes clearer in the next stanza, where Truth explains,

> *She is pleading for the mothers*
> *Who gaze in wild despair*
> *Upon the hated auction-block,*
> *And see their children there.*

Careful not to excite proslavery sentiments by appearing to incite violent slave rebellions, Truth ended her song in a gentle reprimand. It was not blood and warfare she called for; asking for vengeance might insult God. She was asking for freedom—granted as a matter of Christian and democratic principle. In a subtle criticism of American interests in Latin America and the Caribbean, a Truth reminded her audience "to remember your own oppressed at home."[68] Most

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[66] Fitch and Mandziuk, *Sojourner Truth as Orator*, 213-214.
[67] Truth and Guilbert, *Sojourner Truth as Orator*, 3.
[68] Fitch and Mandziuk, *Sojourner Truth as Orator*, 214. For "American interests" see Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Latin American Policy of the United States: An Historical Interpretation* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1943); Thomas M. Leonard, ed. *United States-Latin American Relations 1850—1903*: *Establishing a Relationship*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999).

important, however, was her call for Americans to take up the cause of abolition "and note how base the tyranny/beneath the stripes and stars."[69] It was in this spirit that Sojourner Truth carried out all of her activism. This was her enacted jeremiad. She spoke as a woman whose life experiences and close encounters with the divine made her a sacred advocate of the enslaved and of women's rights.

In many ways, Truth's spiritual growth and her internal transformation led her directly down the road to political activism. Similar to many of her African American contemporaries, spiritual life was the gateway and the vehicle for demanding that the United States live up to its professed ideals of freedom. While she could not read or write, Truth's life and activism illustrate the distinctive markers of black women's jeremiad. Securing freedom for all African Americans was very important to black women who employed it, but ensuring that other black women would be able to control their own bodies was paramount. Within Truth's *Narrative*, speeches, and songs, she underlined the importance of womanhood, motherhood and community. For her, and many women of color who dared to step before a public audience, these were integral to maintaining the necessary respect and dignity that underscored their calls for inclusive democracy.

In effect, black women's use of the jeremiad shifted its traditional meaning significantly. They were challenging America to take on a new "errand" of equality, and contesting male authority over them. More than this, they engaged in national efforts to make democracy a reality for all people of color, and, in this way, they lived the ideals they spoke and wrote about. Nonetheless, it was imperative that black women emphasize their womanhood to avoid being alienated within their own communities. Assuming leadership roles in the public sphere meant

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[69] Fitch and Mandziuk, *Sojourner Truth as Orator*, 214.

openly defying nineteenth century constructions of masculinity. Despite their own marginalization, black male intellectuals often spoke for the race – overlooking issues of intraracial gender inequality. Public spaces of spiritual, intellectual, and political assembly for free people of color were typically dominated by men. Hence, when African American women publicly called on the nation to uphold the ideals of the Revolution, they had to use modified themes of domesticity to maintain their community ties and avoid being ostracized. For Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw, domesticity was a critical component in their construction of womanhood and their challenges to traditional expectations of women.

* * *

Where Truth and Stewart functioned largely in the political arena, Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw worked primarily in Christian ministry. The expansive network of people black women could access under the umbrella of Methodism, for example, paved the way for national political organization in the generations to come. Methodists theology on salvation and spiritual transformation was also complementary to African American spiritual beliefs. Even so, formal affiliations with religious institutions, however, meant that black women were limited by church regulations that sustained gender inequality. Women who rejected these codes of conduct were also engaging in political agitation. For them, prejudice in the church was deeply tied to inequality in the nation at large. In this way, their sermons and personal narratives coincided with evangelicals who argued that the United States had lost its way because Americans had absolved themselves of true Christian practice. Still, black women's effort to destabilize gender prejudice in religious institutions was frequently met with resistance.

African American women who struggled to overcome sexism in their religious communities rebelled in numerous ways, but one of the most radical was in publishing their own

spiritual narratives. Nearly every aspect of American public culture was dominated by male presence and the male voice.[70] Openly discussing their lives as itinerant preachers, and the oppression they faced from white and black men in and outside of the church, African American women undermined the accepted roles for all women in the Antebellum period. Conversion narratives, unlike public oration, also highlighted the growing literacy of African American people between 1820 and 1840. The increase in black literacy rates was due in large part to the efforts of African American women who organized literacy societies, and established schools for children of color. Lee and Elaw, in particular, dedicated years of their lives to black education in free and slave states. More than this, however, black women itinerant preachers like Lee and Elaw claimed the sacred pulpit directly as they used the Jeremiad, politicizing their work within the church and further cementing their positions as the chosen of God.

Black women's spiritual narratives also challenged racist depictions of free people of color, by demonstrating that they had no interested in racial "amalgamation," and that they were moral and productive citizens. This was particularly important in lieu of gradual abolition laws in the North. Back freedom in the North made black women the central focus of many white citizens, who viewed African American women as the greatest indications of black suitability for freedom and enfranchisement.[71] Hence, marriage and motherhood were always important pieces of black women's conversion narratives. Labor too was an important theme in these accounts, and in the details of their lives as workers, they could destabilize the idea that freedom meant the same thing for black and white Americans in the North. Most importantly, however, black women's spiritual narratives undercut the notion that black women were hyper-sexual or asexual

[70] Here I draw on Martha S. Jones' definition of public culture in *All Bound Up Together* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 4-7.
[71] Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans In New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 112-117.

and masculine. In the details of their journeys to salvation, Lee and Elaw portrayed themselves as complex women who worked to preserve their humanity, and find God in themselves, despite the racism and sexism they faced.

Jarena Lee's conversion narrative charted her journey from a poor domestic servant living in southern New Jersey, to a traveling preacher, writer, and activist. Lee was born in a hotbed of spiritual syncretism in 1789, when the doctrines of sanctification, trances, faith healing, and prophetic dreams and visions took root among a growing number of Christian sects. Between the 1780s and 1830s, dozens of churches sprouted across the state advancing these new practices. Methodists in particular, incorporated each of these charismatic expressions of belief into their revivals – drawing many African Americans into the fold.

Lee's story began by detailing the circumstances of her early life, detailing her struggle with lying, insecurity, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Lee noted that her personal fallibility was overlooked by the well-to-do families she worked for, who were not overtly religious in their lifestyles or expectations of her. At this point in the story, Lee's focus on the spiritual laxity of her employers suggested two things. In one sense, it denoted the high propensity for immorality in the poor labor conditions of free blacks. In another, Lee also implicated wealthy whites in the creation of social ills. Accordingly, she suggested that race was not a determinant in standards of morality. Redeeming herself, she explained that her own bad habits weighed heavily on her conscience, and brought on subsequent periods of depression and suicidal thoughts.[72] Lee's intentional validation of negative ideas about poor people of color underscored the importance and urgency of salvation.

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[72]Jarena Lee, "Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*"* reprinted in *Sisters of Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 27-31.

As she segued into the details of her own conversion, Lee's narrative took a turn. After a near death experience, she became very ill and depressed. Concerned about the state of her soul, and still working as a domestic laborer, she attempted to find religious families that might facilitate her path to salvation. But it was not until Lee reached Philadelphia that she found refuge in Richard Allen's African Methodist Episcopal church. She was twenty-one years old, and felt a deep connection to Allen and his congregation. There, she "felt that not only the sin of *malice* was pardoned but all other sins were swept away together."[73] Even so, Lee's conversion experience was incomplete, and she believed there was still more internal work to do. She continued to struggle with bouts of depression until she married Joseph Lee.

Similar to all of her intellectual contemporaries, Lee's marriage signaled a new stage in her life and a new level of spiritual awakening. Marriage was an important part of the sanctifying process, and sanctification generally came after itinerant women preachers were married. Sanctification then was multi-tiered for women who professed its virtues. This stage of spiritual development primed them for spiritual authority, and the demonstration of their power. It was also a spiritual coming of age process that validated black women's femininity. Marriage increased their social status and respectability before audiences and within their communities. The sanctification stage also destabilized the notion that poor black women were a potential nuance in American society. The most important aspect of sanctification for black women, however, was that it denoted a newfound freedom – and was generally preceded or followed by a series of visions, trances, or dreams compelling them to public ministry. As Lee repeated throughout her book, "I had life and liberty."[74]

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[73] Lee, "Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee,*"* 29.
[74] Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee*, (Philadelphia,1849), 59.

As they operated in their divine callings, black women itinerant preachers saw powerful manifestations of the divine in themselves. For Lee, this was exactly the case. Though she struggled against church tradition, she used her calling at every opportunity to challenge racial and gender inequality. This was clearest in her assertion that those who opposed her because of her gender should be careful "lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life." After all, she noted, "the Saviour died for the woman as well as the man." More than this, Lee asserted that it was a woman, Mary, who first "preached the resurrection of the crucified Son of God."[75] Where she faced opposition from black or white men, she argued that they did not have the true spirit of God in them. In one instance, Lee described a challenging minister by explaining "his heart was bitter…his spirit like a viper."[76]

Lee took the same attitude in nearly all aspects of her life. What was impossible for the sanctified and divinely called? Even the responsibilities of motherhood were secondary when a woman was called by God. Lee exemplified this in describing her choice to leave her sons after her husband's death. Leaning on family and friends—including Richard Allen, who later paid for her eldest son's education—Lee continued in her ministry to support herself. She wrote, "I had a call to preach at a place about thirty miles distant…and during the whole time, not a thought of my little son came into my mind; it was hid from me, lest I should have been diverted from the work I had to do."[77] Indeed, as she contended, her spiritual labor was important for their good and many others. Lee illustrated this as she reflected on the power exhibited through her work and the way it appealed to white and black audiences. While the conventions of motherhood were

[75] Lee, *Sisters of the Spirit,* 36.
[76] Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee*, 55.
[77] Ibid., 18.

important to her, she rejected the restraints that came with them – even when that meant leaving her sick children with others.

Consequently, Lee dedicated herself to the cause of equality and faith. Little is known about the latter years of her life, but newspaper reports reveal that she was ever dedicated to social justice. In the closing sections of her journal, she paid special attention to education, noting that it was pivotal for racial progress. In 1837, she toured a series of schools in New York, and praised one in particular for its rigorous curriculum. The school,

> *exceeded all I had ever seen; the principles in different branches which had been, and in some instances, are yet hid from the people of color, to deprive them of their enjoyments, were here taught them, which greatly helped to elevate them to a position that would command respect through the short voyage of life.*[78]

In her continued travels, Lee opened her own school, and helped to establish several others. In 1840, she represented Pennsylvania as a member of the American Anti-Slavery Society. She remained actively involved with this organization until the early 1850s—and even debated against African colonization alongside Sojourner Truth in December of 1853.[79]

In sum, while faith and spirituality were the driving forces in Lee's social life, they were also the means through which she found concert with other political activists. Spirituality, colored her sense of justice. Like all of her contemporaries, she believed, "my Master is no respecter of persons."[80] Lee died in the midst of the nation's sectional crises, shortly after her participation in the 1853 American Anti-Slavery Society convention, but her preaching and activism inspired many free and enslaved women to fight for their freedom. Among the many relationships she

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[78] Ibid., 80.
[79] E. H. Chapin, William Lloyd Garrison, W. Phillips, E. Quincy, S. H. Gay, Editorial, *The Liberator* Friday, December 09, 1853.
[80] Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee*, 35.

developed with black women across the country, none stand out more than her short preaching stint with her contemporary, Zilpha Elaw.

Elaw began her narrative by foreshadowing her journey to salvation and sanctification in the dedication she wrote for the book. She hoped that the narrative of her life would demonstrate "my regenerated constitution—exhibiting as did the bride of Solomon, comeliness with blackness." The seeming contradiction of being "comely," or beautiful and black underscored the general tone of her book—self-acceptance, concern for the oppressed, and rejection of racist and sexist oppression. Black was indeed beautiful, just as there were "riches with poverty, and power in weakness."[81]

Several years younger than Lee, Elaw was a powerhouse. Like Stewart and Lee, she was born free and poor in the North, and was orphaned at a young age. Similar to Lee, Elaw was also born in a state where religious zeal and revivals were prominent. Pennsylvania was filled with Quakers, Baptists, Methodist and many other protestant sects that embraced sanctification and emotional connections with the Divine. Elaw's early life as a domestic paralleled that of Lee and Stewart, and she explained to her audience that the loss of her parents left her without proper religious instruction. For six years she worked as a house servant to a Quaker couple – Pierson and Rebecca Mitchell. Living on her own, Elaw worried over the state of her soul. She described her early teen years as particularly sinful. She observed no specific religious practices, as she had in her father's home, and took on what she called the "sinful tastes" of her young friends, the children of the Mitchell household. Here again, we see the connection between the labor conditions of free blacks and social vices. Elaw suggested that the white family she worked for was negligent in her spiritual growth, and even complicit in her immorality.

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[81] Ibid., 51.

At fourteen however, Elaw experienced what she believed was a prophetic dream that "aroused and alarmed [her] spirit."[82] She took this as a sign that God was dissatisfied with her lifestyle and calling her back to Him. The dream depressed her, and at age fifteen, she dedicated her life to Christian service. The theme of personal salvation served a dual purpose, and Elaw's detailed explanation of her sinful ways make her return to God more impactful. Yet, her sin does not exclude her from frequent communication with the divine. Elaw denotes her own predestination in the details of her young life. Her parents are described as a pious couple who ensured that "family devotion was regularly attended to…prayer was offered up, and the praises of God were sung."[83] Elaw believed that God reached for her continually in prayer and through supernatural visions. And, as with each of the women in this chapter, establishing a close relationship with the divine cemented their calling, promoted salvation, and signaled their readiness for sanctification—all of which informed their jeremiadic discourse.

Elaw's period of sanctification came through her marriage, which she described more openly than Lee. Her husband Joseph Elaw was a fairly well-to-do fuller, or wool cloth maker, who "was not a Christian…. though nominally bearing [the] name."[84] Joseph respected Zilpha's dedication to her faith, but quickly found it tiresome and dangerous. His disbelief and vehement challenges to her spiritual life were the cause of heated exchanges between the two, and subsequent periods of depression for Zilpha. Nonetheless, she carried on in her ministry and her marriage, both of which offered her varying degrees of social protection within her community.

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[82] Zilpha Elaw "Memoirs of the Life Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labors of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw" reprinted in *Sisters in the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 54-55.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Zilpha Elaw "Memoirs of the Life Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labors of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw" 61. Note: A fuller cleaned and softened wool textiles to thicken its texture.

When Joseph and Zilpha relocated to southern New Jersey, she found a welcoming community of African American Methodists who also believed in sanctification. Elaw prayer meetings with other black women quickly opened up opportunities for leadership. As she moved closer to sanctification, and developed greater bonds with the women of her prayer circle, she shed her inhibitions about public speaking and leadership roles for women. Ultimately, her participation in local prayer groups unfolded into full ministry, where she demonstrated her graduation to the final stage of spiritual development – divine authority.

Elaw's ministry flourished quickly, and her prayers, exhorting, and preaching were the source of deep contention and great victories throughout her life. Despite challenges to her authority, she rejected the idea that either race or gender should prohibit the freedom of any person. More than half of her narrative is filled with examples of prejudice from clergy members and strangers. Elaw's travels through the South were particularly distressing, and she worried that she would be "arrested and sold for a slave."[85] Free blacks with no legal proof of their freedom were always vulnerable to slave bounty hunters who kidnapped and sold them into slavery. This fear was heightened when Elaw realized that slaveholders and slave drivers were watching her and attending her meetings. Equally troubling, however, was the opposition she faced from men of various protestant sects who opposed her ministry.

In detailing these events, Elaw offered insight on the insidious nature of racism and sexism, even as she countered that a fruitful spiritual life could erase the presumed vices of race and poverty on anyone. She was so convinced in this that she opened and ran her own school for poor African American children prohibited from attended white schools in Maryland, and argued that prejudice and lack of opportunity were the real culprits in the black condition, rather than

[85] Ibid., 91.

biological or intellectual inferiority. Elaw's assertion countered proslavery advocates who justified their calls for extending the practice in western territories by citing racial inferiority. Hence, her commentary cut to the core of a heated debate over African Americans' readiness for freedom.

At the end of her narrative, Elaw encouraged her readers to learn from her experiences, but she also maligned the conditions she endured simply because she was black and female. Racism and sexism were out of accordance with God, and therefore didn't belong in the "city on a hill." More than this, however, the fallacy of racial and gender inferiority meant that there was great potential in African American people. Like Truth, Lee, and Stewart, Elaw contended that inequality stymied black progress. In her reflection on the state of black education, she wrote, "the pride of white skin is a bauble of great value with many in some parts of the United States, who readily sacrifice their intelligence to their prejudices." In God, she asserted, equality was certain because "the Almighty counts not the black races of man…as inferior to the white…and dwells in them as readily as in persons of whiter complexion."[86] In this way, Elaw's narrative aligned with her contemporaries in its assertion that equality was essential for national harmony and racial progress. And like Truth, Lee, and Stewart, Elaw believed women were integral to achieving social equity.

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Although little is known about any direct communications between women like Maria Stewart, Jarena Lee, Sojourner Truth, and Zilpha Elaw, is highly likely that each of these women passed through the same social circles. In scope and size, free black communities and spaces were very limited. Free populations were generally fractional in the first half of the nineteenth century.

[86] Ibid., 85.

No doubt these women crossed paths as each travelled often through the black communities of Massachusetts, New York, and Maryland. Stewart, Truth, Lee, and Elaw sustained active membership in the African Methodist church and various branches of its public outreach. Additionally, they all served the organized anti-slavery movement, African American literacy movement, and the women's rights movement from the late 1830s into the early 1850s. In sum, Stewart, Lee, Truth, and Elaw frequently moved in and out of the same spaces, laboring in the same cause, and gleaning – in one way or another – from each other and countless other African American women.

Combined, Truth, Stewart, Lee and Elaw provide a poignant example of the ways in which black women's evangelism and public speaking formed the bedrock of black women's increasing political agitation just before the American Civil War. They also highlight the differences between feminine and masculine expressions of the African American jeremiad. Where men emphasized the jeremiad to champion the cause of the race, invoking masculine expressions of nationhood, women advocated racial and gender equality through themes of spiritual purity and domesticity. That is, for early African American women, the progress of the race and the nation were precipitated on moral instruction and gender equality. Of course, the scrutiny black women faced from men and women in and outside of their communities meant that they were constantly met with the task of justifying their presence in the public sphere, and defending their right to challenge notions of white supremacy, as well as black and white male dominance. Consequently, spiritual narratives and discourse were pivotal in allowing black women to push gender boundaries even when they used the gender etiquette of the day to show deference to black men.

In a larger sense, we can think about black women's advocacy of salvation and sanctification as an echo of John Winthrop's seventeenth century call for the settlers aboard the

Arabella to "make other's conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body."[87] Winthrop believed these principles were essential for social cohesion and social equality in the New England settlement. He also believed that they were vital to the development of a society striving for Christian perfection, or spiritual purity. Likewise, many early black women intellectuals viewed Christian perfection as a critical part of the American "city on a hill." For Stewart, Truth, Lee and Elaw, abolishing slavery and achieving social equality necessitated public agitation and interracial cooperation. Consequently, the journey to perfect the race and the nation was deeply personal, and intimately tied to their vision of themselves as sacred citizens in the "city on a hill."

It was in this vein that African American women continued when the nation's second revolutionary War of Independence broke out. While there were many diverging perspectives about the Civil War throughout American society, most African Americans saw it as a redemptive moment of providential design. And though freedom eventually came at the end of the Civil War, African American women found that their changing contexts did not alter the racism and sexism they faced in the United States. Postwar realities included heightened anti-black propaganda, racial violence, sexual assault, and disfranchisement. That is, white supremacy in the North and the South necessitated black women's use of the jeremiad to continue the struggle for racial and gender equality. Accordingly, the first generation of freed black women intellectuals attacked racism and sexism with new vigor—building on the apt foundation of their predecessors and appealing to their jeremiad once again.

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[87] John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature,* ed., Nina Baym, (New York: Norton, 1999), 180.

Chapter 2

To Elevate and Dignify Colored Womanhood

Too long have we been silent under unjust and unholy charges…now with an army of organized women standing for purity and mental worth, we in ourselves deny the charge and open the eye of the world to a state of affairs to which they have been blind, often willfully so…[1]

The harrowing moments at the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of the Jim Crow era are as thrilling as they are heartbreaking. Less than one generation after the American Civil War, freed men and women were no closer to equality than they had been in slavery. In some ways, the conditions of freed people were worse at the end of the Civil War. Southern states hurried to pass black code legislation that undermined the Constitutional rights of freed men and women, racial violence intensified, and black families struggled to secure fair housing and employment conditions in the "New South."[2] For many African American women, Emancipation did little to improve their conditions. Most employment opportunities for black women were limited to domestic service work where they continued to face physical and sexual molestation from white employers. And though black women were active in the political development of their communities, they were not enfranchised until the twentieth century. Equally

[1] Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, "Address to First National Conference of Colored Women." Speech. Boston, July 29, 1895.
[2] See Leon Litwack, *Been So Long in the Storm: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Random House Inc., 1980), 221-292; Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

challenging, black women sustained the burdens of family, church, and community even when they were overlooked or mistreated by African American men.

Most impactful, however, was the routine derision black women endured in American public culture. The "unholy charges" that Josephine Ruffin referenced in her 1895 speech appeared in American newspapers, popular music, literature, and academic scholarship.[3] Indeed, the gendered discourse of racism rested on the derision of black women, even as it also idealized white women as the purity of the white race. By the end of Reconstruction, a new generation of white men rooted their claims to dominate the South—and indeed the nation—to protect white women. White womanhood, they argued, was the nexus of purity and morality. Specifically, pure white womanhood symbolized the virtues of the white middle class in the United States. Consequently, white supremacists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries argued that the unbridled equality of black men, and their presumed hypersexuality posed a serious threat to virtuous and pure white women. In the discourse on "true womanhood," black women represented the antithesis of traditional femininity—hypersexual, aggressive, criminal, and violent. These claims enabled many white men to dismiss claims that they sexually assaulted or molested African American women.[4]

White paternalism and fear of black political power loomed large across the country, prompting a spike in anti-black propaganda, and resting the hope of modernity

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[3] See note 1.

[4] See Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, Gender and Jim Crow*: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North (*Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," American Quarterly 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-174.

on white superiority. As industry and professionalization burgeoned in every sector of American society, public scholars, religious figures, and politicians reinforced the preeminence of the Anglo-Saxon white male, citing black inferiority as evidence of their socio-political status. African Americans challenged the arguments stacked against them by emphasizing education, mutual aid, and spiritual strength in their communities. More importantly, many people of color argued that they were each other's best and only hope of survival, and racial uplift or racial self-help, became the rallying cry of African American activism. Racial uplift in African American communities rested on the leadership, resources, and organizing of educated, middle class, black men and women who felt responsible for the welfare of the poor and working class within their race.

At the forefront of the racial self-help movement, and the most visible representations of black women around the country, African American women leaders became targets of public slander in and outside of black communities. While the educational achievements and professional skills of middle class black women often meant that they were more privileged than their poor and working class counterparts, class status did not shield black women leaders from the challenges of racism and sexism endemic to American society. Middle class status did not shield black girls or women from the realities of Jim Crow segregation, nor did it protect them from the violent threats and sexual assaults that intensified across the nation from the end of Reconstruction through the early twentieth century.[5] Well-to-do African American women also faced

[5] Daniel L. McGuire, *At the Dark End Of the Street: Black Women, Rape, And Resistance- a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf,

limited employment opportunities despite their educational backgrounds. Most college educated black women became teachers or nurses, the two most prevalent job markets for them.

Though they outnumbered African American men in the workforce and in most black communities, black women were routinely passed over for leadership positions, especially when this meant that they would have authority over men. Instead, many African American male leaders expected well-to-do black women to fulfill traditional middle class Christian gender expectations (passivity, marriage, subservience, respectability, and modesty), to represent the best possible characteristics of the race. These black male leaders also expected and implored elite African American in their communities to behave respectably, and remain within the domestic sphere. Even so, most African American male leaders also believed that black women should help with the labor of racial uplift, which they did. That is, African American women leaders took on the responsibility of organizing, planning and running the charities, organizations, and events that provided the wider black community with resources Jim Crow segregation and racism denied them.

Elite black women stood as the bastion of racial pride and purity, working in churches, social clubs, schools, and out of their own homes, to disprove negative

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2010); Jane E. Dabel, *A Respectable Woman: The Public Roles of African American Women in 19th-Century New York* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2008);
Crystal Nicole Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011).

stereotypes and to "elevate and dignify colored womanhood."[6] Spirituality was pivotal to their activism, and women like Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Frances E. Harper, Mary C. Terrell, Anna Julia Cooper, and countless others, undercut racist and sexist public tropes by constructing their womanhood on a platform of purity and morality. Similar to their antebellum predecessors, black women's *enacted jeremiad* during the late nineteenth century rested on their ability to reinforce the dignity of their womanhood. It was nestled in the call to maintain Christian moral principles in public and private life, and complemented by the assertion that black women were their own best defense. Racial stereotypes about black women were powerful in public dialogue, and as Ruffin argued, "we cannot expect to have them removed until we disprove them through ourselves."[7]

Racial uplift was intrinsically contentious, wrought with regional and class prejudice and underlined by rivalries, personality clashes, and political standoff. Equality was the ultimate goal, but strategies to accomplish it were in constant negotiation. Still, black women's intense dedication to racial and gender equality, and their sense of spiritual accountability, mitigated their personal differences. Yet, it is important to note here that while elite black women acted as spokespersons for their race, they were not an isolated group in the effort of racial progress, nor were they the most important. No doubt, the long black freedom struggle owes much to its early middle class foremothers, but it is also deeply indebted to the many unknown black women who carried the mantle

[6] Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, "Address to First National Conference of Colored Women." Speech. Boston, July 29, 1895.
[7] Ibid.

of racial uplift in their personal lives. Sojourner Truth is a prime example of the importance of working class black women to the progression of the long black freedom struggle. Although she lacked formal education, Truth was one of the greatest anti-slavery and suffrage proponents of the nineteenth century. Yet without the records of those who knew Truth throughout her career as an activist, we might miss much of her important work. In this way, African American women's history mirrors that of many other marginalized groups, in its heavy focus on elite men and women who could write and preserve records of their ideas and activism.

The leading African American women of the late nineteenth century were merely the most visible in a cast of stars. In this chapter, some of the voices of their supporting cast appear to demonstrate spaces of convergence and divergence within black women's jeremiadic tradition. Following the example of historian Elsa Barkley Brown, this chapter highlights the "polyrhythmic, 'nonsymmetrical,' nonlinear structure in which individual and community are not competing entities."[8] The voices here highlight black women's demands for a broader national definition of citizenship--one that included them on an equal basis. They also underscore African American women's defiance of the racist indignities of their moment, to which they responded: "I aint been no trash – aint no trash today."[9]

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[8] Elsa Barkley Brown, "African-American Women's Quilting," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 14, no. 4 (1989): 921-929; Elsa Barkley Brown, "Polyrhythms and Improvisation: Lessons for Women's History," History Workshop Journal 31, no. 1 (1991): 85-90.

[9] Rachel Bradley, WPA interview in George P. Rawick's *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* Supplement – Series 1, Vol. 2 (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1977).

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During the Civil War, free African American women utilized every network and resource at their disposal to aid transitioning freed men, women, and children in their journey to Emancipation. At the end of the war, free black women served as nurses, cooks, laundresses, and relief aid workers. Demanding better working and living conditions for freed people, they extended their local charitable organizations and denominations across the country.[10] When the Fifteenth Amendment passed, however, black women found themselves at the crux of a deep divide between white suffragettes and black men. For many white women, the enfranchisement of black men was an egregious mistake and an insult. In their frustrations, noted suffragists Olympia Brown, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony openly criticized the government for its refusal to grant white women the right to vote, often revealing their own racist views about black men in the process. The exposure of white suffragists underlying racial prejudice tarnished what had once been a working alliance between activist white women and African Americans.[11]

Some black women took this opportunity to foster closer alliances with white suffragists, in hopes that an integrated effort would secure the vote for all women. Many, however, approved of the Fifteenth Amendment, and viewed "Negro suffrage," as it was then called, as a victory for the race. Black women were also very concerned about

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[10] See Leon F. Litwack, Been In The Storm So Long (New York: Knopf, 1979); Ella Forbes, African American Women During The Civil War (New York: Garland, 1998), 65-87.
[11] Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, African American Women in The Struggle for The Vote, 1850-1920 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 36-54.

educating freed men and women to uplift them. Consequently, education became the most important thread of many relief campaigns led by free black women during and after the Civil War.[12] During the Antebellum period, women like Maria Stewart, Jarena Lee, Sojourner Truth, and Zilpha Elaw dedicated the latter years of their lives to establishing colored schools in the North and South. Teaching became an integral part of their sacred work, and nearly always included spiritual or moral instruction.

Sojourner Truth and Maria Stewart continued their public activism and teaching long after the Civil War ended, while Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw died in the 1850s just before the war's outbreak. Stewart and Truth died in 1879 and 1883 respectively, but their work continued through women such as Frances Harper, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Harriet Tubman, who helped further develop national activist networks for black women. From the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth, these women focused their efforts on the broader issues of racism and sexism facing African American women, yet they also addressed the nuances of both for black women in the North and South.

During the 1870s and 1880s, northern black women experienced increased humiliation in public places. Tensions over a growing urban black presence, and their public celebrations of Emancipation, garnered anger and violence from poor and wealthy whites alike. Race riots, mob attacks and even arson ensued where black communities flourished. Black women were the targets of physical assaults when they entered local

[12] Forbes, African American Women During the Civil War, 65-87.

stores, hotels, restaurants, trains, ships, or buses. And, as domestic laborers they were the targets of similar abuses in the homes and business of white employers.[13]

Complicating the daily challenges black women faced was the erasure of class distinctions between poor and middle class African Americans. Prior to the war, free people of color enjoyed the distinction of having been generationally free, escaped, or manumitted—a divide that meant little to most American whites, but which existed nonetheless. The legal abolition of slavery, however, along with the naturalization of all African Americans, meant that only African Americans regarded these class lines with gravity. To American whites, all African Americans bore the same marks of difference; they all represented an "other." Accordingly, poor, working class, and wealthy black women faced public ridicule and abuse because of the stigma attached to their racial identities. Indeed, the very idea of refined black womanhood was the source of public laughter.[14]

Southern black women too faced increased violence in their communities and public attacks on their character when they attempted to assert their independence. Before and after the war, African American women were viewed as domineering and masculine because of the arduous physical labor associated with slavery. Black women's labor in

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[13] For an in-depth discussion of sexual abuses black women faced at the end of the nineteenth century see Wilma King, "Prematurely Knowing of Evil Things:' The Sexual Abuse of African American Girls and Young Women in Slavery and Freedom," The Journal of African American History 99, No. 3 (2014): 173-196; Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and The Inner Lives of Black Women In The Middle West," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 14, no. 4 (1989): 912-920.

[14] Patricia Morton, Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on African American Women (Westport: Praeger, 1991) provides an excellent study of the public images of black women in the nineteenth century.

the public sphere further impugned their morality and womanhood, cementing the idea that they were not pure or delicate like white women. As a result, they were often pressured to conform to white middle class gender expectations to undermine negative ideas about themselves. Many black women continued to adapt white heteronormative middle class gender ideals about marriage and domestic labor well into the twentieth century. vehicle to demonstrate their ability to assimilate and as a means of resisting racist diatribe.[15]

Southern black women also faced the reality that freedom did not drastically improve their economic circumstances. Heightened racial tensions and economic depression in the 1870s meant that most African American women had to work to help support their households, but those who did needed to be extra careful if they were also mothers. Black children were frequently taken from their parents in the years after the war on trumped up charges of truancy, being unfit, or absenteeism.. Children taken into the custody of the state were then placed in orphanages or forced into decades long apprenticeships for former slaveholders. Even more than this, African American men, women and children were often the targets of undue surveillance by southern police officials, which ultimately led to their entrapment in the developing criminal justice system.[16] In light of these realities, public respectability was highly important to African

[15] See Jennifer DeVere Brody, Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity and Victorian Culture (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).
[16] See Robin D. G Kelley and Earl Lewis, To Make Our World Anew (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 268-280. For an in-depth study on nineteenth century criminalization of southern blacks, see Khalil Gibran Muhammad, The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime and the Making of Modern America (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

American women, regardless of their class status. Regional and class tensions among black women emerged in many instances during the late nineteenth century, but nearly all believed that the negative social behaviors of one reflected poorly on the entire race. Most believed that cultural racism provided the rationale for political and economic disfranchisement. Hence, middle class black women emphasized the importance of modest Christian behavior to challenge racist portrayals of African Americans in the public forum.

While upper class African American women were often the spokespersons and leaders of black women's clubs and mutual aid societies, working class women, facilitated racial uplift through collective and individual actions, especially in their local communities. Churches were often the spaces where they could and did begin engaging in local activist campaigns. As it had for the poor free women of the antebellum period, the church provided a training ground for public speaking through prayer groups, evangelism, missionary work, and preaching. In the postbellum years, black churches also made women's clubs and reform societies more accessible to working class black women. As they became a more integrated part of the labor force, working class black women could offer greater contributions to the growing women's club movement of the 1870s, 80s and 90s.[17] This is particularly important because working class black women

[17] While many working-class black women did not embody or embrace the ideas of black women's clubs as their middle-class counterparts did, their active memberships in churches—or institutions tied to black churches—allowed them safe spaces to learn and model them in their own ways. For examples of these see Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Clark-Lewis, Elizabeth. Living in, Living Out: African American Domestics and the Great Migration.* (New York: Kodansha International, 1996); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent: *The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard

represented the majority of African American women in the United States. Their efforts were invaluable in the fight for black women's demand for equal citizenship during and after Reconstruction.

Similar to their antebellum progenitors, black women leaders of the late nineteenth century coupled traditional gender roles with a call for public service, but they added greater emphasis on temperance and public and private respectability. No longer relying exclusively on spiritual discourse to refute their racist critics, they wrapped their challenges to racial and gender inequality in the dignity of their womanhood which they viewed as pure and sacred. In this way, black women continued to critique the nation's unfair treatment of them while maintaining that they were sacred citizens.

Black women's notion of pure and sacred womanhood was typical of nineteenth century Victorian culture, and also an expression of their adaptation to its gender and class ideals. This construction of womanhood, however, was also form of resistance.[18] For all African Americans, the late nineteenth century was replete with public debasement of their culture, intellect, and morals. Popular imagery of African Americans positioned them as uncivilized, hypersexual, criminal, unintelligent, and irresponsible. The racist public depictions of black men and women placed them at odds with the ideals of Victorian man and womanhood. Yet the language and ideologies of Victorian culture

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University Press, 1993); Bettye Collier-Thomas, Jesus, Jobs, and Justice African American Women and Religion (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 2010).

[18] For a discussion on black women's radical use of "true womanhood" see Hazel Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

also provided African Americans with spaces to refute vicious attacks on their character and protect themselves from physical harm in the public sphere. Just as the Second Great Awakening provided the context for black women leaders of the Antebellum period to enter the public forum on a national level, the cultural changes of the late nineteenth century offered African American women an amplified audience and a renewed sense of themselves as moral agents for racial progress, gender equality, and full democratic freedom. The heightened emphasis on domesticity as the greatest demonstration of true womanhood, or the idea that true women concerned themselves with their homes so that men could attend to occupational concerns, permeated American society from the late nineteenth century into the first decade of the twentieth. Domesticity also positioned women as the guardians of morality, making room for women to assert their moral influence as a force of social change in America's growing cities. Black women capitalized on the ideals of domesticity to underscore their assertions of pure and sacred womanhood and to challenge their socio-political exclusion. They also used the language of domesticity to protest racial violence and sexual assault against them.

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From the 1870s through the early twentieth century, increased immigration, urbanization and industrialization significantly altered the country's political and economic structures. They also prompted what historian Robert Wiebe calls a "search for order" among American intellectuals and government officials. The burgeoning professionalization of America's industries and it's still developing academies produced

an expanding body of knowledge viewed as enduring and rational truth. From steel manufacturing to the rise of professional medicine, logic, order, and science were central to progress. As the nineteenth century came to a close, progress was increasingly tied to technological advancement and scientific development. For black citizens, however, this search for order and progress nearly always meant keeping them at the bottom of the social hierarchy by affirming racist ideas that stemmed from slavery. This was particularly true in the South, where black freedom and political participation were viewed as a by-product of Northern interference and spitefulness. Between 1865 and 1900, hundreds of books, pamphlets, novels, plays, articles, and public outcries emerged to affirm white superiority by offering scientific and theological "truths" about black inferiority.[19]

By the 1870s, Social Darwinism began to permeate the physical and social sciences, further intensifying American racism. Charles Dawin's 1857 book, *The Origin of Species*, contended that all animals evolved to adapt to changing environs, and through sexual selection those with weaker traits did not survive. Physical variations, he explained, were the result of sexual selection. Two years later, physical scientist and philosopher Herbert Spencer gleaned from Darwin's theories about natural selection and adaptation, asserting in his popular essay, "Progress: Its Law and Cause," that individual competition would drive the world forward. Extending this, he argued, only the strongest

[19] Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search For Order*, 1877-1920 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967); "Pure And Sound Government: Laboratories, Playing Fields, And Gymnasia In The Nineteenth-Century Search For Order," Isis 76, no. 2 (1985): 182-194. See also, George M. Fredrickson, The Black Image in The White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 228-283.

groups would survive, and any government interference or aid would hamper the process of social and political development. [20] In the context of bitter sentiment over Reconstruction, Spencer's theories provided a useful rhetoric for denying black equality. At the end of the century, pseudo-scientific racism saturated American scholarship, and public discourse, and what had once been antebellum proslavery justification was now respected academic work. Hence, for all black women, constructing refined and respectable gender identities were pivotal to their demands for racial and gender equality.

Within this context, black women worked in every conceivable way to resist and minimize their oppression, but its duality presented them with significant hurdles. Primarily, the interconnection of race and gender for African American women meant that they were constantly toggling them in the fight for equality. No doubt, nineteenth century gender norms, complemented by paternalistic and racist attitudes, forced black women to align themselves with causes that did not always address both of their specific needs. But prioritizing race over gender, or vice versa, was counterproductive. Consequently, black women's social and political alliances were always tempered by an insistence that racial oppression was also unavoidably gender oppression. Even when they did not openly acknowledge this, black women intellectuals and activists were constantly working to protect themselves against both.

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[20] Charles Darwin, *On The Origin Of Species By Means Of Natural Selection, Or The Preservation Of Favored Races In The Struggle For Life* (Champaign, Ill.: Project Gutenberg, 1859); Herbert Spencer, *Progress: Its Law And Cause* (New York: J. Fitzgerald & Co., 1881).

In American society race and gender were similarly interconnected and the concept of race throughout the nineteenth century was often synonymous with masculinity.[21] Hence, for many American whites, public discussion about African Americans was alternatively a discussion about black men. In this way, negro suffrage was implicitly black male suffrage, and the race issue was alternatively about black men as a socio-political problem. Black women were rarely ever included as a distinct category of discussion in nineteenth century dialogues about race, unless they were being derided as sexually immoral, criminal, and problematic. When black women were discussed in the public forum, they were consistently deemed poor mothers and wives. Scholars and journalists frequently compared black mothers to animals who would just as soon eat or kill their children as raise them. Experts of every field described black marriages and familial bonds as completely without emotion or love. Black women's bodies were often graphically described and associated with shame. It was also common for white observers to describe black women as more capable of intense labor than white women because of an assumed high threshold for pain.[22] In this sense, the implication

[21] Morton's Disfigured Images offers an insightful argument here. She posits that black men and women were ceremoniously lumped together in all public discussions of race during the late nineteenth century. She also argues, that this was dually effective because of the historical feminization of black men in American public culture (See pp. 1-17). Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott and Barbara Smith underscore this point in their seminal work *All The Women Are White, All The Blacks Are Men, But Some Of Us Are Brave* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982).

[22] For historical study on African Americans in nineteenth century medicine see Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to Present* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 52-75. Current research shows that the legacy of Washington's study is alive and well in the medical profession. See, for example, Kelly M. Hoffman et al., "Racial Bias in Pain Assessment and Treatment Recommendations, And False Beliefs About Biological Differences Between Blacks And Whites," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 113, no. 16 (2016): 4296-4301.

was that black women were no different from black men, and any qualities Americans associated with black masculinity were also affixed to black women.

An equally problematic reality for black women was their exclusion from traditional definitions of womanhood, or "true womanhood." The "true woman" was pious, pure, submissive, domestic.[23] She was also presumably white. The assumed norms for black women, however, were dishonesty, immodesty, sexual availability and immorality. Consequently, while African American women adapted many social customs to conform to traditional gender roles, they also necessarily modified them to protect themselves as racialized women. In particular, the negative public portrayals of black women prompted a dedicated fight over control of their bodies and sexuality. Underpinning this struggle was an emphasis on motherhood, marriage and public decency. Each of these was pivotal in black women's local and national organizations. Spirituality was essential here, as a means of undermining racial and gender stigmas, and was equally valuable for affirming black womanhood. Through spiritual language and training, black women intellectuals could affirm their sacredness and undermine the racist and sexist public discourse that labeled them inferior. Thus, when black women petitioned temperance and purity from others in their communities, they were working to redefine their identities as a race women.

[23] See Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-174.

Collectively, the hurdles of the late nineteenth century forged black women's conceptions of themselves as citizens, and prompted their continued use of the *enacted jeremiad.* The unabashed racism of this period necessitated insistent national effort to embody dignified defiance. It wasn't enough to merely call the nation back to its promise of freedom. For black women, it was also important to live in ways that supported their claims that they were worthy and deserving of equality. Responding to a culture that debased them, African American women writers, teachers, journalists, preachers, and activists rooted their protests in a specific set of ideals. Social and political responsibility, patriotism, intellectual endeavor, and Christian morality formed the basis of the jeremiadic discourse they employed to challenge social and political marginalization.

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Social and political responsibility and patriotism were paramount in black women's resistance to oppression. They were also important for enacting their jeremiad. Whether they were national or local leaders in clubs, reform societies or churches, black women leaders emphasized community service, political awareness, active challenges to inequality and racial self-help. Every woman was accountable to and for other women in her community—and ultimately the race. More than this, however, black women's work in and outside of their communities was a critical piece of demonstrating their suitability for civic equality. Likewise, patriotism bolstered many black women's sense of themselves as valuable citizens of the United States. While some African American women advocated expatriation to other regions of the world, most rejected the idea that

the United States was anything other than theirs to claim.[24] Many black women prided themselves on being the descendants of military veterans and war heroes. Their connection to the military history of the nation linked them to each of its attempts to preserve or extend American democratic freedoms.

African American women's patriotism also underscored the development of their historical narratives. That is, it fostered new interest in historical black women who were agents of social or political change. To this end, black women commemorated heroes like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Phyllis Wheatley, in addition to celebrating each other. Sidestepping their own differences, African American women applauded each other for any accomplishment that illustrated the virtue of the race. Conversely, black women also paid homage to the nation's black male heroes, such as Frederick Douglass, Crispus Attucks, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and Martin Delany. Writer and activist Pauline Hopkins, for example, used her columns in the *Colored American Magazine* to praise notable black men in history. In her essay on "Famous Men of the Negro Race," she lauded men like Lewis Hayden and Toussaint L'Ouverture. She also expressed Pan-Africanist solidarity by encouraging her readers to see themselves as heirs to a long heritage of African heroes.[25] By valorizing black men, Hopkins joined Wels-Barnett and others who reframed and broadened the early American story.

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[24] For a detailed discussion, see Leon Litwack and August Meier, *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University Press of Illinois, 1988), 87-103; Tunde Adekele *UnAfrican Americans: Nineteenth Century Black Nationalists and the Civilizing Mission* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998).
[25] Pauline Hopkins, "Famous Negro Men," and "Toussaint L'ouverture," *Colored American Magazine* Nov. 1900, 9-24.

Most certainly, the homage to black male historical figures conformed to traditional gender roles that gave preference to men over women. Yet, it also demonstrates the clairvoyance of black women who defended black male contributions to the United States because it was also a defense of themselves. That they did so, even when they were slighted by black men, speaks volumes about their dedication to civic equality. It is also evidence of African American women's intense commitment to their adaptation of true womanhood. In this way, the tensions of black women's patriotic expressions were intentionally deferential. By affirming black men, women like Hopkins, Terrell, Wells-Barnett, and Harper were simultaneously demonstrating their refinement and reclaiming their own images.

Black women's patriotic sentiment, however, also buttressed their assertions that the federal government should protect them from physical harm and public defamation.[26] After all, their ancestors fought for the democratic freedom in hopes of ending racial oppression. For black women, freedom from oppression meant protection from the unmitigated racial and sexual violence meted out on their communities. Accordingly, African American women intellectuals' fight for suffrage was not just about being equal to men. Voting was also seen as an important precaution against rape and sexual molestation, and therefore equality was also about protecting black women's bodies.

[26] Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

Few, if any, women could openly discuss sexual abuse in or outside of their communities, but the prevailing social attitudes about black women—and the racism they faced within national women's right organizations—gave urgency to their calls for enfranchisement. One of the earliest and most passionate black women to articulate the importance of black women's civic responsibility was Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a militant voice for women's rights and women's suffrage. She spoke and wrote for local and national women's rights groups such as the American Equal Rights Association (AERA), and contributed to several local and national African American newspapers.

Harper found the racial discrimination within national women's rights organizations deplorable. And by the 1870s, she argued in favor of the Fifteenth Amendment, and warned against "this old rebel element…in favor of taking away the colored man's vote."[27] Unlike many leading black women suffragists, she took less of an issue with the enfranchisement of black men over women - perhaps believing it was a male domain. "I do not believe," she posited, "that giving woman the ballot is immediately going to cure all the ills of life."[28] Harper contended women would not vote any differently than men, and this would not foster progressive movement in the country. Advancement and social justice, she argued, would only come through moral uplift and education, women's particular sphere of responsibility and agency.

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[27] Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, "A Private Meeting with the Women," reprinted in A Brighter Coming Day (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1990), 127.

[28] Harper, "We Are All Bound Up Together," in A Brighter Coming Day, 218. Harper's comment was a criticism of American democracy that played on the fundamental values of the nation's colonial heritage. Here, she references Micah 6:8, which lays out the basic requirements of godly living, justice, kindness and humility. Harper's use of this biblical reference as a critique have been readily recognizable to her largely Christian audience.

For Harper, the most pressing national issues were the racism and sexism that pervaded American society. In a speech commemorating one of Pennsylvania's early anti-slavery organizations, she asserted,

> *The great problem to be solved by the American people, if I understand it, is this—whether or not there is strength enough in democracy, virtue enough in our civilization, and power enough in our religion to have mercy and deal justly with four millions of people…lately translated from the old oligarchy of slavery to the new commonwealth of freedom.*[29]

Even so, she did not believe the government could do more for African Americans than they could for themselves, and in this way, her comment was an appeal to white Christian morality. Harper's words also illustrate the way in which she invoked the jeremiad subtly by pointing to the basic Christian principles of the nation, even as she also critiqued the nation's failure to live up to them. The suggestion that American democracy might not have the strength or virtue to integrate African Americans into its body politic was a sharp critique. Harper's commentary suggested that American democracy was not strong enough to include African Americans equally into its body politic. She also alluded to the fact that American people were not virtuous enough to sustain an equal society. In this way, Harper's critique is an exemplifies the subtleties in the ways black women intellectuals employed the jeremiad. Just as the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah warned the Judeans that the success of their society hinged on their moral integrity, Harper asserted that the long-term success of democratic freedoms in the United States was tied to the morality of white Americans.

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[29] Harper, "The Great Problem to be Solved," A Brighter Coming Day, 219.

Harper also viewed African American morality as a major determinant in the fight for an equal society. Black men, she posited, faced "a moral warfare, a battle against ignorance, poverty, and low social condition." Women were equally accountable in this battle, she explained, "and in the great work of upbuilding, there is room for woman's work and woman's heart."[30] In fact, because of their importance within the black community and the black family, Harper exclaimed, "now is the time for our women to begin to try to lift up their heads and plant the roots of progress under the hearthstone."[31] In her address to the National Women's Convention of 1878, Harper contended, that black women "as a class are quite equal to the men in energy and executive ability." African American women labored in every field they could, and provided for their families entirely when men could not. They worked to obtain higher education, and networked to sustain local and national charities for other people of color. "I do not suppose," she posited, "considering the state of her industrial lore and her limited advantages, that there is among the poorer classes a more helpful woman than the coloured woman as a labourer."[32]

Harper suggested that black women were the greatest moral agents of the race, exemplary of black social and political potential. Through black women's spiritual integrity, she asserted, God would see the suffering of the race and intervene on their behalf. The nation's sins of racial injustice would not go unpunished, and as Harper proclaimed early on in her career, "rest assured, as nations and individuals, God will do

[30] Harper, "The Great Problem to be Solved," A Brighter Coming Day, 221.
[31] See note 20.
[32]Harper, "Coloured Women of America," A Brighter Coming Day, 271.

right by us."[33] This warning buttressed Harper's suggestion that African Americans were God's chosen people, and affirmed her own sense of self as a virtuous woman and spiritual authority—both of which were necessary for black women who claimed the right to speak as political leaders.

Even in the face of overwhelming circumstances, Harper's perceived divine purpose. After the election of Rutherford B. Hayes to presidential office in 1877, and the decline in federal intervention throughout the South, Reconstruction policies were gradually repealed. The ensuing violence and intimidation of freed men and women disheartened Harper, and she lamented,

> I do not believe there is another civilized nation under heaven where there are half so many people who have been brutally and shamefully murdered without impunity as in this republic in the last ten years.[34]

Rather than calling for vengeance, she argued, "the nation that has no reverence for man is also lacking in reverence for God and needs to be instructed." Harper insisted, the grim realities of the Post Reconstruction period were temporary. "Apparent failure," she argued, "may hold in its rough shell the germs of a success that will blossom in time…what seemed to be a failure around the Cross of Calvary…has been the grandest recorded success." [35] Harper's outlook on the very grim realities of black life at the end of Reconstruction underscore her stance as a social prophet and point to her belief that brighter days were ahead for African American people if they maintained moral integrity.

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[33]Harper, "Miss Watkins and the Constitution," A Brighter Coming Day, 47.
[34] Harper, "The Great Problem to be Solved," A Brighter Coming Day, 220-222.
[35] Ibid.

This too reveals the subtleties in Harper's use of the jeremiad, and its parallels with the traditional expression of this discourse. Similar to the biblical character Jeremiah, Harper forecasted social and political consequences for American injustice against black people. Even so, she believed these repercussions were a part of a larger divine plan for the redemption of the nation and African Americans.

Harper's denunciations of American injustice were echoed by several of her contemporaries, and she was praised by nearly every leading woman of her time. Other black women journalists paid homage to her, naming her as a credit to the race. Philadelphia journalist Gertrude Mossell, for example, applauded Harper's "bright and shining examples." and her "eloquent pleading...for the race."[36] Mossell used her columns in the *AME Church Review* and the *New York Freeman* to provide social, political, and economic advice to newly freed men and women settling in northern cities between 1870 and 1890. Although more than fifty percent of the black population was still illiterate, her influence in local churches granted her access to thousands of new church goers, ministries, and religious outreach groups. With this platform, Mossell advanced the cause of racial and gender equality, encouraging black women to exercise their civil liberties.

Mossell's articles in T. Thomas Fortune's *New York Freeman* lambasted inequality wherever it surfaced. She reported stories of racial bias and discrimination in

[36] N. F Mossell, The Work Of The Afro-American Woman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 61-102.

churches, education, housing, employment, and in the criminal justice system. She even shared her own stories of civil disobedience when she encountered potentially dangerous racism in New Jersey and Delaware. Mossell rejected Booker T. Washington's strategies of racial accommodation and his emphasis on vocational training outright, encouraging her audience to actively seek out social and political change. Even more than this, she challenged black women to familiarize themselves with feminist thinkers like John Stewart Mill, and other literature that might broaden their understanding of gender equality. For Mossell, women's political representation was the most feasible way to undercut white racism, and the gateway to national peace. "Give women more power in the government offices," she argued, "if the desire is for peace and prosperity." Mossell's emphasis on peace strengthened the image of women as bastions of national morality, as well as it did support the call for women's increased representation in politics and the labor market. In particular, she argued that young black women should continue to make inroads in fields outside of domestic labor, where they would embody a challenge to white supremacy and provide needed services for their communities.[37]

Similar to Harper, Mossell viewed temperance as a quintessential element of black progress, and, she admonished black women to adapt strict self-control in their living, spending habits, parental teachings, and their social interactions. For her too, uplift and political freedom rested on the morality of black women. This is expressed most clearly in her 1894 publication *The Work of the Afro-American Woman.* The book opens

[37] Quoted in Rodger Streitmatter, *Raising Her Voice*: *African-American Women Journalists Who Changed History* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 37-49.

with Mossell's hope that her work might foster greater purity among black women. Dedicated to Mossell's two daughters—pictured inside the book cover—she offered a written a prayer "that they may grow into pure and noble womanhood."[38] In many ways, the girls serve as figurative examples of Mossell's hopes for the young black women she wrote to consistently in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Yet they also reinforce the notion that pure black womanhood was critical for racial progress and pivotal in black women's protest discourse. Mossell argued that maintained it was black women's integrity and their moral strength that served the race most. In particular, she lauded black women writers, "not primarily [as] makers of literature, but as preachers of righteousness."[39]

Mossell's assertion reveals the ways in which black women intellectuals viewed their work as spiritual and political. The assertion that their writing was an act of preaching "righteousness," attested to their positions as spiritual authorities and added greater significance to their calls for an end to national injustices against black people. Additionally, Mossell maintained that the intellectual productions of black women writers served as examples of their importance to the development of African American progress. Their work represented the moral guidance that helped African American communities cope with and overcome white racism and oppression. In this way, Mossell portrayed herself and other black women intellectuals as Jeremiahs whose literature called on the nation to address its social sins.

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[38] N. F Mossell, The Work Of The Afro-American Woman, 4.
[39] N. F Mossell, The Work Of The Afro-American Woman, 61.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett added another dimension to the call for social and political responsibility. Known best for her pioneering work against lynching, in the South, Wells-Barnett's advocacy of women's political rights receives less attention. Like many of her contemporaries, she argued that women's suffrage would further protect the race, but this was overshadowed by her defense of "negro suffrage" in general. Wells-Barnett's crusade for negro suffrage was, by default, an assertion of black male rights, but it was also a contestation of attacks on black womanhood. Most notable in her campaign against racial and gender equality was her decade long war of words with Frances Willard. In an interview with *The New York Voice* Willard addressed the nation's race problem by asserting that "the Anglo-Saxon race will never submit to be dominated by the Negro so long as his altitude reaches no higher than the personal liberty of the saloon and the power of appreciating the amount of liquor that a dollar will buy." Offering her condolences to southern states, she explained,

> *The problem on their hands is immeasurable. The colored race multiplies like the locusts of Egypt…The safety of women, of childhood, of the home, is menaced in a thousand localities…so that men dare not go beyond the sight of their own roof-tree.*[40]

Willard drew on every offensive stereotype of the day, ultimately shifting the blame of racial violence and racial inequality to African Americans. To this, Wells-Barnett made sharp reply in her book *Southern Horrors.* "Somebody must show that the Afro-American race," she wrote, "is more sinned against, than sinning, and it seems to

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[40] Willard, Frances, "The Race Problem" *Voice* 23 October 1890 reprinted in *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000* Document Project. 3 July 2016 <http://wass.alexanderstreet.com>

have fallen upon me to do so."[41] She implored her audience to think about the faulty rationale that freedom and education had suddenly made rapists out of black men. "The thinking public," she asserted, "will not easily believe freedom and education more brutalizing than slavery." Drawing on public memory of the Civil War, she argued, "the world knows that the crime of rape was unknown during four years of civil war, when the white women of the South were at the mercy of the race, which is all at once charged with being a bestial one." Wells-Barnett urged her audience to speak up. White and black citizens alike, she noted, remained silent about the unlawful practices of brutality and vigilante violence throughout the nation. If southerners were truly concerned about rape, she insisted, they should also be enraged about the indecent assaults on black women. "The miscegenation laws of the South," she charged, "only operate against the legitimate union of the races, they leave the white man free to seduce all the colored girls he can." In essence, she argued, "white men lynch the offending Afro-American, not because he is a despoiler of virtue, but because he succumbs to the smiles of white women."[42]

In several subsequent articles and interviews, Wells-Barnett offered scathing critiques of white women. Her interview in the *Westminster Gazette* Wells-Barnett decried white Christians like Frances Willard, who condoned racial violence in the South through accommodating attitudes and patronizing sentiments. "The white race," she declared, "in its dealings with us has for centuries shown every quality that is savage,

[41] Ida B Wells-Barnett, Southern Horrors (New York: New York Age Print, 1892), n. pag. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14975/14975-h/14975-h.htm>
[42] Ibid.

treacherous, and unchristian."[43] Calling out popular Reverend Dwight L. Moody and Willard, Wells-Barnett asserted, that Moody's segregated services "strengthened the Southern white man in his prejudices and his determination to enforce them even in the house of God." As for Willard, "the great temperance leader went even further in putting the seal of her approval upon the Southerners' method of dealing with the negro." In sum, she argued, "temperance people accepted the white man's story of the problem with which he had to deal." [44] In answer to the justification of lynching as a punishment for heinous crimes, Wells-Barnett noted that of the two hundred lynchings during the previous year, "158 were Negroes…out of these 158, only 30 were even CHARGED with any crime against women or children." This she supported in her 1895 book *A Red Record* which highlighted the half-hazard approach to justice taken in the South by white men, and the consequences for black men, women, and children.[45]

Wells-Barnett's attacks on the laxity and indifference of northern white temperance activists isolated her from many people of her peers, but they underscored her two-pronged application of jeremiadic discourse. In one way, Wells-Barnett drew on the Jeremiad to raise black women's political awareness and encourage their socio-political activism. In another, she utilized the Jeremiad to advocate for black suffrage. On the

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[43] Ida B. Wells, "The Bitter Cry of Black America: An Interview with Ida B. Wells" *Westminster Gazette* 10 (May 1894): 1-2. *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000* Document Project. Document Project. 3 July 2016 <http://wass.alexanderstreet.com>

[44] Ida B. Wells, "Mr. Moody and Mrs. Willard." *Fraternity,* (May 1894): 16-17. *Women and Social* Movements in the United States, 1600-2000 Document Project. 3 July 2016 <http://wass.alexanderstreet.com>

[45] See note 39. Also see Ida B. Wells, "A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892-1893-1894" in *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900.* ed. Jacqueline Jones Royster (Boston: Bedford, 1996).

surface, her defense of black men, was fundamentally an exoneration of the race before the public. It shifted the discourse about racial barbarity and sexual depravity in the opposite direction. Yet it also vindicated black womanhood by pointing out that there was rarely any choice involved in the sexual interactions between white men and black women. White women, she pointed out, did have choices, since no one placed blame on them for sexual engagement with black men. Consequently, Wells-Barnett strengthened the case for the purity of black womanhood by asserting that they actively resisted illicit sex with white men. Even more than this, her accusations against southern white women undercut many of the central arguments of white suffragettes. It called into question southern white women's claims of moral agency – indeed the very notion of the pure southern belle – while also implicating northern white women like Willard who sided or sympathized with them.[46]

Wells-Barnett remained a lioness for black civil rights long after Willard's death in 1898, and she placed heavy importance on the moral integrity and responsibility of black women. She was a charter member of the Women's Loyal Union in Brooklyn, one of the first two black women's clubs in the United States, and later served as the vice president of the Alpha Suffrage Club, the largest black women's suffrage organization in the country, during the nineteen-teens.[47] She remained at the helm of black women's suffrage effort until the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment – encouraging black

[46] Amy R. Slagell, "The Rhetorical Structure of Frances E. Willard's Campaign for Woman Suffrage, 1876-1896," Rhetoric and Public Affairs 4, no. 1 (2001): 1-23.
[47] Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women and the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998); Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 83-94.

women to join clubs that kept them aware of local and state politics. More than this, however, Wells-Barnett called on black women to be the moral guardians of the race, particularly because of the public contempt they faced so often. Conceding some of Frances Willard's points in the *A.M.E. Church Review* she wrote, "Miss Willard's statements possess the small pro rata of truth…it is well known that the Negro's greatest injury is done to himself." Consequently, she believed black women had a great responsibility to help sustain the dignity of the race through their moral influence.

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Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin expressed this very sentiment in her address to the NACW. It may have been black women's responsibility to maintain honorable decorum, but it was also incumbent upon them to demand their nation's just response to the abuse of its citizens. Ruffin, like her peers, argued that black women stood as ready as any American to foster a greater democracy, but they would not stand for injustice. "We are truly American women," she asserted, ready "to do our part for good as other American women." Rejecting the idea that black women were asking for special treatment, she noted, "we are not drawing the color line…only coming to the front."[48] In essence, Ruffin hoped that the "dignified showing of what we are," through the work of the NACW would underline the larger press for socio-political equality.

[48] Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, "Address to First National Conference of Colored Women." Speech. Boston, July 29, 1895.

Ruffin held the United States to the same standard she believed black women should uphold, and was particularly critical of its foreign policies at the end of the century. During the Spanish-American War her newspaper *Woman's Era* blasted the federal government for its treatment of Hawaiian queen Lilioukalani, and suggested American control of Cuba was tainted by racism. Ruffin, and many others insisted that the U.S. could not bring democracy elsewhere until it was established at home.[49]

For many African American women racism and sexism cast a dark shadow over American democracy and put a damper on their patriotic sentiment. As Anna Julia Cooper wrote, "our citizenship is beyond question…we have owed no other allegiance." Still, she maintained, "when the wild forces of hate and unholy passion are unleashed to run riot against us our hearts recoil…in grief and shame at…such a fall…for our country's high destiny."[50] Mary Church Terrell decried "the chasm between the principles upon which the Government was founded in which it still professes to believe, and those which are daily practiced under the protection of the flag." She also criticized U.S. imperialism, noting "the American people are not yet civilized enough…to recognize God's image through the veil of race or color."[51]

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[49] Josephine Ruffin maintained an active watch on U.S. imperialism, calling out the government for its racism at home and abroad. "Club Gossip" *Women's Era* Vol. 1 (March 1894), "Queen Lilioukalani Now Lives in Brookline, Mass.," and "Some Off-Color Happenings at the Hub," *Women's Era* Vol. 3 (Jan.1897)
[50] Anna Julia Cooper, "The Ethics of the Negro Question," in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*: *Including A Voice from the South and Other Important Essays, Papers, and Letters* eds. Charles C. Lemert and Esme Bhan, (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 215.
[51] Mary C. Terrell, "What it Means to be Colored in the Capital of the United States," in *Quest for Equality:* T*he Life and Writings of Mary Eliza Church Terrell, 1863-1954* ed. Beverly J. Washington (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Pub, 1990), 291; Carrie W. Clifford "What Shall it Be?" *Colored American Magazine* 12 (January 1907), 34.

Patriotism also allowed black women to affirm and critique black men. While many African American women supported expressions of citizenship that underscored black masculinity, they responded quickly and keenly when those expressions threatened to exclude them from participating in the black freedom struggle. At the end of the century, when African American men argued that women should focus their attention on child birth instead of politics, black women countered that motherhood was inherently political. Without black women's direct influence, they maintained, the race would falter. Similar to their educational reform efforts, black women's patriotism was rooted in black women's gender construction, and motherhood – or "enlightened motherhood as Frances Harper called it – was its basis. It was integral to their roles as moral guardians of the race, and it cemented their powerful rejections of negative stereotypes about their womanhood.

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Intellectual endeavor was also an important strand in African American women's jeremiad. Teaching and learning were illegal for nearly all African Americans prior to the Civil War, but educational training after the war helped freed people undermine the lasting legacies of slavery. Hence education was a key component of racial uplift. Yet many black women intellectuals also viewed teaching as a noble and sacred profession. Educational institutions represented the greatest venues for instilling middle class refinement and Christian values into secondary and post-secondary African American students. Intellectual pursuit also provided African Americans with the broadest range of professional careers, from journalism to playwrighting. Each form of intellectual activity

helped to diversify African American women's traditions of protest, and the ways in which they employed their jeremiad.

The organized effort to educate African Americans got its most significant support from the Freedman's Bureau in the 1860s. Its black volunteers and contributors, however, were often already engaged in the work of teaching students of color through organized churches and missionary assignments. By the end of Reconstruction, the number of African American schools more than doubled, and the number of black teachers mirrored that growth. At the end of the century, more than twenty-eight thousand African Americans were employed as teachers nationally. Approximately half of these were women who held college or professional degrees.[52]

Black communities believed education was essential to progress and when they could not attend school, they found ways to send their children. More than this, however, African American women frequently argued that children of color needed K-12 and post-secondary education. In the 1870s, kindergarten education was still in national debate, but black women believed this would give their children a helpful advantage. Educators such as Frances Harper, Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, and Nannie Helen Burroughs all agreed with this, and kindergarten education was promoted in the conventions of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), and various black news publications. In the first and second annual NACW conventions, African American

[52] Linda M. Perkins, "The Impact of The "Cult of True Womanhood" On The Education of Black Women," Journal of Social Issues 39, no. 3 (1983): 17-28.

women planned fund raisers and proposed strategies to establish kindergartens for black children.

Mary Church Terrell was a major advocate of early childhood education, working diligently to raise money for them. "It is kindergartens we need," she argued, "in every city and hamlet of this broad land…if the children are to receive from us what it is our duty to give."[53] Early childhood education, she explained, would help "inculcate correct principles, and set good examples for our own youth whose little feet will have so many thorny paths of prejudice, temptation, and injustice to tread." It would also enable more black women to enter the work force knowing their children were in a safe environment. More than this, Terrell implored well-to-do black women to invest in kindergartens as a means of uplifting their working-class sisters. Their families, she believed, were more likely to fall to social vices, and hinder the work of racial uplift. She reminded her audience that racism cast a shadow on all black women, and that "the world will always judge the womanhood of the race" by "the masses of our women." Consequently, she argued, "even though we wish to shun them, we cannot escape the consequences of their acts."[54] Education, therefore, would help fasten the bonds of black communities and prepare their youth for white prejudice and interracial cooperation. As she wrote in the *AME Church Review*, "the real solution of the race problem…lies in the children."[55]

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[53] Mary C. Terrell, "First Presidential Address to the National Association of Colored Women," in Beverly Washington Jones, Quest for Equality (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Pub., 1990), 135.
[54] Mary C. Terrell, "The Duty of the National Association of Colored Women to the Race," in Quest for Equality, 145.
[55] Mary C. Terrell, "What Role is the Educated Negro Woman to Play in the Uplifting of Her Race," in Quest for Equality, 154.

Believing that cross racial alliances were the only means of realizing democracy, Terrell was an active member of several interracial organizations, such as the National Alliance for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Committee on Race Relations of the Washington Federation of Churches (CRRFWC), and the Interracial Committee of the Washington Council of Social Agencies (ICWCSA). She used her positions in each organization to address racial injustice and gender prejudice, and wrote essays and short stories that emphasized interracial cooperation. Terrell even challenged African American leaders to take up the cause of "regenerating the white South," arguing, "nowhere could they render more patriotic, more valiant and more Christ-like service."[56]

Nonetheless, Terrell also believed that people of color needed to combat stereotypes by representing themselves with grace and dignity in public. It was primarily through a demonstration of strong moral character, she argued, that African Americans could prove themselves worthy of white support, and foster more sound alliances between the races. In this sense, she joined the chorus of black women who believed that "the duty of setting a high moral standard and living up to it devolves upon colored women in a peculiar way."[57] The myth of black women's loose sexual mores, meant that black women needed to "avoid even the appearance of evil," she argued. Here again, Terrell pronounces the theme of pure black womanhood: the true, or pure, African American woman was the foundation of a virtuous home, a strong family, and a good

[56] Mary C. Terrell, "Service Which Should be Rendered the South," in Quest for Equality, 211.
[57] Mary C. Terrell, "The Duty of the National Association of Colored Women to the Race," in Quest for Equality,148.

community. And, good communities were filled with productive and responsible American citizens. Consequently, Terrell's emphasis on black women's behavior was not simply about their public representation, but was also linked to civic equality for all communities of color.

Even so, Terrell insisted that white rejection of black equality would garner divine retribution. In several of her essays, she reproached American whites for their complicity in the mistreatment of black citizens and their silence on issues of lynching and rape. In "Lynching from a Negro's Point of View," Terrell wrote, "the South has so industriously, persistently and eloquently preached the inferiority of the negro, that the North has apparently been converted to this view." The upshot of this, she asserted, was that "the American public…seem to be all but indifferent to the murderous assaults upon the negroes in the South."[58] Despite this, Terrell did not believe the injustice would go unanswered, and she issued a powerful warning to white mothers for their children. In a speech to the NACW she remarked,

> Let the association of colored women ask the white mothers of this country to teach their children that when they grow to be men and women, if they deliberately prevent their fellow creatures from earning their daily bread by closing the doors of trade against them the Father will hold them responsible for the crimes which are the result of their injustice…[59]

Terrell stood in line with Harper, and Wells-Barnett in the call for social and political justice, and her life-long activism furthered the work of substantiating black

[58] Mary C. Terrell, "Lynching from a Negro's Point of View," in Quest for Equality, 181.
[59] Mary C. Terrell, "The Duty of the National Association of Colored Women to the Race," in Quest for Equality, 147.

womanhood as the center of African American citizenship and progress. This construction of womanhood, however, was wrapped in a discourse of purity and Christian morality—illustrating the centrality of black women's jeremiadic discourse to her protest.

Colleges were also important to black women, since they typically helped black students train for a racist job market. Additionally, higher education was instrumental in teaching African American youth the behavioral and social expectations incumbent upon them after graduation. For women, in particular, this included a new sense of themselves as "ladies" – or refined women with moral obligations to their respective communities.[60] It was in black colleges and universities that African American women learned their definition of true womanhood. That is, they learned that they must be intellectuals, and were moral agents of change. Higher education trained black women to take on the responsibility of family life and community service – a lesson they took very seriously.[61] Although many women in subsequent generations bemoaned this obligation, racial uplift was, in many senses, gendered. Hence, college training—like voting, marriage, motherhood, and piety—was yet another facet of black womanhood during the latter nineteenth century. True black womanhood was heavy laden with responsibility, leaving little room for error. Racial survival hinged on black women's ability to serve the community and maintain the bonds of kinship networks. Conversely, the defense of the

[60] Margaret A. Lower *Looking Good: College Women and Body Image, 1875-1930* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003).
[61] See Linda M. Perkins, "The Impact of The 'Cult Of True Womanhood' On The Education Of Black Women," Journal of Social Issues 39, no. 3 (1983): 17-28; 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).

race also rested on African Americans' ability to point to dignified black women as proof of the race's value and promise.

Luminary Anna Julia Cooper dedicated her life to shaping black womanhood and education. Her career began right at the end of Reconstruction and spanned more than half of the twentieth century. A deeply religious and feminist thinker, she viewed womanhood as sacred, and black womanhood as a determinant of racial and spiritual uplift. For Cooper, these two established the fundamental underpinnings of black education. "The race cannot be effectually lifted up," she argued, "till its women are truly elevated."[62] More than this, she asserted, "the fundamental agency under God in the regeneration, the retraining of the race, as well as the ground work and starting point of its progress upward, must be the *black woman.*"[63] Accordingly, Cooper believed that young black women needed higher education to serve their communities across the country. "The earnest well trained Christian young woman," she posited, "as a teacher…home-maker…wife…mother…or silent influence even, is as potent a missionary agency among our people as is the theologian."[64] Thus, she argued, black communities should invest more in the education of their young women.

In her own career, Cooper was a dedicated teacher. She worked for many years as a high school instructor, and later vice principle, at M Street School in Washington D.C. alongside Mary Church Terrell. She taught almost every subject, and specialized in

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[62] Anna J. Cooper "Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race,"The Voice Of Anna Julia Cooper, 69.
[63]Ibid., 62.
[64] Anna J Cooper "The Higher Education of Women," The Voice Of Anna Julia Cooper, 87.

classical studies like linguistics and history. Cooper also championed liberal arts education over vocational because she believed the former bolstered black self-esteem. Although her philosophies predate W.E.B. DuBois' call for classical education, she is often characterized as the "female DuBois" – an unintentionally diminutive label.[65] Nonetheless, Cooper incorporated far greater concern for black women in her life's work keep DuBois, and is notable for the time she spent working with and for poor and working class black women in the Washington D.C. area. Her activism extended well beyond her writing and teaching, and unlike many of her contemporaries, she opened her homes in D.C. to struggling black men and women that she adopted as foster children, mentees, and students.

The ripples of Cooper's career were expansive, and her ideologies about womanhood and education sustained themselves well into the twentieth century. Yet, her insightful criticisms of American democracy profoundly shaped black feminist thought and black women's jeremiadic discourse throughout the twentieth century. Cooper's declaration that "only the black woman can say 'when and where I enter," is frequently cited as an important statement of reclamation for black women from the Post-Reconstruction period into the beginning of the early twentieth century. But this statement also reveals a great deal about black women's jeremiadic discourse in the same moment. In one sense, Cooper's assertion that the freedom of black women would determine the destiny of the race was par for the course. It mirrored the sentiment of

[65] Karen A Johnson, Uplifting The Women And The Race: The Educational Philosophies, and Social Activism of Anna Julia Cooper and Nannie Helen Burroughs (New York: Garland Pub., 2000), 112-113.

other leading black women at the end of the nineteenth century. In another sense, however, Cooper was more direct in her contention that black women were not just moral agents in the black freedom struggle, they were ordained for this role in the American republic. In many ways, while the first half of her assertion is a clear reflection of nineteenth century black feminism, the latter half denotes an implicit messianic theme. Cooper suggests that black women's choices would lead the race over the threshold of equality, or as she contended, "then and there the Negro race enters with me." That is, Cooper identifies black women's leadership as the crux of racial advancement and deliverance from injustice.

Speaking on the gradual disenfranchisement of black men in the last two decades of the century, she noted that it was merely a passing moment and test of God, and encouraged black men to

> stand aside from the hum and rush of human interests and passions to hear the voices of God…[since] it may be woman's privilege from her coigne of vantage as a quiet observer to whisper just the needed suggestion or the almost forgotten truth. The colored woman, then, should not be ignored because her bark is resting in the silent waters of the sheltered cove. [66]

Black women, she argued, helped the men in their community maintain strong political ties with the Republican party. Hence, she added, "not felt then, if unproclaimed has been the work and influence of the colored women of America."[67] Despite this, Cooper noted, "the Afro-American woman maintained ideals of womanhood unashamed

[66] Anna J. Cooper "The Status of Woman in America," The Voice Of Anna Julia Cooper, 114.
[67] Ibid., 115.

by any ever conceived."[68] Combined with moral education and consistent social activism, she believed African Americans would wear on the conscious of American society. "It is no fault of the Negro," she posited, "that he stands in the United States of America today as the passive and silent rebuke to the Nation's Christianity." As such, Cooper maintained, "God is not dead…as a nation sows so shall it reap." Although "the American conscious would like a rest from the black man's ghost," she argued, "…America…will never be at peace with herself till this question [of racial equality] is settled and settled right."[69]

Nannie Helen Burroughs, student of Terrell and Cooper at the M Street School, is another important champion of black education. Born at the end of Reconstruction, Burroughs began her teaching career early. She worked in the youth ministry of her church, and began advocating a women's convention to discuss black women's rights within the National Baptist Convention (NBC). Resisted at first by leading men in the denomination, the first national Baptist Women's Convention took place in 1900, through Burroughs' consistent efforts. She served in various leadership positions in the Women's Convention for the duration of her life, and facilitated a considerable amount of planning and fund raising for public outreach and education. Relying on the networks of women in the Baptist church, Burroughs opened the National Trade School for Women and Girls (NTPS) her own school for women and girls in the early twentieth century.

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[68] Anna J. Cooper "The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women in the United States," The Voice Of Anna Julia Cooper, 202.
[69] Anna J. Cooper "The Ethics of the Negro Question," The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper, 206-214.

Most certainly an outcome of her own education under Cooper and Terrell, Burroughs was deeply pious, straightforward and unapologetic in her pedagogical philosophy and her ideas about racial progress. Similar to her predecessors, she encouraged black women to protest unjust treatment and advocated K-12 and post-secondary education for black students. Women's activism was also central in her educational model. Echoing the ideologies of Terrell, Cooper, and Harper. Burroughs believed that women's education would ultimately propel the race beyond reproach, as long as their training was bolstered by Christian teaching. In fact, Burroughs encouraged her students to view their education and job training as integral to their individual ministries. She too saw herself as a divine servant, explaining, "while my spirit serves in the divine realm I still will be helping some working woman or some growing girl."[70] In this way, she was directly expanding the work of Zilpha Elaw, Jarena Lee, Sojourner Truth, and Maria Stewart. Like these early pioneers, Burroughs believed black women had a spiritual obligation to serve and educate the race.

All of these women were highly active in their churches and equally engaged in club work from the late nineteenth century into the twentieth. Each felt a personal responsibility to help African American youth counteract American racism. And all felt that Christian morality was the most important part of education for students of color. In addition to similar pedagogical philosophies, these educators shared with Terrell, Cooper, and Burroughs, a sense that combatting oppression meant upholding

[70] Quoted in Karen Johnson, *Uplifting Women and the Race,* 105.

strict public and private decorum that spoke to the worthiness of African Americans as citizens. And given the public derision they faced despite their own achievements, this was pivotal to substantiating their calls for equality.

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Underneath each of the major themes in black women's *enacted jeremiad* was an emphasis on religious instruction and purity. In nearly all of their popular publications and talks, African American women emphasized the importance of reflecting godly traits, attending church, and maintaining respectable public decorum. Regardless of the class or regional affiliations of their audiences, black women intellectuals argued that the greatest defense of their womanhood was in their moral or spiritual state. It was from this base, they posited, that all other thoughts and actions sprung. In this respect, women's churches were instrumental in disseminating the message of virtuous womanhood to black women of all classes.

In their newspapers, speeches, sermons, church and club publications, black women emphasized these ideas in hopes of advancing the cause of black women. In their own ways, Harper, Wells-Barnett, Ruffin, Terrell, and others like them, worked to embody the principles they espoused, but they also encouraged thousands of working class black women to do the same. Most elite African American women maintained an audience of their peers, and cross class dialogues within black communities were sometimes as contentious and as cross racial alliances. Even so, black women intellectuals and activists sustained larger circles of influence on working class women

through their national organizations. Specifically, black churches and women's church groups provided important spaces of class intersection in many African American communities. Often, poor and working class women filled the rank and file of black women's organizations and societies as organizers, volunteers, singers, or simply as listening and reading audiences. These women picked up on the importance of the ideals advocated by upper class black women, and they embodied them in their own ways. Accordingly, working class African American women also enacted the jeremiad – albeit in ways that are sometimes more difficult to identify.

Within the growing denominations of the black church, African American women were still fighting to be recognized equally, despite the many benefits of their related club activities. In the 1920s and 1930s, as black churches became more organized, women experienced more marginalization in their places of worship. Decision making was especially tedious, since few black women could or did hold high ranking positions of leadership.[71] Despite this, black women worked around black men by orchestrating gender specific clubs and societies, and by concentrating their efforts more heavily in areas where they could exercise their authority. To this end, education, women's health care, and domestic labor became primary focal points. Ironically, black women's marginalization in post Reconstruction churches pushed them further into the public sphere – in turn forcing them to defend themselves against sexualized racism.

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[71] See Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, Sharon Gramby-Sobukwe and Kimberly Williams-Gegner, "Tempered Radicals: Black Women's Leadership in the Church and Community," The Journal of Pan African Studies 5, no. 2 (2012): 84-109; Bettye Collier-Thomas, Jesus, Jobs, And Justice (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

This is not to say that black women retreated from their long-standing work in local and national denominations. Indeed, many women continued to advance in the higher ranks of their church leadership. They often did so, however, by initiating their ministries overseas or outside of church governance. Missionary work was one entry point for black women to establish ministries outside of black male control. Yet itinerant preaching remained the most successful means of forcing larger denominations to make room for African American women as preaching evangelists, pastors, and ultimately Bishops.

Julia A.J. Foote is one clear example of the continued importance of itinerant preaching. Foote's published conversion narrative at the end of Reconstruction was a testament to the difficulties women faced in the black church, as well as it was a call for American Christians to re-evaluate their profession of faith. Her book *A Brand Plucked from the Fire* was a conversion narrative with strong feminist undertones. The book was also saturated with anti-racist sentiment and appeals to the jeremiad. Following the pattern of her antebellum predecessors, she detailed her journey from a difficult childhood to a spiritual calling.

In her ministry and personal life, Foote faced significant resistance. Like Elaw, her husband disproved of her ministry, and as a result, she struggled with her internal beliefs and her external realities. Mr. Foote believed his wife "was getting more crazy every day," and threatened to "send [her] back home or to the crazy house."[72] Throughout

[72] Julia A. J Foote, A Brand Plucked from The Fire. (Cleveland, Ohio: W.F. Schneider., 1879), 59.

her life Foote was frequently ill or dismally depressed. Church opposition was also a major hurdle for Foote, since she was not officially ordained to preach by any high ranking minister within her church. Refusing to acquiesce to church mandates that denied her the ability to preach, as she believed God called her to, Foote began her itinerant preaching like many black women – in prayer meetings. Achieving sanctification was also an important strain in her ministry, and it heightened her sense of freedom. As she explained, "my soul had great liberty for God."[73] Sanctification also made Foote more critical of American inequality. In several portions of her narrative, Foote references racism, calling it a "cruel monster."[74] Still, for Foote, gender and race prejudice in the church were deeply linked to larger societal ills.

Foote's itinerant ministry picked up just as Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw's declined, but she no doubt benefitted from their established spiritual and political activism in the New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania tri-state area. Born just outside of New York's capital, Foote's family lived well within the preaching route of Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw during the 1830s and 1840s. Similar to Lee and Elaw, Foote's spiritual conviction rested on the idea that salvation and spiritual transformation erased the damning impact of sin. Yet she was also more vocal about the need for temperance in African American communities. Foote shared with other leading black women, the belief that social behaviors were important to racial progress. But, for her, spiritual salvation was the linchpin of proper social conduct and political equality.

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[73] Ibid., 103.
[74] Ibid., 96.

In one sense, Foote's call for salvation was a straightforward plea to maintain Christian faith. In another, however, she was also advocating faith and spiritual transformation as a means of social redemption. Given the high levels of poverty that fostered social ills in black communities, and the concurrent press for temperance among black leaders, Foote's message was relevant and salient.[75] Additionally, Foote's ministry and her belief in the redemptive power of faith was another type of racial uplift. Her work in and outside of the church further established the case for citizenship based on pure and sacred black womanhood. Her own life was exemplary in this sense, and she believed women like herself were helping to end gender prejudice. "Dear sisters…you may think you have hard times," she wrote, "but…I feel that the lion and the lamb are laying down together." In a much larger sense, Foote's ministry underscored the idea that salvation and purity led to self-actualization. This, in turn, prompted activism in the secular arena, which for her encompassed years of temperance work. She travelled the nation preaching against tobacco, alcohol, and caffeine. And, as the nineteenth century came to a close, Foote served on T. Thomas Fortune's Afro-American League in New York, an organization chartered to improve the lives of black New Yorkers struggling because of social, economic and political exclusion.[76] Consequently, Foote joined the ranks of her contemporaries in word and service.

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[75] Terry Novak, "Frances Harper's Poverty Relief Mission," in Our Sisters' Keepers: Nineteenth Century Benevolence Literature by American Women eds. Jill Bergman and Debra Bernardi (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 213-226.

[76] Foote, A Brand Plucked from The Fire, 89. Foote was mentioned in several newspapers for her preaching, particularly when the subject was temperance. News and Misc. Items, Bangor Daily Whig & Courier, Monday August 9, 1880; Local religious news, St. Louis Globe-Democrat, Friday June 22,1883; Religious Intelligence, Daily Evening Bulletin, Saturday March 14, 1885; Albany Notes, The New York Freeman, Saturday August 28, 1886.

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The latter half of the nineteenth century was earmarked by black women's intense intellectual fervor, despite a rise in sexual and racial violence. Black women worked diligently to embody Victorian middle class sensibilities, and to meld them with their own sense of racial and gender identities. For black women, Victorianism functioned in conjunction with their spiritual beliefs, and allowed them to valorize and dignify their race and gender. It also enabled them to embrace American national identity as their own. For white Americans, national identity was linked to political freedom. Black women, however, noted that it was conditional. As such, they contended, people of color needed to help each other to advance and prove their American-ness. In this way, they saw themselves and their successors as vital actors in the progress and conservation of the race, and in the protection of other African American women.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the gender etiquette of the day was changing. Young black women, who travelled farther north and west for employment and education waited longer to marry, and more frequently they lived on their own. As the nation underwent a sexual revolution, and racial violence and exclusion persisted, uplifting the race became overwhelming for many black women, and undesirable for others. Consequently, the early twentieth century marks a budding divide in the use of the *enacted jeremiad* – one that deeply impacted the long civil rights movement. Black women remained busy in their churches, emphasizing self-control, self-help, education, and moral purity as the foundations of American citizenship for people

of color. These messages, however, were increasingly out of sync with the culture at large and the new experiences of younger black women. They were also more difficult to maintain as the nation entered the First World War, and African Americans threw the weight of their support behind black male military service to prove their equality.

Conversely, the socio-political changes of the early twentieth century fostered a growing presence of African American women in the labor market, creating new platforms for demanding equality and defending their womanhood. For these women, secular culture was the ideal medium to express their frustrations with racism and prejudice in the United States. In music, performance, and literature, younger black women infused new notions about their womanhood into public culture. Even so, secular constructions of black womanhood were not completely divorced from a spiritual discourse. Indeed, spiritual discourse remained a part of African American women's calls for civic equality and their use of the jeremiad. Drawing on Afro-Christian ideologies, black women writers, speakers, and performers embedded themes of spirituality and Christian teachings into their work as a means of critiquing American racism and sexism. Here again, they underscored their sense of black womanhood with themes of redemption, divine inspiration, purity and spiritual awakening.

Chapter 3

A Fit Vessel

> *"…If God is the father of all, the relationship that [exists] between Gentile and Jew, as well as Ethiopians, is [inseparable] and unquestionably established[.] So let us saints, pray that the Constantine of our day (if there be one) sends a letter to the modern pagans in the [polluted] southland in the form of 'Anti-lynch legislation that is now pending in Congress."*[1]

Though it is commonly overlooked, Holiness-Pentecostal belief and practice has tremendous influence on social, economic, and political developments in many African American communities. Since the late nineteenth century, black Holiness – and later Holiness-Pentecostal – organizations have garnered a predominantly working class female constituency.[2] In many places, women organize everything from church fundraising to community outreach. Even more than this, however, black women in the

[1] Ida B. Robinson, "Economic Persecution," in *Daughters of Thunder* ed. Bettye Collier-Thomas (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 204.

[2] While many African American religious communities view Holiness and Pentecostal doctrine as interchangeable, it is important to delineate the distinctions between them. Holiness doctrine emerged within Methodism during the nineteenth century. It emphasized strict moral standards and concerted effort towards "Christian Perfection" a concept that emphasizes complete devotion to God and a concentrated effort to avoid sin. Achieving this perfection, however, came only after conversion or salvation from sin. Pentecostalism also emerged in the twentieth century, after the 1906-1915 Azusa Street revival led by William Seymour and several others. Pentecostal doctrine holds that true salvation is evidenced by demonstrations of the Holy Spirit such as glossolalia and shouting. Pentecostal belief is generally grounded in the biblical narrative of Acts, chapter 2. While some Pentecostals uphold holiness doctrine explicitly in their organizations, many do not. For further reference, see Amos Yong and Estrelda Y. Alexander, *Afro-Pentecostalism: Black Charismatic Christianity in History and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Charles E. Jones, *Perfectionist Persuasion: The Holiness Movement and American Methodism, 1867-1936* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1974). See also Acts 2: 1-21 KJV.

Pentecostal tradition have developed a practice of acknowledging and celebrating divinity in each other.

Seeking prayer, comfort, and leadership in one another, black women within the emerging Holiness-Pentecostal movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century inscribed this sect with a radical conception of female leadership that did not fully bloom among Baptist or Methodist denominations until the latter twentieth century. Consequently, the emergence of Holiness-Pentecostal churches at the turn of the twentieth century, provides an untapped resource for identifying black women's enacted jeremiad.

During its early days in the 1910s, Holiness-Pentecostal practice was malleable and permeable, allowing women across racial, ethnic, and class lines to fashion new identities rooted in gender equality. Accordingly, the flexibility of Holiness-Pentecostal denominations, also bolstered women's political engagement in the secular arena. For black women, in particular, Holiness-Pentecostal movements underscored much of their socio-political activity throughout the early twentieth century, ultimately complimenting the budding cultural explosions in African American communities across the nation.[3] Even so, the form of black women's activities in and outside of their churches did not change—making it more difficult to identify their labors as inherently political. That is, black women remained the primary source of domestic labor in and outside of their

[3] Randall Keith Burkett, *Garveyism as a Religious Movement* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1978); Tony Martin, *Literary Garveyism: Garvey, Black Arts and the Harlem Renaissance*. Dover: Majority Press, 1984.

churches, homes, and communities, but the meanings of this labor shifted as they gained new leadership roles within Holiness-Pentecostal churches.

Certainly, black women's labor at the turn of the twentieth century made room for a more organized effort among working class African American people throughout the twentieth century. Yet black women's overrepresentation in Holiness-Pentecostal churches, as congregants and church workers, has obscured the values of their work and created a gender norm that, in many ways, parallels larger trends in American society.[4] Indeed, the prevalence of African American Holiness-Pentecostal women who function as pivotal figures in the families of their local, state, and national church networks, bolster the sense that their efforts are somehow innate or natural to women. Consequently, they are often viewed as "sisters" "mothers" or "aunties," rather than bishops, preachers, elders, pastors, or deacons. In this way, the language and practice of Holiness-Pentecostal belief deepen the conflation of black women's spiritual, domestic, and political work in their churches and communities.

In my own life, the intersection of black women's domestic and spiritual labor is continually invaluable. As a child, I was socialized in several types of religious institutions; each one shaped my research questions and interests. Holiness-Pentecostal

[4] Although black women often assume domestic roles in and outside of their homes, they have also historically functioned as partial or sole bread winners in their families and communities. In this way, their economic experiences differ from that of many, but not all, white women who were barred from the labor market in early American history, and restricted at the turn of the twentieth century. See Jacqueline Jones, *Labor Of Love, Labor Of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, from Slavery to the Present*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010); Sharon Harley et. al, *Sister Circle*: *Black Women and Work.* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

traditions, however, have been most impactful in molding my understandings of womanhood and motherhood. No doubt, this project is undergirded by my own memories of a family crisis over twenty years ago, when my mother lost consciousness at work.

There were no warning signs, and the morning progressed like each one before it. My mom packed lunches for my little sister and me, she ironed our uniforms, and insisted we tuck in our shirts so we looked neat. ("Thank you, mom"). She double checked our book bags and folders, wrestled with the dense springy curls that refused to fold neatly into the braided ponytails she worked so hard to secure, then hurried off to work. My father did a follow-up inspection of us, and took us to school, reminding us on the ride that the only acceptable standard in our house was excellence. ("Thank you, dad").

When my mother reached the hospital, she was still unconscious. A ventilator kept her breathing, and the hospital staff was not hopeful. By the time my father arrived, they informed him that she would very likely die if taken off life support. Even if she recovered, they warned, she would never be the same. The highest probabilities were death or permanent disability: a morbid reality on all sides.

In the days and weeks that followed, she remained on life support, while her family and friends prayed for her recovery. Afraid she might never return, I prayed often for my mom--and my dad--whose tired, glassy, red eyes made it hard for me to comprehend his promise that "God is faithful." And though we didn't fully understand this, my sister and I believed our dad's encouragement that God saw and heard us.

During my mother's extensive recovery time, I struggled to comprehend the language of faith spoken in and around my home, and the meanings of prayer in the cultures of both my parents. And, though I do not profess to have mastered these values and meanings in any way, I have often thought about how my pleas for my mother were answered. As my mom's healing process stretched from one month to the next, the answers to my prayers came through a father whose response to crisis was to love his children harder, and in the compassion and kindness of the women who rallied around my family.

Several of my parents' relatives, church members, and even coworkers, took up the challenge of helping my father with his two little girls so he could be there for his wife. My great aunt Virginia, a woman in her seventies, took care of my sister and me every day after school, bringing us with her to church during the week so my dad could visit with my mom after work in the evening. Another woman, who attended our family church, took on the task of cleaning our home, caring for our hair, and helping with our homework. A coworker and family friend, made large pans of food for us so my dad would not have to worry about cooking.

Collectively, these women deeply shaped my own understanding about community and family. In many ways, they are a fixed representation of the spiritual and the divine in my consciousness. More than this, however, they illustrate the continued relevance of the political and spiritual work championed by black church women for centuries. Indeed, the loving response of those women who met the needs of a family in

crisis is exemplary of the type of spiritual work carried out by African American women since the late nineteenth century.

Ignored because it is thoroughly domestic, or women's work, black women's cooking, cleaning and caring in their own communities is also spiritual labor.[5] It is another means of affirming black life, black families, and black women. Undoubtedly, women's domestic work is a central thread of sustained family and community life for many African Americans. Equally important, however, is that black women's physical and intellectual labor in their homes, churches, and communities, significantly shapes the ways they see the divine in each other. This recognition, in turn, underscores their activism and spurs a continued challenge to American inequality.

Just as black women of the early nineteenth century could and did voice their criticisms of American racism and sexism through their spiritual discourse and work, so too did their successors at the turn of the century. Relying on the language of purity and sanctification, African American women at the beginning of the twentieth century defied continued attacks on their character by organizing their own departments within larger black Christian denominations, or establishing independent religious institutions. These new spaces created platforms that fortified black communities across the nation. As they worked to establish equality within their larger religious communities, black women's

[5] For "women's work" see Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work: 1840*-1940 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); David H. Demo and Alan C. Acock, "Family Diversity and the Division of Domestic Labor: How Much Have Things Really Changed?" *Family Relations* 42, no. 3 (1993): 323-31.

efforts complemented the "race work" of their predecessors, and facilitated the development of the twentieth century's unfolding civil rights movement. [6]

The importance of African American women's independent religious organizations and activism to the long black struggle for freedom is formidable, and has been well documented by scholar Bettye Collier-Thomas. Her seminal work on black women's socio-political and spiritual labor documents the powerful implications of their efforts for racial and gender progress from the late nineteenth century to the present. This chapter adds to Collier-Thomas' important work in that it offers a more nuanced examination of a frequently overlooked segment in African American religious history, and African American women's intellectual history: Holiness-Pentecostal communities. As I will argue here, black women's spiritual work at the beginning of the twentieth century was also an essential component of their jeremiadic expression. Specifically, I contend that women like Bishop Ida B. Robinson facilitated the fight for civic equality among working class African Americans by establishing organizations rooted in thoroughly egalitarian ideals. Namely, Bishop Robinson, and women like her, used female leadership and holiness doctrine to undermine gender injustice and to encourage equitable power dynamics in and outside of their churches and communities.

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

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Overshadowed by the NACW and larger black Christian denominations, black Holiness-Pentecostal movements offer a powerful example of African American women's use of the jeremiad. As they developed in the first thirty years of the twentieth century, Holiness-Pentecostal churches allowed African American women to construct egalitarian styled communities predicated on gender neutral doctrines. In particular, black women who founded their own Holiness-Pentecostal institutions, used their positions of leadership to promote feminist interpretations of God and the bible. Similar to their early nineteenth century forerunners, black women preachers of the following century emphasized the idea that "God is no respecter of persons."[7] Accordingly, these leaders insisted on being ordained alongside men, arguing that God calls women too, and demanding shared power within their churches.

In their organizations and activism, womanhood, motherhood, and marriage figured prominently in black Holiness-Pentecostal women's appeals to equality. Working to distinguish themselves from their Baptist and Methodist counterparts, Holiness-Pentecostal women emphasized minimalistic, frugal, living. Indeed, many Holiness-Pentecostal churches emerged at the turn of the century in response to the economic changes in black communities across the country.[8] While black families did not experience an overwhelming increase of economic stability, they did see a steady rise in

[7] Reference to Acts 10:34 and Romans 2:11.
[8] See John Giggie, *After Redemption: Jim Crow and the Transformation of African American Religion in the Delta, 1875–1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

employment opportunities from the late nineteenth century well into the twentieth.[9] Specifically, as the nation's cities grew more industrialized, African American workers found a wider selection of skilled and unskilled labor jobs, as well as they did find venues for employment as strike breakers.[10] Women, in particular, entered the workforce in larger numbers as domestic servants and industrial workers.[11] Their growing presence in the labor market augmented their financial independence within black communities, while also intensifying their experiences with harassment, abuse, and assault.[12]

The rising earning potential of black women throughout the United States prompted an increasing consumerism in and outside of the black church. African American churches throughout the South dedicated more attention to building beautification and maintenance, and some black ministers sustained their churches as traveling salesmen within local church circuits. In some instances, ministers sold religious paraphernalia such as holy water, bibles, head coverings, and anointing oil to

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[9] For a more detailed discussion on black women's economic stability during the early twentieth century see, Bettye Collier-Thomas and Ann D. Gordon, *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965*(Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 137-140.

[10] For a discussion on black "strike breakers," see Stephen H. Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation: Mercenaries and Masculinities in Twentieth Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Paul Moreno, *Black Americans and Organized Labor: A New History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Warren Whatley, "African American Strikebreaking from the Civil War to the New Deal," *Social Science History* Vol. 17, No 4. (Winter 1993): 525-558.

[11] For a detailed discussion of domestic labor conditions and statistics see, Susan Thistle, *From Marriage to the Market: The Transformation of Women's Lives and Work* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2006); Tera W. Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[12] See Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and The Inner Lives of Black Women in The Middle West," *Signs: Journal of Women In Culture And Society* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912-920; Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1997); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Cheryl D. Hicks, *Talk With You Like A Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

their congregants or believers in surrounding communities. Swelling consumerism, in turn, garnered vehement rebuke from Holiness-Pentecostal leaders who argued that it was blasphemous and ungodly.[13] Consequently, black Holiness-Pentecostal women advocated conservative social behavior and strict sexual mores, messages that dovetailed the ideologies of the NACW, the Baptist Women's Conventions, and other largescale black women's organizations. In this way, the Pentecostal ministries at the turn of the twentieth century made room for black women to continue their fight for racial and gender equality within the public sphere, as well as providing new spaces to express their jeremiad.

For black Holiness-Pentecostal women, the spiritual discourse of the antebellum period remained pertinent to the self-affirmation and public defense of other black women. The language of purity in early Pentecostal churches bolstered the self-worth of their largely working class black female constituency, and underscored their value as women, people of color, and Americans. Undoubtedly, the teaching of many early Holiness-Pentecostal churches facilitated the training of women who would profoundly impact the modern Civil Rights Movement. In their emphasis on sanctification, black Holiness-Pentecostal women preachers reinforced the idea that their constituency was a valuable and important part of American society. The doctrine of holiness also bolstered the notion of refined womanhood.

[13] Charles Edwin Jones, "The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement In The United States," (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmanns Publishing Co., 1971); John Michael Giggie, *After Redemption*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Echoing the leading clubwomen at the turn of the century, Holiness-Pentecostal women argued that those who oppressed African Americans, and women of color specifically, simultaneously rejected God's voice. And, in the tradition of Jeremiah, black women preachers, such as Ida B. Robinson, Rosa Horn, Lucy Smith, and Barbara King, warned that America's prejudice, its refusal to hear God, would have powerful ramifications.[14] Hence, an interrogation of the organizational structure and theologies of Holiness-Pentecostal women provides an alternative perspective on African American women's jeremiad: one that illustrates the contribution of black Pentecostal women to the developing socio-political consciousness of African Americans at the turn of the century. Additionally, while many scholars have acknowledged the importance of Garveyism, the New Negro Movement, and the cultural flowering of the Harlem Renaissance in the development of black socio-political consciousness, few link these to the thriving Pentecostal traditions that supported and informed them.[15] Each of these larger movements gleaned from traditional black religious thought, and spiritual expression, as they simultaneously absorbed many faithful black church goers. Black women's Holiness-Pentecostal organizations therefore, represent an untapped tributary in the

[14] Rosa Horn, Lucy Smith, and Barbara King each founded their own churches where women could be ordained and trained in ministry. Like Robinson, their ministries grew in the cities where they began, defying male dominance and providing additional spaces for training women leaders. See Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* ((New York: Knopf, 2010), 117-118.

[15] Randall Keith Burkett, Garveyism as a Religious Movement (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1978); Tony Martin, *Literary Garveyism: Garvey, Black Arts and the Harlem Renaissance* (Dover: Majority Press, 1984); Amy Jacques Garvey and John H. Clarke, *Garvey and Garveyism* (New York: Octagon Books, 1978); Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

stream of consciousness that fundamentally shaped the long Civil Rights Movement of the twentieth century.

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The rise of the black Holiness-Pentecostal tradition is rooted in several places. Social and economic shifts in African American communities, the increasingly middle class aesthetic of black Baptist and Methodist churches, and a change in Methodist doctrine in the late nineteenth century all contributed to the rise of Holiness-Pentecostal churches across the country. Equally important, however, was the impact of heightened racial violence, mass migration, World War, and the sexual revolution of the early twentieth century. These larger social and cultural changes prompted unique responses from black communities already struggling to sustain families and local institutions.

The turn of the twentieth century signaled the rise of a national concern over progress. Millions of European and Asian immigrants arrived on the eastern and western coasts of the United States, prompting fears about "Old World" ideals, political corruption and moral decline. Lady liberty's call for the "tired…poor…huddled masses yearning to breathe free," hinged on their desire and suitability for Anglo-American protestant ideals. The increasing presence of immigrants in the nation's cities gave rise to various responses. Most notably, American Progressivism offered a multitiered approach to dealing with the "problem" of immigrants in the United States, and the problems of immigrant life in the nation's major metropolitan sites. From urban development

planning and education, to exclusion acts and involuntary sterilization, Progressivism often lent itself to racist and xenophobic ideology. [16]

Arguably, many of the nation's progressive policies in the first half of the twentieth century were rooted in white racism. While many progressive thinkers worked in multiethnic, multiracial, alliances, they also justified the need for their activism using pseudoscientific studies that designated ethnic whites, African Americans, Asian Americans and indigenous groups as socially, biologically, and intellectually inferior – or "feebleminded."[17] Such designations were especially damaging for African Americans, who were frequently overlooked as a demographic needing reform. Instead, black men and women were consistently identified in terms that linked them to social and political deviance.[18] Accordingly, black communities suffered extraordinary degrees of public defamation, even as they also experienced higher and higher rates of racial violence, intimidation and criminalization.

For many, black thinkers, this necessitated self-sufficiency, and racial self-help remained a central thread in black thought throughout the first half the twentieth century.

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[16] Between 1850-1930, more than fifteen million immigrants arrived in the United States, settling largely in its major metropolitan areas. Gibson J. Campbell and Emily Lennon, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-born Population of the United States: 1850-1990," *U.S. Bureau of the Census Historical Statistics of the United States, 1789-1945* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1999) <https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0029/twps0029.html>; Karen Pastorello, *The Progressives: Activism and Reform in American Society, 1893-1917* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

[17] See Maureen A Flanagan, *America Reformed, 1st ed.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 1st ed. (New York: ACLS History E-Book Project, 2005); and Marouf Arif Hasian, *The Rhetoric of Eugenics In Anglo-American Thought*, 1st ed. (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

[18] Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

To the majority of African American people, however, the intensified violence of the South, where most lived, prompted a gradual exodus out of the region. The expansion of American industry in the North, West, and Midwest, augmented this exodus.[19] And, while they were paid considerably less than white workers, the ability to live free of white harassment outside of the South was a significant accomplishment for African Americans. Indeed, for many African American workersparticularly black domestic workers, increased freedoms, coupled with rising demands for their labor, encouraged labor negotiation and union support in many communities.[20]

The rise in black women's presence in the labor market also informed shifts in their expressions of feminism. With more capital, they could and did demand more in and outside of their communities. The twentieth century marked a rise in black women's growing refusal to live with their employers – a preference of many well-to-do white families. Black domestic workers viewed this as too similar to slavery and rejected it in favor of independent living quarters. They also began to organize their labor – working with whites where possible – and dedicated their off-work time to leisure.[21]

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[19] The statistical data on lynching varies because the definition of a lynching varied across the country. Even so, between 1880-1920, approximately 4,730 people were lynched in the United States. See Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2002); James E. Cutler, *Lynch-Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States.* (Memphis, Tenn: General Books, 2012).

[20] Eric Grodsky and Devah Pager, "The Structure of Disadvantage: Individual and Occupational Determinants of the Black-White Wage Gap" *American Sociological Review* 66 (2001): 542-567; Joseph G. Altonji, and Rebecca M. Blank, "Race and Gender in the Labor Market." *Handbook of Labor Economics* 3 (1999): 3144-213.

[21] Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*. 1st ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). Cite also Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestics in Washington D.C.:1910-1940* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

Physical mobility and urban employment, however, were not without significant drawbacks. Black workers who began to migrate out of the South were met with other obstacles and continued antagonism from whites and other minority groups, if they were hired at all. For African American women, this was doubly troubling, since they faced verbal and sexual threats and abuse in their places of employment, and discrimination from white women within their class groups.[22]

Despite the challenges of urban life for black women, many working African American women mirrored the trends among their white counterparts. They worked to balance their tough work lives with leisure time, boldly celebrated their sexuality, and called for greater social and political independence from men. The development of jazz and blues culture underscored many of these social changes, by openly discussing many of the stigmas attached to race, gender, class and sexuality.[23] Even so, these cultural dynamics did not undermine their poor treatment in American society. Rather, it intensified public criticism and racial violence against them. Instead, black cultural developments in the public sphere intensified public malign and violence against African American communities.[24]

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[22] Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out,* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).
[23] Walter R. Allen and Angie Y. Chung, "'Your Blues Ain't Like My Blues': Race, Ethnicity, and Social Inequality in America," *Contemporary Sociology* 29, no. 6 (2000): 796-805 an Angela Davis *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billy Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).
[24] For "intensified public malign and violence," see Amy L. Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Jeffrey S. Addler, "Less Crime, More Punishment: Violence, Race and Criminal Justice in Early Twentieth Century America," *Journal of American History* (June 2015): 34-46.

For many African American intellectuals, this drove nationalist, anti-white, and anti-capitalist sentiment. By the 1920s, black communities embraced an incredibly wide range of social, economic, and political ideologies. Most prominent in the first decade of the twentieth century was Booker T. Washington's pragmatism and accommodation strategies, but after his death in 1915 these began to wane. For successive generations, Washington's philosophies about economic progress proved shallow in the wake of increasingly urbanized realities. Consequently, communism, black messianism, nationalism, and "orientalism," all found their way into black intellectual and religious communities.[25] Many traditional black Christian thinkers, however, believed this was evidence of social and moral declension. Hence, the 1920s were also a moment of intense Holiness-Pentecostal belief and a concurrent rejection of some elements of modern black life.

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Many African American Holiness-Pentecostal communities viewed modernity with ambivalence. While it offered new possibilities for African American people, the

[25] For "black communism" see Susan Campbell "Black Bolsheviks" and Recognition of African-America's Right to Self-Determination by the Communist Party USA." *Science & Society* 58, no. 4 (1994): 440-70; Erik McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). For "messianism" and "nationalism" see Wilson J. Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); Adam Lively, "Continuity and Radicalism in American Black Nationalist Thought, 1914-1929," *Journal of American Studies* 18, no. 2 (1984): 207-35. For "orientalism," see Nathaniel Deutsch, "The Asiatic Black Man:' An African American Orientalism?" *Journal of Asian American Studies* 4, No. 3 (Oct. 2003), 193-208 and Helen H. Jun, *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-Emancipation to Neo-liberal America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

twentieth century also created new dangers. Among the many threats to black lives at the turn of the century, lynching and mob violence presented the most notable checks to the idealism surrounding urban life. In particular, many northern white Americans viewed their region as more orderly and accepting than the South. Violent incidences in the New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania area were frequently dismissed as anomalies in otherwise safe spaces for African Americans. This, however, did not take away from the realities for black citizens who remained vulnerable to the frustrations of white communities.[26]

In other parts of the country where black workers and families migrated, eugenics ideology spurred a disproportionate rise in the criminalization and incarceration of African Americans. In New York and California, for example, young black men and women were targeted by local police forces and imprisoned whether they committed crimes or not. Patterns of police harassment and high incarceration for African Americans continued throughout the country, setting the tone for long term inequalities. The rising presence of African Americans in the nation's expanding prisons and jails underscored eugenic and progressive arguments about black inferiority.[27]

Higher imprisonment rates for African Americans, in conjunction with their relatively low social status nation-wide, also fueled pro-segregation arguments. Indeed,

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[26] James Campbell, "You Needn't Be Afraid Here: You're In A Civilized Country': Region, Racial Violence and Law Enforcement In Early Twentieth-Century New Jersey, New York And Pennsylvania," *Social History* 35, no. 3 (2010): 253-267.

[27] M. Chavez-Garcia, "Youth of Color and California's Carceral State: The Fred C. Nelles Youth Correctional Facility," *Journal of American History* 102, no. 1 (2015): 47-60; Cheryl D Hicks, *Talk With You Like A Woman* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

white fears about the "feebleminded" underscored eugenics science that emphasized the importance of segregating racial groups or sterilizing the "weaker" races to prevent racial suicide. In many states, African American women were routinely sterilized to control black populations.[28] In others, criminalizing African American men and utilizing them for public labor inhibited normal family life.

Further complicating the problems for increasingly urbanized African Americans were the realities of urban labor. Frequently blocked out of trade unions by ethnic whites, or used as strike breakers, African American men hoping to enter various skilled trade industries were consistently mistreated, overlooked, or fired. Accordingly, black male labor during the first half of the twentieth century was overwhelmingly in areas of menial labor, such as cotton mills, rail roads, factories, and coal mines. Similarly, black women were overrepresented in domestic service positions where they were vulnerable to sexual molestation and assault. Black women who did not comply with the insidious whims of their employers could be accused of any number of petty crimes, at which point they bore the burden of proof.

In this deeply contentious context, Holiness-Pentecostal ministries emerged in multiples across the country in communities of largely working-class African Americans. Based predominantly in the Mississippi-Arkansas Delta region at the turn of the twentieth century, Holiness-Pentecostal ministries provided support and refuge to the black

[28] Paul A Lombardo, *A Century of Eugenics In America*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Gregory Michael Dorr, *Segregation's Science*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008).

communities in which they existed, similar to mainstream black Baptist and Methodist denominations. As they expanded into the urban North, Holiness-Pentecostal ministries continued to absorb a constituency of poor southerners who migrated in hopes of economic improvement and freedom from white violence.

While many migrants hoped to settle in the Baptist, Methodist and Episcopal churches of the North, they were often rejected by northern black churchgoers who viewed ecstatic worship as culturally backwards and embarrassing.[29] Consequently, the Great Migration prompted an exponential rise in Holiness-Pentecostal "storefront" churches that promoted worship styles familiar to southern migrants. These churches were also typically founded by southern migrants who rejected the middle-class sensibility of native northern African Americans. In particular, some Holiness-Pentecostal churches argued that the fundraising within mainstream denominations was blasphemous. These Holiness-Pentecostal leaders claimed Baptist and Methodist organizations were teaching their members that spiritual worth was tied to material possessions. In response, they drew heavily on simple biblical principles that emphasized frugal living, modesty, simplicity, and morality. They also emphasized spiritual calling over seminary training as the most important quality of a church leader, and they embraced charismatic styles of preaching and worship.[30]

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[29] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* (New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2014),89-118; Cheryl Jeanne Sanders, *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
[30] John Michael Giggie, *After Redemption,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Outside of the class based differences between Holiness-Pentecostal, Baptists and Methodist churches, there were some fundamental similarities. Holiness-Pentecostal churches framed the suffering of their largely working-class congregants in terms of the long standing African American biblical interpretation. Rooting their narratives in that of the Old Testament Hebrews, black Holiness-Pentecostal preachers emphasized the impending change of circumstances for oppressed black citizens, and underscored these assertions with a warning that divine intervention hinged upon righteous living. Holiness-Pentecostal ministers also preached a message of total transformation through sanctification, a doctrine they shared with many Methodist churches.

Rooted in the shifting winds of late nineteenth century Methodism, Holiness belief encouraged believers to live a sin free life, thereby achieving purity and sanctification. Methodist holiness doctrine emerged in the eighteenth century through the teaching and writing of John Wesley. The doctrine waned during the early National Period, but resurfaced in the 1830s, 1860s and 1870s. Wesley's belief in divine healing was complemented by the writing and teaching of theologians George Muller, Charles Cullis and Charles Finney, all of whom emphasized faith as a precursor to divine healing and perfection. Though many theologians rejected the notion of human perfection, it was whole heartedly embraced by many black women ministers in the antebellum period and thereafter.[31]

[31] Donald Dayton, "The Rise of The Evangelical Healing Movement in Nineteenth Century America," *Pneuma* 4, no. 1 (1982): 1-18; Vinson Synan "The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement," *Paraclete* Vol. 23 No. 4 (1989), 1-8.

Just as it had supported the anti-racist and anti-sexist campaigns of black women in the early national period, holiness doctrine served the same purposes at the turn of the twentieth century. Christian perfection was a common theme in African American women's sermons throughout the late nineteenth century. As anti-black sentiment swelled in response to African American citizenship and black male suffrage, women utilized the language of sanctification and perfection to resist sexism and racism. Itinerant preachers Julia Foote and Amanda Smith, for example, drew heavily on the doctrine of sanctification to preach against racial and gender prejudice in and outside of the church. Both women functioned outside of formal Christian jurisdictions because they could not secure sanction for their preaching before mixed audiences.[32] Hence, they resisted the gendered hierarchy of the Methodist church by claiming sanctification and direct calls from God. Undoubtedly, these women had a tremendous impact on the development of twentieth century Pentecostal ministries for other women of color.

Smith and Foote were also instrumental in training other women who might otherwise have been rejected by black male church leaders. And, while Foote and Smith were not specifically within the fold of the subsequent Pentecostal movement of the twentieth century, both women travelled extensively in the United States preaching and teaching about Holiness doctrine. Amanda Smith's evangelism in the United States took her to Ohio, California, Louisiana, Michigan, Washington, Oregon, and Illinois. Smith

[32] See Rosetta Renae Haynes, *Radical Spiritual Motherhood: Autobiography and Empowerment in Nineteenth-Century African American Women* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 89-115.

also spent time preaching and doing missionary work in Liberia, England and India.[33] Likewise, Julia Foote's ministry in the country led her to Massachusetts, Oregon, Michigan, Ohio, California, Pennsylvania and New York.[34] The evangelical work of Smith and Foote laid the theological and ideological foundation for those who would ultimately shape Pentecostal doctrine and practice. Indeed, while William J. Seymour, an African American man, is often credited in black Pentecostal tradition as the founder of the movement, his introduction to spiritual manifestations came through Lucy Farrow – an African American woman. [35]

The details about Farrow's early life are scant. She was born a slave in Virginia during the mid-nineteenth century, but moved further southwest for employment opportunity at the beginning of the twentieth century. Farrow settled in Houston, Texas where she attended the meetings of Pentecostal preacher, Charles F. Parham. Parham believed that converted Christians could experience the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, as it is referenced in the book of Acts.[36] He taught these lessons to his Bible students and congregants in Kansas, from the 1890s to the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1900, Parham's Bible school became the site of much celebration when he and his students

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[33] Amanda Berry Smith, and Adrienne M. Israel, *From Washerwoman to Evangelist Lanham,* (Maryland: The Scarecrow Press. 1998).
[34] Douglas M. Strong, *They Walked in the Spirit: Personal Faith and Social Action in America* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 17-33; Joy A. Howard, "Julia A.J. Foote" *Legacy* 23, no. 1 (2006): 86-93; William L. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 9-10.
[35] Douglas G. Jacobsen, *Thinking in the Spirit: Theologies of the Early Pentecostal Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 61-62; Estrelda Alexander, *Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 293-342.
[36] For "outpouring," see Acts 2: 1-21 *KJV.*

experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages.[37] Soon thereafter, he took the message of these experiences to Texas, where he had been invited to preach.

Parham's meetings in Houston garnered large audiences and Lucy Farrow was in regular attendance. While it is unclear what drew her to Parham's segregated meetings, it is likely that his sermons on divine healings, conversions, and baptisms underscored her own sense of spirituality. Though enslaved religious communities had no written theological doctrines about divine spiritual manifestations, slave folk culture emphasized the marriage between the physical and spirit worlds. The religious practices of many enslaved communities embraced the manifestation of spiritual possession, prophetic dreams, divine healing, and spiritual conjuring.[38] In this way, it is very likely that Farrow attended Parham's meetings because his message mirrored her own understanding of the Divine.[39]

While attending Parham's meetings, Farrow became acquainted with the Parham family and was subsequently hired to work as a governess in their home. Farrow later invited William J. Seymour to Parham's services in Houston after she had experienced the holy baptism herself. Sharing her experiences with Seymour and introducing him to

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[37] See James R. Goff, *Fields White Unto Harvest: Charles F. Parham and the Missionary Origins of Pentecostalism* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1989).
[38] Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture in America: The Foundations of Black America and Nationalist Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
[39] See for reference Albert J. Raboteau, *African American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

Parham, Farrow helped ignite Seymour's passion for Pentecostal belief.[40] William Seymour's interracial movement on Asuza Street remains an important moment in the development of Pentecostalism, but the relevance of Lucy Farrow is criminally understated.

Farrow's ministry, and her experiences with the divine, along with her role as a spiritual leader and faith healer, are exemplary of the type of spiritual work prevalent among African American women ministers throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. No doubt, the success of early Pentecostalism was due in large part to the contributions of women who acted as overseers, preachers, and partners in the development of Seymour's organization.[41] When members of the Azusa Street ministry began to claim that they had experienced glossolalia, divine healing, trances, visions, and other examples of spiritual manifestation, the organization grew. The ministry drew residents from nearly all of Los Angeles' growing ethnic enclaves, including its Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Armenian, and Native American populations. Collectively the ministry embraced African styled worship practices mirroring those of Antebellum slave churches. Services at Asuza included informal styles of preaching and worship and they rejected the formal structures found commonly in African Methodist Episcopal and Baptist churches. Seymour's ministry drew heavily on Afro-centered musical traditions

[40] Douglas G. Jacobsen, *Thinking in the Spirit,* 61-62.
[41] Estrelda Alexander, *The Women Of Azusa Street* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 39-47.

of call-and-response, hand clapping, acapella singing, and the use of the drum, washboard, and tambourine.[42]

Given its historical period, the Azusa Street movement was unusually integrated.[43] Under Seymour's leadership, men and women assumed leadership roles and black and white believers worshipped side-by-side. The integrated, charismatic, services of the movement spurred significant resistance. Charles Parham, in particular, rebuked the organization for doing away with segregated services. He publicly lambasted Seymour for conducting wild, obscene interracial sex orgies and attempted to dismantle the organization. Nonetheless, Parham did not hinder the growth of Seymour's ministry in Los Angeles.[44] The Asuza Street movement remained active until Seymour's death in 1922, but the impact of holiness and Pentecostal teaching had far reaching ripples in the nation. Pentecostal churches sprung up across the country in the wake of Azusa Street; many adopted similar egalitarian practices. Ethnic diversity was a notable marker of these churches and by the mid twentieth century, African American Pentecostal ministries were the most racially diverse in the nation, rivaling the Roman Catholic Church, Father Divine's Peace Mission Movement and Christian Science churches.[45]

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[42] Amos Yong and Estrelda Alexander, *Afro-Pentecostalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 1-12.
[43] Ibid.
[44] See Allan Anderson, "The Dubious Legacy of Charles Parham: Racism and Cultural Insensitivities Among Pentecostals," *Pneuma* 27, no. 1 (2005): 51-64, doi:10.1163/157007405774270392; Gaston Espinosa, "Ordinary Prophet: William J. Seymour and the Azusa Street Revival," in *The Azusa Street Revival and Its Legacy*, 1st ed. (Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press, 2006), 29-60.
[45] Ibid.

The fluid power structure of the early African American Holiness-Pentecostal movement fostered significant contributions from women who filled its rank and file. Consequently, Pentecostal organizations were pivotal for poor and working class African American women who were disconnected by region or social exclusion from the outreach efforts of the NACW and Methodist and Baptist churches. As Holiness-Pentecostal churches became more organized, however, black women were increasingly limited to service roles that paralleled those they performed in their larger communities. It was within this context that Bishop Ida B. Robinson emerged, calling on Holiness doctrine to challenge the male leadership of her organization on its sexism. Robinson's use of Holiness doctrine to protest gender discrimination in her denomination illustrates the continuity of holiness discourse as a rhetorical strategy to contest marginalization in African American churches. Her rejection of biased gender hierarchies within the Holiness-Pentecostal built on the protest and activist traditions of Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Julia Foote and Amanda Smith.

Ida B. Robinson was born in Hazelhurst, Georgia in 1891. Little is known of her early life, but in 1908, she attended a local camp meeting held by a holiness ministry called the Church of God where she gave her life to God.[46] Robinson was so impressed by the preaching, presence and message of the Church of God ministers that she later modeled her own ministerial dress, and that of her congregation, on their example. Indeed, when her ministry expanded, Robinson became known for her modest and

[46] Minevera Bell, interview by author, Teaneck, NJ, December 5, 2016. See also Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

solemn appearance, she wore a long dark flowing robe and no makeup or jewelry. Within a year of her decision to follow the teachings of the Church of God, Robinson began holding prayer meetings and she was married to Oliver Robinson in 1909.[47]

After the outbreak of the First World War, the Robinsons lost their employment, and moved to Philadelphia in search of better opportunities in 1917, where they joined the United Holy Church of America (UHCA), a growing Holiness-Pentecostal denomination in the Northeast. Similar to Lee, Elaw and Foote, Robinson began working as a street evangelist under the auspices of the UHCA, and her preaching and singing were so impressive that she garnered attention from passers-by and the leaders of the organization. By 1919, Bishop Robinson was ordained an elder and appointed as the pastor of Mount Olive Church in Philadelphia. Robinson's appointment and her ordination in the UHCA were exceptional. Women were increasingly denied ordained leadership roles, as male leaders debated the merits and biblical justifications for women's spiritual authority in the denomination. By the early 1920s, the UHCA decided to exclude women from high ranking positions within the church, and for the rest of the twentieth century it remained a male dominated religious movement.[48] Unsettled by the decreasing leadership opportunities for other women in the UHCA, Robinson began fasting and praying for answers from God for ten days in January of 1924. During this period, she believed God told her to separate from the UHCA and begin her own separate

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[47] Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Turn the Pulpit Loose: Two Centuries of American Women Evangelists* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
[48] Felton O. Best, *Black Religious Leadership From the Slave Community to the Million Man March: Flames of Fire* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998)

ministry where she could "loose the women."[49] Robinson broke from the UHCA later that year, explaining that God was prompting her to begin a ministry where women could serve in the full capacity of their calling, but she maintained her relationship with its leadership. The leaders of the UHCA also continued to invite her to preach in several of their church locations. In 1925, she was ordained a Bishop, which allowed her to ordained other women for through the tenure of her ministry. [50]

Bishop Robinson called her denomination, Mount Sinai Holy Church of America, and she quickly garnered a large following of families and other churches under her leadership. Unique to Mount Sinai was the gender balance of its leadership. All but two of the church bishops were women. Each one was responsible for the development of other churches and the facilitation of Mount Sinai's outreach. Juxtaposed with other Pentecostal ministries, Bishop Robinson's church was most reflective of the early Azusa model. She encouraged and welcomed diversity, and her organization maintained an interracial and multicultural following. Similarly, the significant presence of women in Mount Sinai's structure fostered intensely egalitarian values in her congregations and nuanced the meaning of holiness. Additionally, Robinson's female-led organization facilitated a sense of intimacy between her congregants and supporting ministers. Members viewed her as charismatic, affectionate and embracing, even when her sermons reprimanded them for sinful behavior.[51]

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[49] This information came from church historian Minerva Bell, who shared documents from the church's private archival collection. *Manual of the Mount Sinai Holy Church of America, Inc.*, Mount Sinai Holy Church of America Collections.
[50] Minevera Bell, interview by author, Teaneck, NJ, December 2, 2016.
[51] Ibid.

Most distinctive in Mount Sinai was the sense of familiarity adopted by the church. Members loved and revered Bishop Robinson, and, in turn, she utilized a maternal style of leadership to strengthen the bonds of her relationship with her congregation.[52] She took in members who needed help, and extended herself to counsel those struggling with personal problems. Robinson embraced her church members and staff as though they were family, even referring to the ministry's youth as her "grandchildren."[53] Familial ties were the lynchpin of her ministry, ensuring life-long memberships. In nearly every way, Robinson embodied the principles of racial uplift and community motherhood espoused by the NACW. She required strict moral standards from her members, including modest appearance, temperate social behavior and a rejection of secular pleasures. Indeed, Bishop Robinson's embodiment of sanctified and holy motherhood underscored the notion that it was central to black community life and the community outreach she maintained in her twenty years of ministry.[54]

As a woman in an increasingly male led denomination, Bishop Robinson stands as a powerful example of the legacy of early black women preachers. Yet she is also ideal for understanding the ways in which black women could and did undermine racism and

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[52] For "maternal style" see Harold Dean Trulear, "Reshaping Black Pastoral Theology: The Vision of Bishop Ida B. Robinson," *Journal of Religious Thought,* 46 (Winter 1989/Spring 1990).
[53] Minevera Bell, interview by author, Teaneck, NJ, December 2, 2016.
[54] While I theorized this idea early on in my research, confirming it through my study of Bishop Robinson's organizational structure, it was further confirmed through my conversations and interactions with Mrs. Bell. Married for 67 years of her life, and a mother of three, Mrs. Bell holds a Master's degree, and held her children's upbringing and education as the most important aspects of her responsibility to her family. Yet she maintains the same attitude about other children, a fact reinforced by her service as an educator for most of her life. While Mrs. Bell cannot represent every woman in Mt. Sinai, she is certainly a strong representation of the type of womanhood modeled for her mother and many others who remained under Bishop Robinson's leadership for the duration of their lives.

sexism through their spirituality. Aside from the centrality of family and motherhood in Mount Sinai, Robinson's organization was heavily influenced by female leadership. The visibility of shared power in the ministry had deep and long lasting results. Namely, women in Mount Sinai were not relegated exclusively to domestic tasks and they held power outside of women's boards and fund raisers. The women of Mount Sinai organized educational missions, bible study schooling, community outreach and church archival history. Consequently, Mount Sinai's male constituency maintains its tradition of deference for the women bishops and elders in the organization.

At the heart of this was Bishop Robinson's emphasis on the importance of women to the Christian biblical narrative. That is, Robinson taught that the value of women as preachers was reflected in the story of Mary. The New Testament account of her virgin birth and purity meant that she was the first to literally and figuratively carry "the word"—or the figure whose life and teachings were responsible for the Christian faith. In this way, Robinson suggested, similar to Lee, Elaw, Foote and Smith, that women who were called to ministry could and should claim a spiritual lineage connected to Mary. The story of Mary's sacred pregnancy also bolstered the centrality of motherhood and purity within Mount Sinai's teachings, just as it did for nineteenth century itinerant women. Even the music traditions within the ministry were infused by this message. Mount Sinai's hymn "Didn't Those Women Run," for example, celebrated the narrative of the

first people to share the news of resurrection of Jesus: Mary, his mother, and Mary Magdalene, a devoted follower.[55] The chorus declared:

> *Didn't those women run*
> *Didn't those women run*
> *They ran the good news to spread.*
> *The angel tod them to go*
> *For Jesus had gone on before*
> *'He is risen just as He said.'*[56]

The song emphasized the importance of the two women as the first to carry the news of the gospel, while also reinforcing the message that God revealed the message of resurrection to women first. Rehearsing the stories of both Marys underscored the idea that women are integral to carrying the message of Christianity. In this way, Bishop Robinson also rejected the social belief that women needed male support to establish their authority. Instead, her teaching on Mary reinforced the importance of a direct relationship between God and women, as well as it did bolster the notion that women are godly.

Equally important is that Robinson epitomized the principle of holiness she taught, and was revered for her preaching, singing, prayers and her emphasis on faith healing.[57] Robinson's supporting leadership were also viewed as spiritual authorities. One member in particular attributed the cure for his on-going illness to Vice-Bishop Elmira

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[55] Minevera Bell, interview by author, Teaneck, NJ, January 5, 2017.
[56] See note 52.
[57] Sociologist Authur Fauset documents this in his study of black religious organizations in the Mid-Atlantic states. The study contains two interviews from members of Mount Sinai and a detailed explanation of its beliefs. Arthur Huff Fauset, *Black Gods Of The Metropolis*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 13.

Jeffries. After describing his condition to Bishop Jeffries, he claimed that she laid her hand on him and the pain left permanently. Although Robinson was known for her spiritual gifts, she was careful not to boast about them, and she surrounded herself with a board of bishops sharing power with those who helped her maintain Mount Sinai's growing network of churches.[58] Consequently, Bishop Robinson maintained an organization that implicitly and explicitly reinforced the equal connection of men and women to the Divine and their equal accountability for immoral living. This emphasis, in turn, was useful for refuting racist ideologies.

Similar to her stance on gender prejudice and inequality, Robinson's rejection of racism and discrimination came through a language of sanctification and racial unity. This was particularly important given her ministry's multiethnic, multiracial and cross class demographic. Mount Sinai's membership included eastern and western European families and black families from the South and the Caribbean. This mixture of cultures forced members to look beyond racial identity while simultaneously encouraging cross cultural alliance. Robinson's ministry rivaled that of Prophet Cherry, Daddy Grace, Father Divine and Charles Mason, which also boasted interracial membership.[59] Cherry, Grace, Divine and Mason led the largest African American religious organizations in the nation. Mason founded the Church of God in Christ in 1897, breaking off from the black Baptist denomination, and quickly becoming one of the biggest Pentecostal

[58] See Harold Dean Trulear, "Reshaping Black Pastoral Theology: The Vision of Bishop Ida B. Robinson," *Journal of Religious Thought,* 46 (Winter 1989/Spring 1990).
[59] Ibid.

denominations across the south and Midwest.[60] Grace, Cherry, and Divine, however, had each founded denominations that were unconventional when compared to African American Baptists, Methodists, the United Holy Church of America, and the Church of God in Christ.

Prophet Cherry, for example, taught that African Americans were descendants of the biblical Hebrews, his followers called themselves black Jews, and read the Hebrew bible instead of the King James bible. Father Divine taught that he was God incarnate, that he came to earth in the form of its most oppressed people to save them, and that Heaven existed on earth. Daddy Grace, founder of the United House of Prayer for all People, taught that he was the personification of God's grace, and that believers could find salvation through him. Each of these movements functioned through messianic theologies that encouraged followers to accept their leaders as the Divine or as messiahs.[61]

What distinguished Robinson's ministry, however, was its adamant emphasis on holiness and life changes that exemplified holiness teaching. Robinson taught that no one who professed to be God or Christ could stand before Him on "the great day of

[60] Milton C. Sernett, *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 314-325.
[61] Arthur Fauset, *Black Gods Of The Metropolis*, 22-68.

judgement."[62] This was an implicit rejection of the messianic doctrines of Father Divine, Daddy Grace and Prophet Cherry. She also preached that "the real unadulterated gospel" did not alter biblical scripture to accommodate personal desire or social divisions. Robinson's views on the "unadulterated gospel" underscore her belief that religious teachings which embraced racial divides or reinforced social inequality was not godly at all. This is best illustrated in her sermon "The Economic Persecution.[63]

Bishop Robinson's message undergirds three important themes integral to the larger teachings of the ministry. Primarily, she rejected the idea that race indicated human value. She taught that all people were bonded in Divine creation. In answer to those who "questioned the brotherhood of all mankind" Robinson argued "God is the Father of all" hence the relationship of all people "is [inseparable] and unquestionably established."[64] Her message also rejected racial violence and white supremacy as anti-God. Discussing the prevalence of lynching in the southern United States, she asserted "in this section of the country laws are made to uphold 'Christianity' in their states…But these same people…will toss their own laws to the four winds and trample under feet the laws of Christianity and utterly ignore the words of the sacred 'Book' they pretend to love so dearly." Robinson suggests that black people specifically were no different than the early Christians, persecuted for their belief. "Our people," she explained, "are killed, their bodies dismembered ad thrown to vultures…where 'Christianity' is more prevalent than

[62] This specific refence is made in her sermon, "Who Shall Be Able to Stand?" where Robinson asserted that those who had not overcome their own vices would not be able to stand before the Divine in the afterlife. Bishop Ida B. Robinson, "Who Shall Be Able to Stand?" *Daughters of Thunder,* 200.
[63] Bishop Ida B. Robinson, "The Economic Persecution," *Daughters of Thunder,* 203--205.
[64] Ibid.

any other part of our Union."[65] Bishop Robinson's commentary on the South is striking, and illustrates her concern for members who were southern migrants. Yet it also highlights another important teaching in Mount Sinai: Robinson's message suggested that systemic oppression was linked to national sins of inequality and injustice. Hence, she encouraged her members to vote as well as pray for the passing of anti-lynching legislation in Congress.[66]

Most importantly, however, Bishop Robinson issued her warning against American inequality and injustice in a different way, using the image of the Second Coming. In many Christian traditions, the concept of the Second Coming references the words of Jesus after his resurrection, promising that he would return to earth for those who believed in him. According to the biblical narrative, Jesus explained that his return would wake the dead from their rest and all humans would be judged based on the just and unjust actions of their lives. Robinson's reminder about the Second Coming signaled the beginning of Judgement Day. This was a subtle reminder that the nation would be judged for its unrighteousness as well as individuals. She reinforced this, reminding her audience that modern society was ingrained with sin and irreligious doctrine. Robinson believed that modernity represented a "sin polluted age," and therefore believers must work to keep themselves holy by observing biblical tenants. Hence, she warned her congregants against "anti-Christs, false prophets, and seductive, lustful doctrines."[67]

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[65] Ibid.
[66] Costigan-Wagner Bill, 73rd Congress, 2nd Session (January 3, 1935).
[67] Bishop Ida B. Robinson, "Who Shall Be Able to Stand?" *Daughters of Thunder*, 200.

Underneath her admonition was the ideology that all people represented the "body of believers." As she explained, the church was similar to a tree in which "birds of all descriptions have lodged in its branches, from the pulpit to the door." Doctrinal teachings that undermined unity or led Christians away blemished the purity of that body. Maintaining purity meant overcoming "sin," which Robinson described as "playing and writing numbers…fornicating…adultery…and whoremonger[ing]" – among other vices.[68] Specifically, she placed the onus of responsibility on religious leadership – male leadership. Believers, she contended, could only reflect what they learned as acceptable behavior from their leaders. She cited the gambling and sexual affairs of black male ministers as a direct influence on the moral standards in their communities.[69]

For Robinson, all followers of biblical teaching must learn to conquer their own personal desires when they were incongruent with scripture. This imbalance, she argued, made "dry bones" out of its beliefs. Even so, she exclaimed that regeneration was always possible and renewal always an option. Both hinged on the concerted effort towards sanctification and Christian perfection. Robinson also held individual believers accountable for the sustenance of holiness doctrine. She chastised her congregation for not paying attention – warning that a "stupid and slothful servant" would hinder the work of spiritual success. [70]

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[68] Bishop Ida B. Robinson, "Can These Bones Live?" *Daughters Of Thunder*, 201-202.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Bishop Ida B. Robinson "And a Little Child Shall Lead Them," *Daughters Of Thunder*, 206-207.

Equality was also central to Bishop Robinson's teachings about marriage. While divorce was explicitly rejected in Mount Sinai, mutually loving and supportive relationships were also emphasized. When young couples failed to meet the highest moral standards in their dating relationships, celibacy, Bishop Robinson did not pressure them to marry. Instead, she counseled them, emphasizing the responsibility both parents would have to assume and advised them to marry for love. While pre-marital sex was prohibited in Mount Sinai, Robinson's foresight in advising members against circumstantial marriage is formidable and progressive. It highlights the influence of her motherly leadership to help young parents from further complicating their lives through unwanted marriage.[71]

Robinson's stance on pre-marital pregnancies is also indicative of her construction of man and womanhood. The undertone of her response to pre-marital pregnancies is that parenthood and childrearing were the equal responsibility of men and women. More than this, however, Robinson's position on this issue also revealed the ways in which she sought to acknowledge the heterosexual desire among her followers. Alternatively, Robinson's teaching on sex and marriage underscored her conservative beliefs about man and womanhood. Heterosexual marriage, she taught, was ordained by God and entry into a marriage was a lifetime binding agreement. Divorce was prohibited, and therefore, the selection of a marriage partner was a critical decision for Mount Sinai members. Sex, she taught, was the privilege of marriage, not the source of casual

[71] Minevera Bell, interview by author, Teaneck, NJ, January 5, 2017.

pleasure. Hence, Robinson discouraged her members from dating relationships that would lead them into sexual relationships that did not end in marriage. In this way, Robinson maintained the gender ideals of the late nineteenth century, upholding the sanctity of pure, chaste, womanhood and virtuous marriages.

In another way, Robinson's forward thinking posture on pre-marital pregnancies is also indicative of her belief in Divine redemption. In an interesting way, her understanding about a very taboo subject in the early twentieth century illustrates one of the ways in which Bishop Robinson circumvented body shaming and sexual stigma. This is not to say that the social standards ingrained in Mount Sinai's doctrines did not lend themselves to some level of body shaming. Mount Sinai maintained very strict social and ethical standards. Members were prohibited from engaging in alcohol consumption, smoking, premarital or extra marital affairs, dating without the intention to marry and wearing ornate makeup and jewelry. Additionally, Bishop Robinson encouraged a modest dress code for all members and although it was not required, many modelled their own sense of fashion on hers. She preached against visiting amusement parks and other sites of secular congregation where members might eschew the responsibilities of faith or be introduced to smoking or drinking.[72]

Coupled with the close relationships Robinson maintained with her staff and members, Mount Sinai's teachings on acceptable social norms looked arcane and obsolete. Indeed, the shifting social and political mores of the 1920s and 1930s make

[72] Ibid.

those of Mount Sinai seem overly restrictive and repressive. The decades of the Interwar period were characterized by a growing cultural embrace of complexity, and a disdain for simple, absolute truths. Within this period women gained the right to vote, American youth attended college in record numbers, and black Americans began to reshape the urban centers of the country by moving from the rural South into major cities. Additionally, American citizens became more indulgent. There was a marked rise in consumerism and leisure activities, which included movies, dances, sports games, nightclubs, speakeasies, cabarets and amusement parks. These cultural shifts undermined traditional ideas about social etiquette, by encouraging men and women of various ethnicities, and classes to mingle in public spaces.[73] In this sense, Robinson's teachings were highly restrictive.

Nearly everything required of Mount Sinai members defied modernity and the changing social and political ideologies of early twentieth century American society. The early twentieth century was marked by its liberal ideals and the increased participation of the working class in public leisure and amusement activities.[74] Baseball became the nation's past-time. Public performance of music and theatre increased and explored taboo topics like lust and sex, and black performers and artists began to embrace behaviors and

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[73] See Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

[74] For "liberalism" see Charles Forcey, *The Crossroads of Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961); Stanley Shapiro, "The Great War And Reform: Liberals and Labor, 1917–19," *Labor History* 12, no. 3 (1971): 323-344; Harold Stearns, *Liberalism in America: Its Origin, Its Temporary Collapse, Its Future* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1987); David M. Kennedy, *Over Here*: *The First World War and American Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); For "leisure and amusement" see David Nasaw, *Going Out*: *The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

beliefs that seemed unwieldly and immoral to their forbears.[75] No doubt the anomaly of Mount Sinai as a religious institution, and the rarity of a female bishop, struck many as unnatural and problematic.

Sociologist Arthur Fauset, who completed one of the earliest academic studies on Mount Sinai, labeled it a cult. Fauset claimed the organization reflected "nationalistic' characteristics…which tend to emphasize the racial qualities of the communicants, sometimes almost to the exclusion of any preoccupation with the Diety, The Christ, or the Trinity."[76] Adding to the scholarship of Melville Herskovitz, Fauset contended that the spiritualism of black cults was evidence of African cultural survivals. More importantly, Fauset argued that organizations like Mount Sinai helped the southern migrant "adjust his psychological and emotional reactions to conditions in the North, where all life and living are more fluid and intermingling of the races is inevitable."[77] While Fauset argued that organizations such as Mount Sinai had the potential to resolve the major social and political issues facing working class African Americans in the North, he also noted that the intense attachment to black church leaders had the potential to shift entirely the religious focus of their organizations. That is, he suggested that the power and influence of leaders like Charles Emmanuel Grace, Father Divine and Bishop Robinson had the potential to create alternate theologies centered on them rather than the traditional conceptualization of God. [78]

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[75] See Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).
[76] Arthur Huff Fauset, *Black Gods of The Metropolis*, 9.
[77] Ibid., 81.
[78] Ibid.

Equally troubling for Fauset was the social separation underscored by churches like the United House of Prayer and Mount Sinai. According to his study, members within both organizations were relatively isolated from other sectors within their communities, and could be severely alienated from their kinship networks within the movements they joined if they decided to leave. For Fauset, the political potential of movements like Mount Sinai, The Peace Mission Movement and the House of Prayer, was as great as their inclination to further stigmatize their African American followers. His description of the style of dress adopted by Mount Sinai's women, for example, was that it was "severely plain": an observation he does not make about the other four institutions in his study.[79] Fauset's scrutiny of Mount Sinai's dress code is indicative of the larger social and political context of the early twentieth century.

Women made significant gains in American society during the first half of the twentieth century. Popular culture and styles of dress reflected their growing presence in the public sphere and to some extent celebrated feminine sexuality.[80] Many American women, for example, put away conservative Victorian styles of dress that covered their bodies entirely, and increasingly they began to wear pants, short dresses and skirts. The increase of women in the workplace also contributed to women's burgeoning participation in leisure activities to destress after long work days or difficult work weeks.

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[79] Ibid., 20.

[80] See David Nasaw, *Going Out* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Cheryl Buckley and Hilary Fawcett, *Fashioning the Feminine: Representation and Women's Fashion from the Fin De Siecle to the Present* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002); Davis, Angela Yvonne. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. (New York: Vintage books, 1999).

In films women appeared more often as fiery vixens or heroines, and in music women talked openly about smoking, drinking and sexual desire. American feminism also changed, and a growing number of women argued the suffrage was not enough to ensure gender equality. They contested the constraints of marriage and rejected the idea that women should be bound to the domestic sphere. In sum, the twentieth century ushered in more challenges to the middle class Christian ideals of the nineteenth century.[81] It was precisely this backdrop that made Bishop Robinson's teaching and ministry so relevant.

Despite their gains in American culture, women remained stigmatized by gender. Compounding this for women of color was the persistence of racism and hyper-sexualization they continued to face in the public arena. In many ways, these realities informed the "politics of respectability" espoused by black women in the NACW, NAACP, black sororities, mutual aid societies, and in larger black Methodist and Baptist churches.[82] Likewise, Bishop Robinson's emphasis on righteousness and holy living complemented a long-standing tradition to challenge and undermine racial discrimination. Accordingly, her teachings were multifaceted and they highlight the intersections between black social and political thought, and spiritual discourse and belief.

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[81] See Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

[82]For in-depth discussions about black women's complicated use of respectability politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see White, Deborah Gray. *Too Heavy a Load Black Women in Defense of Themselves 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999); E. Frances White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Danielle L. MacGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance: A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Knopf, 2011).

In one sense, Bishop Robinson's appeal to holiness and sanctification was a clarion call for all people – especially people of color – to return to righteousness. Robinson framed herself as Jeremiah through her emphasis on self-sacrificing worldly desire in exchange for rectitude. That is, she reminded her followers that they were holy people whose lives needed to reflect their relationships with God. Robinson also reinforced her position as prophet through her admonition that Christian believers must be "regenerated by the spirit," and "beware of Anti-Christs, false prophets and seductive, lustful doctrines." And, in the fashion of many early women preachers, she modelled righteousness in her personal life and in the community building activities she orchestrated for her church. Perhaps realizing how alienating it could be for her followers to exist in a society and live contrary to its accepted social standards, Bishop Robinson provided leisure outlets and events for her members throughout the year, such as celebratory dinners and church trips. In this way, she could compel them to live what they believed by illustrating that holiness was not devoid of pleasure.

In another sense, Bishop Robinson's teachings reinforced the idea that national standards of justice were deeply informed by the moral imperative of Christian believers in the United States. This is clearest in her sermons about sanctified life, but was also visible in her political leanings. While she did not endorse any specific political parties in her ministry, she did compel her followers to vote. Voting, complemented by prayer, she suggested, was the only way to ensure justice and an end to oppression. Her sermon "The Economic Persecution" conveys this in its emphasis on the hope that there was a "Constantine of our day," who might protect true Christians from persecution and

intimidation.[83] Robinson's sermon was a response to the pending Costigan-Wagner Bill of 1935, which proposed federal trials for police officers that did not intervene to stop the lynching of African American men and women. Leaders of the NAACP hoped that the bill would bring an end to lynching altogether, or at the very least minimize the occurrence of these racial crimes. African American leaders, such as Mary McCleod Bethune and Walter Francis White, urged President Roosevelt to speak out in favor of the bill, but he declined claiming that doing so would cost him political support in the South during the next election.[84]

Bishop Robinson's political beliefs were also suggested in her argument that the South was a contradictory place where white citizens used the law to support racial violence and intimidation in the name of Christianity. Believing that there was more economic opportunity for African Americans in the North, she travelled frequently throughout the South, working to help poor and working class families migrate into the mid-Atlantic states where her ministry was growing and active. While the transition would certainly have been an adjustment for many southern migrants, the larger Mount Sinai community was a safe haven for them. Within the network of churches under Bishop Robinson's leadership, members assisted one another with employment, housing and adjusting to life in urban communities. More than this, however, Robinson's

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[83] Ida B. Robinson, "The Economic Persecution," *Daughters of Thunder*, 203. Robinson's comments here may have been a veiled reference to FDR, whose public campaigns and "fireside chats" about the New Deal were replete with Judeo-Christian reference and ideology. See William J. Federer, *The Faith of FDR - From President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Public Papers 1933-1945* (St. Louis, MO: Amerisearch, 2006).
[84] Stephen Shaw, et al., eds *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Transformation of the Supreme Court.* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 170-172; Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder, 196.*

recruitment of southern African Americans inducted them into an organization that helped them develop the language and skills for church and community activism. For women, in particular, inclusion in Mount Sinai entailed active service in its many ministerial branches. Consequently, Robinson's spiritual development of her members fostered their development in areas of civic service and social activism.

Education was one area in which many women served as instructors and students in and outside of Mount Sinai. Unable to secure full formal education in her own youth, Bishop Robinson took pride in her biblical education and provided weekly bible school classes for her congregation, in addition to classes on holiness and sanctification. Appreciating the importance of traditional education, however, she founded Mount Sinai Holy School, where primary and secondary students followed a traditional academic curriculum. The school also provided students with courses in the fine arts and vocational training. Similar to women like Nannie Helen Burroughs, Robinson envisioned an institution where her students would learn the virtues of holiness along with marketable skills for the labor market.[85] Accordingly, Mount Sinai paralleled the racial uplift objectives prevalent in other black Christian sects.

Connected to Bishop Robinson's educational programs was her focus on administrative skills. Robinson's active effort to found new churches up and down the

[85] Nannie Helen Burroughs was a pioneering educator and activist who started one of the first African American girls' secondary schools in the nation. Burroughs's educational institution was based on vocational training and Christian instruction. For further reference see Karen A Johnson, *Uplifting The Women And The Race: The Educational Philosophies, and Social Activism of Anna Julia Cooper and Nannie Helen Burroughs* (New York: Garland Pub., 2000).

eastern seaboard, a practice commonly known in Holiness-Pentecostal tradition as "birthing," demanded an efficient administrative board that could stand in her place when she travelled and address any organizational or fiscal issues that arose within Mount Sinai. As a result, many of the leaders in the organization developed organizational and administrative skills that easily translated beyond their religious communities. Within the organization, for example, women took on roles as secretaries, event coordinators, program directors, clerical workers, bookkeepers, and ministerial trainers. Robinson, in turn, could move freely to extend her vision, while delegating tasks to the women she trusted and led.

Bishop Robinson also fostered social and political activism through the public services she provided in and outside of her church. Similar to the women evangelists and itinerant preachers of the early nineteenth century, Robinson initiated several services for the poor, including feeding them and opening her home for those without lodging and those who were ill. She also dedicated a portion of church revenue to the financial support and assistance of the poor and the sick in and around Mount Sinai. Holiness, as she illustrated, was more than personal righteousness; it was also an active effort to uplift those who needed it most. Indeed, Robinson exemplified this principle in her numerous trips to the South, where she "birthed" new churches and helped southern African Americans move north. Bishop Robinson's trips south were an important part of her effort to extend Mount Sinai's network of churches into the region, and to encourage southern men and women to begin working in full-time ministry. She frequently took members of her staff along with her, modelling the process for church "birthing" and

community development. This was particularly salient because of the many social resources churches provided in southern African American communities. It was also powerful because it facilitated the development of a small economy for southern migrants, in which they could secure employment through ministerial work and traditional domestic and industrial labor. Although her followers continued to work in menial jobs as domestic and unskilled laborers, they could achieve skilled, professional status in their ministerial work. Several of the long-time members in Mount Sinai, including Bishop Joseph Bell, one of her first male successors, were recruited from the South for work in full-time ministry.[86] For Mount Sinai members like Bell, the training they received under Robinson helped them to escape the labor inequities of the South, and facilitated their eventual shift into full-time ministry.

Robinson's political inclinations were also clear in her expressed dissatisfaction with the divisive political rhetoric leading up to and during the Second World War. Despite her uncertainty about the sincerity of Christian leaders in the United States, Robinson encouraged the men in Mount Sinai to support the war effort. Yet she taught that they should enter as conscientious objectors—volunteering specifically to serve as medics—because Mount Sinai prohibited its members from carrying weapons. Hence, serving through medical aid was the most feasible option for men who believed in sanctification. Bishop Robinson's stance on military service for her male membership, however, made her a target of federal surveillance. The relative novelty of her

[86] Minerva Bell, interview by author, Teaneck, NJ, January 19, 2017.

organization, in comparison to the Quakers, Mormons, and other protestant sects that encouraged conscientious objection, meant that Mount Sinai did not have a long enough history to receive pardon for its position. The Selective Service Act, ratified under President Woodrow Wilson, only pardoned political officials, clergy and ministers in training, and "any person…who is found to be a member of any well recognized religious sect or organization at present organized and existing and whose existing creed or principles forbid its members to participate in war in any form."[87] By the time the United States entered the Second Word War in 1941, Mount Sinai was only in its seventeenth year of existence. Consequently, Mount Sinai's relatively short history in the United States, coupled with its association with the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), placed Bishop Robinson under federal scrutiny. Although Mount Sinai was not formally connected to the COGIC organization, or its founder Charles Mason, federal investigators believed both institutions represented a potential threat to the nation. During World War I, Mason garnered federal attention when he allegedly "openly advised against registration and made treasonable and seditious remarks against the United States government."[88] Consequently, Robinson's comparison to Mason was especially harmful.

Complicating the investigation of her ministry was Mount Sinai's interracial constituency, in conjunction with her stance on gender and racial inequality. Local federal officials labeled Robinson a political agitator influenced by foreign forces. One report on Mount Sinai noted that she allowed the dissemination of anti-government

[87] Military Selective Service Act of 1917, 50 U.S.C. 3801 [section 6].
[88] Sherri Sherod Dupree, *Exposed: Federal Bureau of Investigation FBI Unclassified Reports on Churches and Church Leaders* (Washington, D.C.: Middle Atlantic Regional Press, 1993), 9.

material during her services. The agent also claimed that she encouraged "pleasure at Japanese victories over whites in Asia and Pacific, considering it good that whites have suffered humiliation." He concluded that black members in Mount Sinai were "pro-German, Japanese, and Anti-Semitic" – a claim that may have underscored rumors that she housed German spies in her Philadelphia congregation. Still, the agent's final conclusion was that the anti-American sentiment among black members in Mount Sinai was linked to a general dissatisfaction with the United States and not foreign inspired. [89]

Nonetheless, she resisted intimidation, expressing her beliefs clearly from her pulpit and her weekly radio show. She disproved of any doctrine that bolstered racial divide and social inequality. Given the nation's persistent racism against non-white citizens, many African Americans found the national call to protect global freedom and democracy hypocritical. No clearer example of this exists than the development of the "Double V" campaign during and after the war. Equally important however, is that Robinson believed and taught that divine judgement was the consequence for spiritual corruption in the lives of Christians and in the nation at large. Just as her forebears had warned against the social and political sins of inequality, so too did Bishop Robinson. Similarly, Robinson's language was nuanced in that it implicitly rejected white racism and male hegemony through an emphasis on holiness. Yet she also warned that the cost of personal or national unrighteousness would come on Judgment Day. As she noted, "the life of man is frequently compared to a shadow," indicating that time was ephemeral.

[89] Report detailed and quoted in Sherri Sherod Dupree, *Exposed,37-38.*

"We may look out and see wars developing in all parts of our land," she explained, "unrest and confusion are found everywhere. This truly indicates the shadow of our Lord and we know it is time to pray."[90] The reoccurring theme of judgement in Robinson's messages are rooted in traditional African American biblical interpretations that inscribe meaning onto the suffering of African American people and promise retribution for the injustices they faced. Yet Robinson's use of this trope also undergirded her use of the jeremiad, in its dual warning to believers about their own issues of corruption and that of the nation. Unrepentant immorality and persecution of believers, some of whom Robinson identified as oppressed African Americans, would certainly bring Divine condemnation. Consequently, Robinson's jeremiadic discourse was embedded in her calls for holiness and her warnings about messianic judgement.

In many ways, Bishop Robinson's egalitarian theology of holiness and sanctification armed her constituency with a language and skills they would not otherwise receive in day-to-day life because of their low socio-economic status and the stigma of race. The doctrine of holiness, therefore, circumvented negative racial discourse and gender prejudice by teaching them that they were god's people: holy and separate. And consequently, they could reject the pleasures and the burdens of the world. This principle had two profound outcomes: a) it offered Mt. Sinai members a simple means of resistance to alienation that could only be achieved through full acceptance of this

[90] Ida B. Robinson, "The Economic Persecution," *Daughters of Thunder*, 205.

identity as God's chosen and b) it neutralized the restrictions of race, class and gender by demanding a uniform standard of morality from men and women.

The doctrines of holiness and sanctification undergirded Robinson's egalitarianism. It was required of all and held every individual to the same standard of righteous living. In turn, living a sanctified life helped to undermine racial stigma by fostering separate social habits and distinct socialization practices. Robinson's belief in the universal brotherhood of all people undermined any serious accusation that she was a race nationalist, while simultaneously boosting the self-esteem of a largely black constituency. In essence, her insistence that they were holy and divinely chosen reinforced the idea that injustice of any kind was also anti-God.

Given the gender balance and multi-ethnic composition of her institution, Robinson's holiness teaching also retained an implicit set of subtexts. The posture of holiness depended entirely on intersectional identity. It required men and women of all cultures to shed their personal vices and their specific biases. Holding on to prejudice was, in effect, to live immorally because it rejected the equality of humanity as a creation of God. Hence, Robinson's sermon emphasized the connection of all people to the Divine and each other as "unquestionably established." As a result, believers in holiness could, and did deny, or outright reject, the validity of racial inferiority and gender inequality. Their belief in holiness, and in Bishop Robinson, cultivated a language that fostered egalitarian perspectives and facilitated individual self-worth.

While Robinson's use of holiness theology was a nuanced call to righteousness for believers and the nation, her warnings about the impending judgement for all deeds was also complex. The concept of divine judgment is egalitarian and Bishop Robinson taught that all individuals would face consequences for their sins and immorality. Given the cultural context of Mount Sinai, however, the concept of judgement had multiple meanings. In one sense, immorality – as personal vice or prejudice – would bring divine judgement to the individual. As Robinson emphasized in her teaching, no one could achieve righteousness or help others without conquering his or her own internal struggles. In another sense, however, personal immorality bolstered inequality and lowered the morality of the nation. Consequently, unholy living on the personal level defiled the "body of the church" and the American body politic.

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Juxtaposed with the Church of God and Christ, the African Methodists Episcopal Church, and the Baptist church, Mount Sinai was a small Holiness-Pentecostal organization. The legacy and impact of Bishop Robinson, however, should not be overlooked. Holiness-Pentecostal ministries like Bishop Robinson's were invaluable for the resources, training and refuge they provided to working class and poor black women who migrated from the rural south into the urban north in the first three decades of the twentieth century. These were also spaces where women could assume positions of power without wealth or significant levels of traditional education. Consisting largely of working class southern migrants, and typically founded by them, Holiness-Pentecostal

churches in the North did not have the class rivalries of mainstream denominations. Divine calling and spiritual authority outweighed professional titles or income – a reality that garnered local Holiness-Pentecostal churches significant ridicule from larger institutions – creating the space for marginalized women to resist the racist and misogynistic scripts of American society. More than this, Mount Sinai offers an incredible example of the ways in which poor and working class women worked to uplift themselves and their communities through church service, in the same ways that well-to-do women assumed these roles through national organizations, charities, and schools. In effect, Bishop Robinson demonstrates the ways that black women embraced messages of respectability, self-help and economic independence in their own ways. Undergirding all of these was a theme of purity – or holiness. Just as nineteenth century African American women drew on a language of purity and sanctification to undermine racism and sexism, along with an emphasis on the sanctity of their roles as civically responsible women wives and mothers, so too did Holiness-Pentecostal women.

Bishop Robinson's ministry provides a clear example of the ways in which black women leaders challenged racial and gender discrimination through their spiritual work More than this, Mount Sinai stands as one of several examples of African American women's use of their churches to ordain and train other women leaders. Additionally, Mount Sinai's community outreach and educational programs illustrate the many ways in which working class black women addressed social and political issues through Pentecostal churches. Nonetheless, Robinson's strict teachings on the requirements of holiness were increasingly out of step with the social standards of the United States

during the 1920s and 1930s. For Bishop Robinson, and many African American women of her generation, the growing visibility of black secular culture in America's major cities was a sign of the coming Judgement. And as many saw it, young people lived dangerously and without self-respect. But for many of those young people the rigid standards of older generations had done little to resolve the day-to-day realities of being black in a racist nation. Accordingly, they reshaped the meaning of African American cultural expression and racial identity by infusing their secular work with the spiritual discourse of black women's jeremiad.

Chapter 4

Like Honey for the Gods

An ascendancy of wisdom. An incalculable hoard of wisdom in all fields, in all things collected from all corners of humanity. A stupendous mass of things…And you wonder and wonder why they have not deftly and skillfully learned how to handle, Wisdom, stored up for them—like honey for the Gods on Olympus—since time unknown.[1]

The early twentieth century ushered in a host of cultural shifts prompted by the rise of Jim Crow; the First World War; the Nineteenth Amendment that gave women the right to vote in 1920; the mass migration of African Americans from the rural South into urban centers between the 1910s-1940s; immigration from the black Atlantic, especially from the Caribbean; and the nation's quest for modernity. Combined, the advent of these major events underscored the radicalization of African American populations that were increasingly urban. Indeed, their response to the cultural changes at the top of the century has been the source of significant academic research. Most of the work on black life in the early twentieth century, however, emphasizes the role of the New Negro Renaissance movements that produced the most well know and celebrated black intellectual work of the twentieth century.[2]

[1] Marita Bonner, "On Being Young---Colored—And A Woman" in *Frye Street & Environs*, 1st ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1989), 6.
[2] Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett, *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Focused intently on the Harlem Renaissance, scholars of African American history, music, art and literature have aptly noted that the first forty years of the twentieth century significantly defined black activism and identity for the duration of the twentieth century. Recent scholarship on the New Negro movement has also interjected that the nation's search for and definitions of modernity are deeply influenced by black responses to continually exclusionary and oppressive conditions. More than this, scholars such as James Smethurst, Charene Johnson and Daphne Lamothe suggest that the journey to national progress was permeated by racial anxieties over black migration and black rejections of white racist discourse. Because expressions of progress often hinged on a rejection of all that was primitive, racist depictions of African Americans—often rooted in the tropes of antebellum slavery—were cemented in the developing fields of physical and social science.[3]

Conversely, the early twentieth century was also marked by a rising interest in eastern cultures, spirituality and the exotic. The development of industry, technology and science was also accompanied by a cultural fascination with magic, theosophy and psychic studies.[4] Amidst all this, communities of black men and women developed a rich and dynamic creative intellectual culture that question and challenged the very notion of progress. Modernity for African Americans at the top of the twentieth century held in it

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[3] See James Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, *Portraits of The New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Daphne Lamothe, *Inventing The New Negro: Narrative, Culture, and Ethnography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

[4] For an in-depth discussion here, see Leigh Wilson, *Modernism and Magic: Experiments with Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Occult* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

all the trappings of pre-Civil War racial politics. From Jim Crow segregation to race riots, lynching and minstrel shows, public ridicule of black life was a national trend. Despite this, however, black men and women found ways to strengthen the bonds of their communities and resist American racism.

In the previous chapter, I have argued that the rise of Holiness-Pentecostal churches provided a new avenue for black women's jeremiadic expression. Yet, I also maintained that the Holiness-Pentecostal traditions underscored a change in the way the Jeremiad could be used. Nonetheless, Holiness-Pentecostal organizations were not appealing to all those within black communities. Indeed, because of their reliance on African inspired spiritual rituals such as shouting and speaking in tongues, black Holiness-Pentecostal organizations were the source of ridicule from black and white Americans. The exuberant, charismatic worship coupled with the largely working class constituency, linked black Holiness-Pentecostal ministries to slave religious traditions and superstitions frequently scorned by black and white intellectuals alike. And yet, this exuberance and the syncretic spiritual belief and practice of Afro-Christianity found its way into New Negro Art that worked to articulate a progressive vision of black identity. Even so, these expressions emphasized African based practices of the black diaspora and the use of these to redefine blackness – to complicate it.

For black women, in particular, the use of African inspired symbolism and imagery in conjunction with feminist ideology and Judeo-Christian themes, fashioned another venue for expressing their Jeremiad, as well as it did forge alternative means of enacting the Jeremiad. Namely, black women's contributions to and influence in the

literary and fine arts and fields of social sciences, like anthropology and ethnography, ensured that they would be able to legitimize black cultural traditions as both political and intellectual. Yet it also meant that black women intellectuals could now resist the racist and sexist discourse that informed the Academy from within. That is, they could utilize the training and methodologies of their academic disciplines to resist the racist and sexist epistemologies they forge and sustain. Consequently, the works of Marita Bonner and Zora Neal Hurston are instructive. Bonner and Hurston reflect the diverging interests of black women intellectuals in the early twentieth century.

Marita Bonner employed the Judeo-Christian ideology and middle class sentiment found in the discourse of the NACW and earlier writers such as Pauline Hopkins and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. In much of her writing, themes of dignified womanhood and moral uplift are reoccurring. Nonetheless, Bonner challenged the idealism of her predecessors by countering with the realities of black women who continued to struggle despite their aspirations to the high ideals of racial uplift. Hence, she grapples with the complexities of progress for racialized women in urban settings. In doing so, Bonner rejected the essentialism of her time, highlighting the nuances of life for black people in New England versus those in the mid-Atlantic states, and exposing the socio-economic tensions inherent in the mass migration of black citizens across the nation from rural to the congested segregated neighborhoods of America's urban centers.[5]

[5] See James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners and the Great Migration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989); Carole Marks, *Farewell—We're Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

On the contrary, Zora Neale Hurston's work took a slightly different approach, rejecting the classical styles of writing in favor of traditional folk based style. Her literary work employed the dialect of rural southern black communities and her narratives lacked overt political messages. Hurston's characters and her ethnographic work aimed instead to give voice and agency to the voiceless by capturing their language, experiences and beliefs as they were. Equally important was Hurston's implicit and explicit use of African derived spiritual practices in the rural South and the Caribbean. Her use of Voodoo imagery and symbolism, along with Caribbean folk culture, provided a powerful counter narrative to American scholarship that denied African cultural retention because of slavery. Hurston's work also bolstered the links between the New Negro Movement of the United States and the negritude movement of the Francophone and Anglophone Caribbean islands. Accordingly, her work complemented black espousals of modernity by infusing the New Negro movement with a sense of its own links to the past and its cultural roots beyond the United States. [6]

Bonner and Hurston represent an important shift in black women's use of the Jeremiad. As I will argue here, both women secularized the Jeremiad – removing it from its early context in black religious intellectual tradition. Placed within the context of academic scholarship and popular culture, they re-appropriated the Jeremiad to refute black inferiority. While both women's writings posed critical questions about the nature of black freedom in the United States and black women's freedom's specifically, neither

[6] See Deborah G. Plant, 'The Inside Light:' New Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010);

writer made a concerted effort to link her work to moral uplift. Instead, uplift was questioned and critiqued. Bonner and Hurston also engaged eastern spirituality in ways that speak to their education and suggests their embrace of the spiritual beliefs of antiquity. In this sense, both women signal a move away from traditional African American Christian narratives that drew parallels between the historical experiences of African people in the western world under European imperialism, and those of the biblical Hebrews under the domination of foreign powers.

Finally, Bonner and Hurston are significant because their work de-emphasized the divine consequences of American racism for whites and pronounced the divine consequences for people of color. Namely, their work suggested that the ultimate consequence of racism was that black people and black women especially lost their true selves as they worked to be accepted by white Americans. That is, both women used their work to call African Americans back to themselves. Righteousness, or godliness, therefore could only be expressed through self-embrace and freedom of expression. Consequently, neither writer expressed hope or even desire for approval and acceptance from white citizens – or black men. Instead, their writing indicates that black women were all they need search for. If only they would open themselves to the possibility of their own sacredness–-their own connection to and embodiment of the divine. In short, Bonner and Hurston's challenge to racism and sexism emerged through their portrayals of black women who defied categorization and personified the divine, the taboo, the magical, and the supernatural. Their nonfiction essays bolstered this effort, illustrating that black women's experiences and their insistence on grappling with their intersectional

identities in popular culture paved the way for black feminist prose-creative and traditional – for every subsequent generation of black women intellectuals.

* * *

While the turn of the nineteenth century ushered in a swelling of good feeling about the nation and its economic and political stability, the turn of the twentieth saw a rise in good feeling about national "progress" and modernity. Technological advances, scientific development and the professionalization of nearly all sectors of the labor market was evidence of American strength and the durability of American ideals. Despite the hurdles of slavery, the Civil War, and the ensuing racial conflicts in the country, many people believed that significant progress had been made and that the twentieth century would see a continuance of that progress.[7]

Education was particularly salient in the national dialogue of progress and modernity. With the development of the public-school system underway and the simultaneous expansion of social and physical sciences in higher education, it seemed the United States was every bit the progressive place it claimed to be. In public discourse, even the accomplishments of black communities were attributed to the high ideals and democratic freedoms of the United States. The continued expansion of industry and the fairly rapid industrialization of the country was another source of pride, and for many Americans it was a sign of progressive times ahead.

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[7] See Paul V. Murphy, *The New Era: American Thought and Culture in the 1920s* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011); Daniel H. Borus, *Twentieth-Century Multiplicity: American Thought and Culture, 1900–1920* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

Further evidence of American modernity was its scientific developments. Within the first thirty years of the twentieth century, more than a dozen social and physical science fields emerged as staples in the nation's colleges and universities. From the rise of psychology and sociology, to the development of epidemiology, hematology and oncology, science stood as a measure of progress and knowledge production. As many nineteenth century intellectuals feared, modernity marginalized religious ideals – or as Frederic Nietzche wrote in several of his works, "God is dead and we have killed him."[8] Nonetheless, while American society shed much of its devotion to the Victorian ideals of the previous century, there remained a sense of angst about what this would mean for the "city on a hill." [9]

For some, the shift into modernity sparked a very sharp insistence on a return to Judeo-Christian values in the nation. In art, literature and painting, nihilism emerged as intellectuals grappled with the cultural changes of their time and the loss of the traditional as a constant. [10] For others, modernity was a welcome tide washing away the oppressive social mores of Victorian culture and its links to the monarchies of Europe. Still, for some Americans, modernity was a complex amalgamation of traditional and progressive ideals that simply made American life more complex. Indeed, for black and white intellectuals, modernity signaled the opportunity to unpack the meanings of progress and

[8] For "Nietzsche," see Frederic Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Dover Publications, 2006); for scientific developments see Edward Arthur White, *Science and Religion In American Thought* (New York: AMS Press, 1972).
[9] See George Cotkin, *Reluctant Modernism*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).
[10] See, for examples, Weller Shane, *Modernism and Nihilism*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

address its ambiguities. In many ways, intellectuals of the early twentieth century worked to include this uncertainty into their considerations of progress.

For African Americans, the meaning of progress was saturated by contradiction. Though the nation promoted progress, and significant progress was achieved, racial violence intimidation, discrimination, economic and political exclusion were still major aspects of the black modern experience. Though thousands of African Americans had access to education by 1900, employment opportunities were largely restricted to menial labor, and domestic service jobs. And higher education rarely improved socio-economic status for African Americans as it did for American whites. While economic opportunities for black laborers were more stable, they remained largely in subservient or domestic fields. Housing and land ownership now entailed some choice for African American citizens, but the options for land and housing were typically subpar and overcrowded. Despite the gains of Civil Rights legislation ratified during the Reconstruction and the passing of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, black political rights and suffrage were not protected.[11]

Counter arguments for the supremacy of states' rights undermined black citizenship and white violence intensified in response to black assertions of civic privilege. Lynching, rape, assault, property destruction, and race rioting increased as black citizens attempted to find work or better living conditions away from the rural

[11] See here Deborah G. White, et. al., *Freedom on My Mind*, Vol. 2 (New York: Bedford St. Martin, 2012); James Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

South and imprisonment rates rose as black families settled into the nation's centers. Compounding all this was the predication of modernity on the contrast of black primitiveness and backwardness. In popular culture, movies, music, and literature popularized imagery of the stereotypical black caricature. *Birth of a Nation* popularized sensational tropes about black hyper sexuality and criminality.[12] Minstrel shows and black face performance swept the nation, becoming one of the most popular types of entertainment. American literature was also rife with derogatory racial imagery steeped in the dialect and style of black face performance. The early works of T.S. Elliott, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Virginia Wolf, and William Faulkner, which are now widely accepted as canonical standards in American modernist literature, were no exceptions to this, and several scholars have pointed out that their troubling use of language mirrored the music traditions of minstrel shows.[13]

As I noted in the previous chapter, professional academic fields influenced and absorbed messages about the inferiority of African American people. Sociology and anthropology, in particular, reified pseudoscientific theories by searching for proof of black inferiority. The famed Chicago School of Sociology, for example, gave credence to racist ideologies by developing studies on "Negro Pathology." Charted by Robert Park, the Chicago School sought to explain the alleged deviant behavior of African Americans and their resulting failure to assimilate into American society. Simultaneously, medical professionals and care givers promoted research that denied black people felt pain in the

[12] D. W. Griffith and Thomas Dixon, *Birth of a Nation. (Los Angeles: Triangle Film Corp, 1915).*
[13] James Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism*, 16-20.

same ways as whites. And heinous medical experimentation was practiced on black bodies throughout the twentieth century. [14]

Underneath the studies on African Americans in the United States was an assumption that blackness was a problematic identity, and therefore ill-suited for American society. Accordingly, academics described the nations racial tensions as a "negro problem." Scholarly attempts to understand this problem was, in effect, an attempt to grapple with the place of black people in America's future. Yet the core of the problem for most was not just inherent inferiority, it was also a failure in black homes and communities that implicated black women. The "Negro problem" then was a consequence of impoverished families headed by single black women whose lascivious behaviors bred immorality into black communities.[15] Indeed the discourse that links female headed households and African American social failures remains a potent trope in explaining away systemic inequalities and racism.

What then was the meaning of modernity for African American women in the early twentieth century? Like all people of color, black women lived with the social repercussions of systemic racism and political exclusion. Still, gender made the realities of both a double burden. Limited to largely domestic labor and forced to work to provide for their families and make up for the underemployment or imprisonment of black men, African American women were precluded from domesticity and subsequently linked to

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[14] Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid,* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).
[15] See James B. McKee, *Sociology and The Race Problem* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

public discourses on illicit sexual behavior and indecency. Equally important is that black women did not receive their legal rights to vote until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. This monumental victory for American women, however, was ultimately a shallow one for black women whose race meant that voting in many parts of the nation, especially the South, was prohibited through states' rights stipulations. Hence, when African American women were granted suffrage nearly a half century after their male counterparts, many were still unable to vote.

Making matters worse, black women were at the very bottom of the economic ladder. The overconcentration of women of color in domestic, agricultural, and menial labor jobs yielded very little return, which hindered their ability to be fully independent. The gaps between black women and the rest of American society also hampered their efforts to mobilize politically across class lines. The lack of economic capital, political representation or legal protection from physical or sexual abuse, rendered black women nearly invisible. As a race group, they lacked the political power to significantly challenge their oppression. As a gendered group, they lacked the social or political capital to overcome their exclusion. Even so, black women were highly visible as the subjects of, and scaffolds to, American popular culture in the early twentieth century. Largely stereotypical and derogatory, references to black women in popular culture reduced them to the antebellum mammy or jezebel caricatures. Still, pop culture gave them spaces of

resistance where they could challenge racism and sexism through humor, satire and irony—or by signifying as Henry Louis Gates calls it.[16]

In the twentieth century, popular culture provided for black women the platform that the Second Great Awakening had done for their nineteenth century predecessors. Through art, dance, music, theatre, and literature, African American women fostered nation-wide networks of other creative intellectuals, cross racial audiences, and international acclaim. They also spoke to the daily frustrations of the "colorline" and the double standards of gender, as well as they did refute the idea that the U.S. practiced its principle of "liberty and justice for all." Early blues music for example, was performed predominantly by black women whose lyrical content positioned the new social, economic and political freedoms of African Americans at the forefront of American public culture.

Blues lyrics celebrated hetero and homosexual love and desire, while also challenging traditionally accepted gender roles in American society. Blues artists like Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ida Goodson, and Ethel Waters sung of love, lust, and heartbreak in the twentieth century – rejecting the traditional roles of domesticity for themselves and revising black spiritual music traditions. Blues and jazz music borrowed heavily from negro spirituals of the antebellum era, but both genres adapted the spiritual to address the twentieth century realities of African Americans. For black women, this meant a heavy emphasis on independence, social mobility and sexual freedom outside of

[16] See Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

marriage and motherhood—a fundamental divergence from the feminism of their predecessors.[17]

The development of African American dance traditions at the beginning of the twentieth century was another venue of black women's anti-racist and feminist expression. Performers Katherine Dunham, Josephine Baker, and Pearl Primus, for instance, garnered international attention by integrating the dance styles of India, Africa, and the Caribbean into their work. Their movements on stage broke with traditions of classical ballet and inspired new interest in an eastern dance aesthetic. Dunham in particular also embraced ethnic costuming and music in her performances, dazzling audiences with Asian and African derived movements that celebrated love and sexuality. In some senses, the artistic expression of Dunham, Primus and Baker was also a celebration of the indigenous traditions forged in pre-colonial times and continued despite European imperialism.[18] Yet this artistic expression also suggested that black dancers acknowledged and embraced their links to the colonial nations of the world—a sentiment echoed in the Pan-Africanist, Negritude, Indigenismo, and Mestizaje movements around the world at the beginning of the twentieth century.[19]

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[17] The most important study on this to date is Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, 1st ed. (New York: Vintage, 1999).
[18] See Julia L. Foulkes, *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey by Julia L. Foulkes* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).
[19] See Belinda Elizabeth Jack, *Negritude and Literary Criticism: The History and Theory of "Negro-African" Literature in French* (Westport: Greenwood, 1996); George Coronado, *The Andes Imagined Indigenismo, Society, and Modernity* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009); John F. Burke, *Mestizo Democracy: The Politics of Crossing Borders* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2002).

The visual artists of the New Negro Renaissance provide yet another example of black women's challenges to racism and their revisions of feminism in the early twentieth century. Through sculpture, painting, photographs, drawing, and film, black women reimagined themselves in ways that challenged white racism, denied the validity of racial categories and undermined mainstream historical narratives about African and African American people in the world. Women such as Lois Mailou Jones, Edmonia Lewis, and Augusta Savage celebrated black women in antiquity and modernity through heavy emphasis on beautiful dark skinned women.[20] Yet they also resisted common celebrations of fair skinned or racially mixed black women typically linked to high socio-economic status and beauty standards that paralleled those of white women. Accordingly, their art worked to diverge from the theme of the tragic mulatta. Instead, artists like May Howard Jackson defied these narratives by challenging the presumption of choice in racial identification for mixed raced African American women. Her controversial pieces, *Mulatto Woman and Child* and *Head of a Negro Child*, emphasized the paradox of race for African Americans in a society that desperately wanted clear distinctions between its racial groups.[21] These same themes were mirrored in the black literature of the twentieth century, expanding the boundaries of womanhood and black identity, while also refuting the essentialism of the previous century. In this way, black women of the early twentieth century used their cultural expression as a venue for articulating new definitions of race

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[20] See Amy Helene Kirschke, ed. *Women Artists of the Harlem Renaissance* (University Press of Mississippi, 2014); Edmonia Lewis, *The Death of Cleopatra*, sculpture, 1876; Lois M. Jones, *The Ascent of Ethiopia*, painting, 1932; Augusta Savage, *The Harp*, sculture, 1939.

[21] Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, *Portraits of The New Negro Woman*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

and womanhood. Most importantly, their calls for justice and lamentations over America's contradictions differed significantly from their nineteenth century foremothers.

Black women who used their creative intellectual work to decry American injustice also challenged the idea that Christian middle class ideals could uplift the race. They also did not warn white Americans about the repercussions of racism in the nation. Rather, they warned each other against the compulsion to assimilate for acceptance. In this sense, it was not the nation which stood to face the consequences for accepting racism and sexism. Black people stood to lose the most because their identities were at stake. Drawing on feminist rhetoric, ethnocentric aesthetics and the foundation of their previous generation, women like Marita Bonner and Zora Neal Hurston wrote foundational works that laid the groundwork for a black arts aesthetic. Yet their work is also important because it framed modernist perspectives on black rural and urban identity, sexuality, spirituality and folk tradition. Combined, they illustrate the influence of African American women on modernity in the United States and they represent a cornerstone in the development of black women's jeremiadic traditions during the twentieth century. Twentieth century uses of the Jeremiad reaffirmed the sacred status of women of color and used the cultural platform of the New Negro Renaissance Movement to assert black women's rights to equality, self-determination, and visibility on their own terms. Each of these was predicated on African American women's self-realization and their self-acceptance, rather than the vindication of a Judeo-Christian God. In essence, the

modern expression of African American women's Jeremiad called for a return to their authentic, divine selves.

* * *

While black women's nineteenth century literature worked to emphasized new definitions of womanhood, motherhood and citizenship, their twentieth century works revised and reframed them. Modern black women's literature was saturated by the complex. It resisted the absolutist frameworks of the previous century and questioned the ability of those foundational premises to facilitate black survival in modern times. Hence, in the literary works of Marita Bonner and Zora Neale Hurston, several new motifs emerged and forged a more modern jeremiadic expression. The core of nineteenth century black jeremiadic expression was purity, motherhood and refined womanhood. In the subsequent generation, however, several new variations emerged.

The mainstay of black women's twentieth century jeremiadic expression was the affirmation of black women's spiritual sacredness. In fact, writers of the twentieth century layered this idea by extending the notion of divine to the polytheistic African based faiths of antiquity. They linked themselves to goddesses of love, jealousy, power, and fertility – drawing on the symbolism of Yoruba, Voodoo and southern root working or conjuring. To this they added that traditional African American spirituality was contradictory and rooted in divisive class politics – a reality most visible in the strained relationships between mainstream black Christian denominations and their Holiness-Pentecostal counterparts in the North and the South.

The clearest divergence of the black women Jeremiahs of the twentieth century was in their redefinition of the Divine. Undergirding this definition was the suggestion that black women were gods themselves, that in themselves they would find what they needed to survive in modernity. Additionally, the assertion of black women's divinity in the early modern period was a marker of actualization that bolstered women's participation in and influence on the long black freedom struggle of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. That is, within the imagery of black female godhood, African American creative intellectuals of the early twentieth century laid the groundwork for the powerful Civil Rights discourse rooted in their constructions of womanhood, racial identity and citizenship.

Motherhood was also a consistent theme in modern black jeremiadic expression, but here too black women modified it. Black children, they illustrated, were hindered (even destroyed) by the middle class Christian values of the previous century. Despite their best demonstrations of civic virtue, education, refined social etiquette, and high moral standards, African American youth in the twentieth century were no more free than the previous generation. As many New Negro intellectuals argued, they were in a more difficult position because they were legally freed, but systemically excluded from the full benefits of their citizenship. More than this, black women of the twentieth century often rejected the idea that motherhood was preeminent. While it remained an important life accomplishment to many, motherhood was no longer espoused as the sacred obligation of all black women.

Racial ambiguity was another divergent aspect of black women's twentieth century jeremiadic expressions. Nineteenth century black women worked to reject the validity of racial categories, or to debunk the notion of black inferiority, through middle class Christian values. From educational initiatives to political activism and creative expression, black women of the nineteenth century worked to undermine racism and sexism by demonstrating that they too were civilized, refined and accomplished in comparison to white Americans. Black women intellectuals of the twentieth century however, celebrated the complexity of African Americans. Emphasizing racial mixture, cultural diversity, and folk traditions, they suggested that blackness was fluid, rich and multifaceted. Marita Bonner achieved this by highlighting the racial ambiguity and diversity of black urban life in short stories like "Nothing New" and "A Sealed Pod" Zora Neal Hurston, however, emphasized the absurdity of colorism in black communities and the ways in which it deteriorated black community life in stories like "Color Struck" and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Colorism was one of the most notable themes in many black women's literary work during the New Negro Movement and its results were always destructive and alienating. For Bonner and Hurston, and many other black women intellectuals of the early twentieth century, true equality would only come through the ritual acceptance of black multiplicity and its continuity across diasporic traditions. Hence, their celebrations of the cultures of the African diaspora in the western world was an affirmation of this plurality. Arguably, it was also an indication that black women intellectuals hoped to advance a pluralistic vision of black identity as its modern definition. Yet, black women's focus on African culture and spirituality was also

accomplishing what their nineteenth century counterparts could not: rediscovery. Wider accessibility to education and the development of African and African American scholarship in the early twentieth century meant that young black men and women could locate themselves in a historical trajectory that preceded European nations by centuries. This, in turn, lent itself generously to the idea that Afrocentric expressions were the most authentic in black culture and therefore a more "true" representation of black identity than the cultural expression of the nineteenth century.

Black women's jeremiadic expressions during the twentieth century, then, differed most significantly from its early form in that it suggested racism could only be overcome through the acknowledgement of true black identity. It was in this identity that back men and women could become actualized, and through which they could also recognize their own sanctity. Combined these motifs reoccur in the works of Marita Bonner and Zora Neal Hurston, offering us an introspective and insightful view of the important shifts in black women's intellectual traditions at the top of the twentieth century.

* * *

Marita Bonner was born in 1899 in Boston Massachusetts, to Joseph and Mary Anne Bonner and raised in the nearby suburb of Brookline, Massachusetts. Afforded the privileges of both secondary and post-secondary education, Bonner trained as a classical pianist in high school and studied Comparative Literature, English, German, and musical composition as a college student at Radcliff College. Like many well-to-do African American women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Bonner's early

career began as a teacher. She worked first in Bluefield Colored Institute in Bluefield, West Virginia, and subsequently in Armstrong High School in Washington, D.C.

Bonner's time in Washington D.C. initiated her entry point into the literary movement of the New Negro Renaissance. Her friendship with African American playwright and Oberlin graduate Georgia Douglass Johnson granted her access to the "S" Street salon, where many of the Movement's luminaries gathered regularly. Her years in D.C. placed her in the same circles as Jessie Fauset, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, May Miller and Alain Locke. During this period, Bonner produced some of her most celebrated work. Her time in D.C. also forged the ideological underpinnings of her writing style. Bonner's intellectual development and style were further developed after her marriage to William Occomy in 1930, and the couple's subsequent relocation to Chicago, Illinois. It was there that Bonner's work became more intensely focused on the intersections of race, gender and class oppression.[22]

The contrast of Bonner's more privileged life, as an educated woman of color, with that of most women of color in D.C. and Chicago underscored the urgency in her use of the Jeremiad. Indeed, the poor conditions of working class women of color permeates Bonner's work from the late 1920s into the 1940s and reflects her frustrations with the destructive outcomes of American inequalities for women. In her early work, she focused specifically on the harsh realities of working class life for African Americans living in urban centers, exploring the ways American racism shaped those realities.

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[22] Marita Bonner, *Frye Street & Environs: the collected works of Marita Bonner* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), xi-xxv.

Bonner's first essay, "To Be Young—A Woman—And Colored" and her early short stories "The Prison Bound" and "Nothing New" utilize themes of entrapment to capture life in America's urban black ghettos.[23]

Describing her own realities in the crowded African American neighborhoods of Washington D.C., Bonner noted "and one day you find yourself entangled–enmeshed–pinioned in the seaweed of a Black Ghetto." Keenly aware of her class distinction and frustrated by the limitations racial segregation in D.C. imposed on her Bonner explained that the all of the region's African Americans were "cut off, flung together, shoved aside in a bundle because of color and with no more in common." Bonner's characters were equally confined by race, despite class distinctions or even the ability of some to "pass."[24]

In "The Prison Bound," the main characters Maggie and Charlie are trapped in a small, "greasy," apartment–exaggerated by their loveless marriage and drab, isolated lives. The grueling realities of Charlie's exhausting work in "a mill," coupled by their evenings of silence and Maggie's crying, underscore their life together in the segregated city that remains relatively foreign to Maggie. Denny, the central character in Bonner's short story "Nothing New" also personifies isolation. His inquisitive, artistic, sensibilities and skill as a painter are mocked within his own community, while his fair complexion and disregard for the racial boundaries of his segregated neighborhood render him vulnerable and queer. A target of black disdain, white violence and sexual desire, Denny

[23] Ibid., 3-9; 64-78.
[24] Bonner, *Frye Street & Environs,* 4.

becomes a murderer as he defends his life. And like Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas, Denny's life is over before it ever truly unfolds.[25]

"Exit: An Illusion" depicts a similar narrative through its only characters, Dot and Buddy, who live in "a cheap flat off from the rest of the world." The play details Buddy's deep racial anxieties as the two sleep in their shabby apartment. Fearful that Dot, who is "almost as pale as the sheets," has taken a new (white) lover, he kills her in his sleep. When he awakens to find that he has been dreaming, he sobs over her lifeless body. "Drab Rambles" and "Tin Can" follow a similar trajectory. Trapped in their own skin and further limited by gender, the men and women in these stories suffer in the poor black section of "Frye Street."[26]

Nearly all of Bonner's writing illuminated the world of working class black women, and her stories highlighted the doubly oppressive nature of poverty for women. The women who figured most prominently in her narratives were washerwomen, seamstresses, maids, and prostitutes whose encounters with rape, death, illness, domestic violence, verbal abuse, and underemployment befuddle even the simplest of pleasures or leisure. Consequently, Bonner illustrated the main reasons middle class ideals of domesticity and womanhood failed so many black women in the twentieth century.

As Bonner's work continued in the 1930s and early 1940s, urban segregation and the faintly veiled Jim Crowism of the North permeated her writing. This was particularly

[25] Ibid., 64-78.
[26] Ibid., 92-102; 119-140.

frustrating for her because of her belief that racial identity was asinine and capricious. This is evident in "Nothing New" where white children berate Denny in a park for crossing into "the white kids side" to pick a purple flower. Denny's community on Frye Street was thoroughly diverse, comprised of French, German, Russian, Jewish, Italian, and Chinese residents, in addition to its southern black migrants.[27] Still Frye Street was as segregated as many parts of the South, and black residents faced the grim realities of fatal violence when they crossed the imagined boundaries of race. Similarly, washerwoman Madie Frye is overjoyed to find employment in a city boarding home washing dishes, until her joy is perceived as sexual availability and she is raped by her employer. Her pregnancy garners the suspicion of his wife, who pays Madie off and dismisses her. A new mother who could not afford childcare, she struggled to keep a job and her baby. Madie's second job at the Kale's Fine Family Laundry is equally traumatic. Despite her attempts to not to draw attention to herself, she is raped again by her manager after she inadvertently looks in his direction on her way out of the Laundry.[28]

"There Were Three" and "A Sealed Pod" offer equally tragic stories about the consequences of breaking the unwritten racial laws of the North. Single mother Lucille of "There Were Three," for example, is one of many African Americans in the ethnically diverse Frye Street neighborhood who "manage to look like all men of every other race and then have something left over for their own distinctive black-browns." A very fair skinned, blond, prostitute with a primarily white clientele, she warns her children against

[27] Ibid.,71.
[28] Ibid., 98.

working in hotels – likely out of a fear they might see her and ruin her performance as a white woman. When Lucille's sixteen-year old son Robbie defies her orders to "stay out of hotels" and away from white women, who she calls "the devil," to work as a bellhop it costs him his life.[29] Realizing he has walked in on his mother and her white customer, Robbie rushed to his mother unsuccessfully. In the frenzy, Lucille's customer attempted to knock him down and instead pushed him out of a three-story window to his death.

Likewise, Viollette Aurora Davis, in Bonner's "A Sealed Pod" met an equally tragic end for betraying her Italian boyfriend. Quick tempered and violent, Joe Tamona begged Viollette to wait for his return as he skips town to avoid imprisonment for murdering a man he fought with in a pool room. Returning two years later to find that Viollette entertaining a married man, Dave Jones, Joe stabbed her to death and escaped once again – leaving her lover from the previous night to hang for her death. Nonetheless, while only two people have been killed, they community mourns separately, leaving the grieving characters – Joe and Viollette's mothers and Dave's wife and children, to mourn in alienation.[30]

In Bonner's most celebrated work, "The Purple Flower," she underscored the absurdity of racial divides and the resulting color consciousness it produced. Her play depicts a society that "might be here, there or anywhere," in which "Sundry White Devils" and "Us's" live in an antagonistic relationship over access to "the Purple Flower of Life at its Fullest." While "most of the action takes place on the upper stage" where

[29] Ibid., 104.
[30] Marita Bonner, *Frye Street & Environs*,140-148.

the "Sundry White Devils" live around the hill on which the "Purple Flower of Life at its Fullest" rests, almost all of the dialogue takes place in the valley of "nowhere" where the "Us's" live. Although the barrier separating the "Sundry White Devils" from the "Us's" is so thin "a thought can drop you though it," the "Us's" are unable to break the barrier.[31] Here Bonner uses her work to point out two things. First, she highlights the common experience of exclusion for all "Us's" despite their various colors. Her broad references to color and also denotes the wider global spectrum of people struggling against white racism. Linking the "Us's" color coded diversity to their class status, she implies that neither provided relief from their places in Nowhere.

Bonner uses the dialogue of the Us's to suggest that the social and political philosophies of the older generation inhibited their collective actualization – a concept she echoes in "On Being Young – A Woman – and Colored," "A Sealed Pod," and her 1928 essay "The Young Blood Hungers." In all three pieces, Bonner expressed frustration with the seemingly passive approach to racism, the hypocritical religiosity of black church leaders, and the class prejudice embedded in black racial uplift efforts. The "Young blood," she argues, "cannot take God as the Old Blood Takes Him," nor could they live with "the Illusory Veils of Blind Misunderstandings and Blunderings" the older generations accepted.[32] These early strategies, she suggested, lent themselves to spurious dialogue, but little resolve for the grave situations of the working poor in black communities. Even more damning, was Bonner's suggestion that older black leaders

[31] Ibid., 30-47.
[32] Ibid., 30-47.

contributed to the oppression of successive generations by abusing their power and positions of authority. This is clearest in her references about the ways the Reverend Harris and two doctors remembered at Viollette's funeral "had known Viollette's sweetness and tenderness," and in the references to black church traditions that condemned black youth for "their too brief garments, too tinted cheeks – to fancy-free dance steps – too fancy-free Thoughts-About-Things."[33] Old generation's hyper-focus on black youth worldliness, she suggested, inhibited their ability to address or acknowledge the tragedies of violence, sexual assault and abuse their poor constituents faced.

Bonners sharp criticism of older African Americans was one of the pivotal components of her jeremiadic expression. In many ways, she suggests that the previous generation's rejection of modernity, was also a dismissal of their youth. More than this, the application of traditional answers, that is, "take God as we have taken Him," as supplication for the ills of urban black life rang hollow for Bonner and "the Young Blood [that] hungers." In this sense, the historic place of Christianity in black communities served as its own undoing. It undercut black revolutionary sentiment and action. Given this context, Bonner invoked the Jeremiad in a call to action echoed in much of her work. Resolving the issues of racism, sexism and the poverty it creates required a response of collective action. The undertone of *The Purple Flower* and "The Young Blood Hungers" are clearest in this sentiment. The consequence for America's injustices was revolution. "God must be sought in new ways," she asserted.[34] The loss of black life under American

[33] Ibid., 10.
[34] Ibid., 13.

oppression and racism, for Bonner, meant that violent revolution was eminent. Hence, she asked at the end of *The Purple Flower,* "Is it time yet?"[35]

Most striking about Bonner's jeremiad was its introspection. Although Bonner expressed the belief in a coming revolution, she wasn't speaking generally to American society. Rather, she called exclusively to an African American audience. Her use of the Jeremiad then was a call to black America –or Frye Street (black) as she described it–to search itself and respond out of a renewed sense of identity. As nearly all of her work showed, racism was pervasive; it functioned in and around black communities and destroyed the basic bonds of public and private life within them. Economic injustice furthered black inequality, she illustrated, and fostered an absurd color hierarchy among African Americans that sustained discord and circumvented political activism. It was not white America that needed to respond to the national injustices experienced by working class communities of color. Bonner's work pointed instead to African American people; they were responsible for resolving the issues that plagued their communities.

Bonner's use of the Jeremiad is marked by three reoccurring motifs. Similar to her nineteenth century foremothers, she viewed racial accountability as a quintessential component in black survival and progress: an ideal she sustained throughout her life in D.C. and later in Chicago as a devoted educator, community activist, wife and mother. Just as African-American Christians and churches had constructed the Jeremiah as a prophet who called the nations of Israel back to righteousness, admonishing them for

[35] Ibid.,46.

their adaptation of foreign gods and customs, so too did Bonner challenge her African American audience to abandon its self-destructive behaviors. Her essays, drama, and fiction work suggest that these were attitudes of greed, class prejudice, complacency and self-loathing. Here, her many examples of the deteriorating impacts of individualism associated with urban industrial life are useful.

Black labor conditions prove alienating and dissatisfying in all of Bonner's work. They also underscore the proliferation of social behaviors rejected by older black citizens, and black middle class communities. Left with few spaces or opportunities for leisure, confined in both by Jim Crow, and without the support of urban black churches, the African Americans in Bonner's narratives fold in dangerously on one another. In their desires to enjoy the freedoms they had at their disposal, her characters were careless and irresponsible. Since nearly all of her drama and fiction was about African American women, their foibles are pronounced. Whether they were single, married, mothers or daughters, the women in Bonner's literature lived troubling lives.

Mothers found it difficult to nurture and protect their children because they worked constantly. Bonner's depiction of Violette Aurora's mother is one example of this, in her devotion to work and faith, she is unable to protect her from the preying men in the church or her community. Similarly, the maternal figures in "Tin Can" and "Nothing New" are consumed by "church, work and God," but neither can save their children from the tragic ends that befall them.[36] In some instances, Bonner's female

[36] Ibid., 69.

characters eschewed the responsibilities of motherhood altogether—as in the case of Madie and her baby "Madie second" or Lucille and her neglected sons Robbie and Little Lou. Both women struggle to juggle the realities of poverty and motherhood, and each finds a means of escape. Madie relies heavily on her religious older neighbor as a babysitter, despite the fact that the woman ritually gives her baby cough syrup to put her to sleep. Lucille, on the other hand, demands that her sons stay indoors while she works as a prostitute in the upscale hotels across town. Even loving, doting, compassionate mothers like Bessie left their children ill-equipped to handle life, making them more vulnerable to white racism and more prone to racist violence.

Conversely, Bonner's youthful, single female characters were not heroes, though they were also not passive victims of oppression. They schemed against, cheated, gossiped about, deceived and mistreated one another. Each character capitalized on whatever life gave her—whether that was beauty or simply fair skin—even when that was detrimental to the people they loved. Bonner illustrated this in the character of Lucille, whose free wielding sexual liaisons lead to her death. It is also exemplified in the insensitive character of Nola, in her short story "Reap It As You Sow It," whose open relationship with a married man leads to the death of his wife and the abandonment of his child. [37] Bonner's depictions make clear that without a sense of accountability for the community, no collective uplift was possible. This was especially important for black women, whose dual responsibilities as linchpins in black communities, and laborers in

[37] Ibid., 268-279.

and outside of it, meant that they were especially vulnerable to the crushing existence of urban working class life. Thus, the second motif of Bonner's jeremiad was an emphasis on the equal inclusion of women in the development of black socio-political uplift.

Although much of Bonner's work centers on the realities of black women, men often appear as brutish, possessive, overbearing and violent. We see these characteristics in the male characters of *The Purple Flower* who dominate the discussion and ignore "The Young Girl –Sweet" who interjects, "I want to talk too!" Yet it is also visible in the *Exit: An Illusion* and "The Prison Bound." The men in both narratives are calloused and brooding, with little concern for their lovers. A mirror of early twentieth century realities, Bonner portrays a world in which black women are sexual objects for their men and marginalized in their communities. She also points out the ways in which black patriarchal attitudes ended in tragedy for black women and children. This is most clear in *Exit* but is also visible in each of the preacher characters that appear in several of Bonner's stories. All of the ministers in her stories feign strict adherence to biblical principle, but each one is corrupt, greedy and adulterous. Nonetheless, Bonner also highlighted the ways in which black women sexualize themselves to advance socially or to survive. A consequence of the male dominant and sexist society in which they live, all attempts also lead to tragedy.

In contrast, Bonner uses her female character's resistance to black male dominance as a means of destabilizing their victimization. Even when their lives are cut short, the women in her stories make choices. They challenge social and economic dependencies and they express their sovereignty through sexual freedom. Black women's

agency as individual actors in Bonner's work implicates the strength and possibility of African American women—even in marginalized spaces. Even so, her characters' lives in the alienating urban north limits their agency, their potential, and their ability to see themselves as they were. For her, the strength and potential of black women was the source of their own sacredness. Recognizing their own infinite potential, however, required deep introspection and actualization through political activism. Consequently, the first two themes hinged on the third: self-discovery.

While nineteenth century black women Jeremiahs called for behavioral shifts that indicated respectability, their twentieth century heirs called for new modes of thought that would prompt different strategies to resist oppression. The discourse of holiness worked to undermine the stigma attached to black racial identity by rejecting the prevailing ideologies of their inferiority, hyper-sexuality and criminality. Respectability through education and marriage destabilized the negative public representations of black womanhood in the public sphere. Yet, as Bonner illustrated in her work, holiness had not produced civic equality, nor had it promoted healthy and balanced gender relationships within black churches and communities.

Through her characters, she illuminated the ways in which black churches mirrored the oppressive conditions of the society in which they existed. In one of her sharpest critiques, Bonner used the character Madie, from "Drab Rambles," to illustrate this point. Having suffered a sexual assault and subsequently dismissed from her job, Madie "bore her baby in a charity ward, thanked God for the kindness of a North, and thanked God she was not back in Culvert when Madie was born, for she would have been

turned out of church."[38] For women, in particular, churches could be very abusive spaces, as well as they could be ardent supporters of unfruitful gender biased traditions. Certainly, given the hardships of Holiness-Pentecostal women and those in many black mainstream denominations, Bonner's criticism was exceptionally astute. As a result, her use of the Jeremiad called for a rediscovery of the racial and gendered self.

Bonner's implicit and explicit references to self-discovery were two-fold. In a secular sense, it required that African Americans accept complexity and plurality as the basis of modern racial identity. Her portrayals of black ethnic diversity, and the ethnic diversity of the urban communities in which they lived, reinforced her contention that all people were connected. They were, in fact, all Africans—all colors were different shades of black. As she mused in the opening vignette of "Drab Rambles," blackness was kaleidoscopic and infinite. "I am all men tinged in brown. I am all men with a touch of black. I am you and I am myself."[39] All cultures, therefore, suffered because of their investment in America's racial hierarchy. Lived diversity, therefore, was essential to promote equality. When "the pod was sealed…and the peas did not touch each other," everyone lost.[40] In this way, Bonner demonstrated that simple answers would not meet the needs of a complex, urbanized, industrialized society. Hence, they could not resolve the multidimensional experiences of race.

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[38] Ibid., 98.
[39] Ibid., 92.
[40] Ibid., 148.

In a spiritual sense, undoing the harmful result of race for African Americans in Bonner's fiction and nonfiction entailed a new way of conceptualizing God. Primarily, this new vision no longer perceived the Divine in exclusively male terms. There was room, for example, to suggest that "perhaps Buddha is a woman," or to link womanhood to infinite wisdom and understanding.[41] Bonner's first essay toyed lightly with these themes, but her later work laid them out insistently. Her play, *The Purple Flower*, for example links the story of man's genesis—or rather his regenesis—to a woman. Having heard from God that the only way to reach the Purple Flower would be in the dust, an old man Us calls for some. The dust is subsequently provided by an older woman who has kept it gathered in her bag and provides it for collection in a pot. The use of this imagery invokes powerful imagery of godhood and creative power.

Decentering the importance of the Judeo-Christian God, who Bonner implies is a white construction, is another central component in reconceptualizing the Divine. Bonner utilizes her characters' tragic lives, and the hypocrisies of their faith traditions to underscore this point. Her essay, "The Young Blood Hungers," provides some of her clearest criticisms of traditional black Christianity in its contention that black youth would no longer accept "the Old Blood's God demanding incessant supplication—calling for constant fear."[42] Instead, Bonner maintained in much of her work the importance of self-reflection and the need to see the self as God—not as his agent. Full self-reflection, she argued, would allow "life to flow into you and not by you." It would prepare black

[41] Ibid., 7.
[42] Ibid., 10.

people, and women in particular, for the moment when "time is ripe [to] swoop to your feet—at your full height…ready to go where? Why…wherever God motions."[43] Bonner's suggestion here indicates that God might well be black women's self-direction.

Bonner also noted that the African American youth of her time longed "for the God they called Jehovah when Christ was yet to come." While their dissatisfaction with tradition frustrated the previous generation, she asserted that the cultural shift they saw among black youth was "God seeking God." Accordingly, the incessant hunger depicted throughout her essay is driven by black youths whose "feet stumble in the drunken mazes of seeking to find Self." As she noted in "Nothing New," if young African Americans "looked deeper—deeper than themselves—they might have seen God." Hence, Bonner's use of the Jeremiad insisted "God must be sought in new ways."[44] In short, her jeremiadic call required a vision of the Divine that gave full agency to African Americans, particularly to women. This vision, in turn would bolster the political agency in black communities by underscoring their will.

* * *

Zora Neale Hurston was born in Notasulga, Alabama in 1891. Hoping for better land and economic opportunity, her parents relocated to Eatonville, Florida where she lived most of her life. In Eatonville, the Hurston found greater success than they anticipated. Zora's father John became a Baptist minister, and later served as the town's

[43] Ibid., 7-8.
[44] Ibid., 13;76.

mayor. Hurston discovered she had a gift for writing in school, and her abilities landed her amidst the twentieth century's leading black writers during her time at Howard University. Her life long career was as complicated as her writing was dynamic. An ethnographer, folklorist, cultural anthropologist and writer, Hurston defies traditional labels.[45] The rich imagery and unorthodox approach she took to story-telling have given earned her a central spot in academic studies on the New Negro Movement, the Harlem Renaissance and literary black feminism.

Hurston's time in D.C. was as fruitful for her as Bonner's. She took on several mentors and sponsors, and befriended the most celebrated and controversial writers of the New Negro Renaissance. Emerging in a moment when many black writers were poised to use their work as a means of socio-political propaganda, Hurston's was a bit of an anomaly. Rather than tell white America about their wrongs, or vindicate black America through her writing, she opted to preserve rural southern culture as it was. Similar to Bonner, she wrote in the dialect of rural southern black citizens and she focused on the world of the working poor. Unlike Bonner, however, whose position as a married, middle class mother in Chicago gave her some distance from the contentious atmosphere of Harlem, Hurston was a struggling intellectual stymied by the open rebukes her work received from men like Richard Wright and W.E.B. Du Bois. For many, Hurston's work simply wasn't political enough. Yet, Hurston's work was indeed political and it was

[45] Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on A Road* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

premised on clear choices she made—albeit within the parameters of her sponsor's approval—about what deserved attention in African American life.

For Hurston, urbanization meant that the traditions, customs, and experiences of black southerners were gradually being displaced by those developed in the nation's urban centers. Arguably, many African Americans embraced this as they moved into cities that mocked their country accents and seemingly backward, ignorant mannerisms. Yet Hurston viewed this as a potentially incalculable loss. As she spent her entire life illustrating that the culture mecca of many American black traditions were rooted in the South. The loss of southern black culture was the erasure of the very foundation of black racial identity and consequently all of its surviving Africanisms. Accordingly, Hurston's fiction and non-fiction work aimed to preserve as much of the black South as possible.

Like Marita Bonner, Hurston was troubled by the impacts of racism in black communities, and she highlighted this by exploring its outgrowth of colorism. Her award-winning play, *Color Struck,* cast an interesting new light on colorism through the main character, Emmaline. The beautiful Emmaline and her lover John are the play's central characters. Their infamous cake walk earns Jacksonville bragging rights and the prize cake each year, but their constant bickering drives the narrative forward. Despite John's doting on Emmaline, and his assurances that "nobody can hold a candle to [her] in nothing," she insists "every time [he] sees a yaller face, [he] takes a chance."[46] Emmaline's paranoia about John's wondering eye reaches a climax in the play's second

[46] Jennifer Burton and Zora Neale Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston, Eulalie Spence, Marita Bonner, and Others,* 1st ed. (New York: K.G. Hall & Co, 1996), 81.

scene when she refuses to enter the cake walk competition with John out of fear that the lighter skinned women in the room will draw him away from her. She attempts unsuccessfully to convince John to leave with her, and is devastated when the "half white" Effie takes her place on the dance floor with John. In her despair, Emmaline declares, "The whole world is got a sign on it. Wanted: Light colored. Us blacks was made for cobble stones."[47]

While Emmaline's fears are largely unfounded, Hurston uses the dynamic on the train ride to the cake walk to highlight the ways light skin color is favored among the men and the women from Jacksonville. When Effie, a mulatto woman from Jacksonville, enters the train, her peers are surprised she is without a partner. For the men on the train, this is an opportunity, and Hurston makes clear Effie's position as an object of black male desire and black female adoration. A young man stands and tips his hat to her, noting that she was "lookin' jes lak a rose" and inquiring about her absent lover, Sam. Effie explains "a man dat don't buy me nuthin' tuh put in mah basket, ain't goin' wid me to no cake walk." The man, whose girlfriend Ada has yet to board the train, declares that he has always been "sweet" on Effie, but retreats before Ada catches him. Hence, Emmaline's insistence that "yeller wenches…gets everything they wants."[48]

In the play's final scene, we find that John really does love Emmaline. Despite moving up North and marrying another woman, John returns to the South to find Emmaline when she dies. Finding her alone and in the dark, he declares in his love for

[47] Ibid., 88.
[48] Ibid., 80-87.

her and his intention to marry her. John is elated to see Emmaline and confesses that she has never left his mind, but she is reluctant to trust him. Still, he insists that he would make her happy and move her back up North with him—despite having learned that she now has a small very white child. Wanting to prove his love for her, he tells Emmaline that he will care for the child as his own and they will be a family. The little girl, however, is seriously ill and John urges Emmaline to get a doctor. Emmaline leaves reluctantly, but returns in a rage when she finds John giving the dehydrated child some water and wiping her forehead. In a rage, she attempts to fight with him, and he leaves distraught, realizing that Emmaline doesn't love herself enough to be loved.

Hurston's play inverts the tragic mulatto theme that emerged in many black writer's stories during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Though Effie is described as beautiful, she presents no real threat to Emmaline's relationship. It is Emmaline's personal sense of inferiority, because of her darker complexion, that fuels her insecurity. And despite the praise of her peers, Emmaline believes her complexion will always deny her a chance at happiness. Although it is unclear, Hurston suggests that the death of Emmaline's daughter is also linked to her self-loathing and her jealousy of John's seemingly unusual embrace for a child he just met. For Hurston, the issues of color prejudice in southern black communities may have been linked to white racism, but it was sustained by African Americans' embrace of their own inferiority. This is also clear through the character, Janie, in Hurston's celebrated novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. While Janie embraces blackness, and finds comfort and refuge in black communities, she is scorned and mistreated by black men and women. Here again,

however, Hurston avoids the tragic mulatto archetype and Janie's defiance of the color hierarchy mark her as a heroic character. Even so, Janie does not escape the tragedies of race and poverty, nor do any of Hurston's characters.[49]

Hurston's characters exemplify the cycles of poverty that plagued rural black communities. They were poor, illiterate, and ignorant about most things outside of their own towns. In this way, they fulfilled many of the worst stereotypes about black people. Hence, it is clear why Hurston received such resistance from writers like Du Bois and Wright. The worlds she introduced were born out of the legacy of slavery that black intellectuals were working hard to overcome. Still, Hurston's characters are resilient. What they lack in poverty they make up for in simple, straightforward wisdom and the problems they encounter are overcome by returning to the simple wisdoms that undergird her storylines.

Her short story, "The Six Pence," captures just this in its portrayal of a loving couple, Joe and Missie May, whose lives are turned upside down when a seemingly wealthy man seduces the naïve Missie May. The couple's relationship is playful, joyous, and almost childlike—marked by a weekly game the two play in which Joe throws silver dollar coins into the house before rushing in with other treats and surprises for Missie May. The two exchange playful banter during the evening and dote on one another, happy with the simple pleasures they have in each other. When Joe announces the arrival of a new ice cream parlor in the small town, opened by "Mister Otis D. Slemmons of

[49] Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (New York: HarperCollins Books, 2014); Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: HarperCollins Books, 2008).

spots and places," Missie May is excited to see it. Joe, however, is keen to give Missie May yet another treat and show her off to Slemmons. The reader learns that Slemmons has wowed the men in his parlor earlier in the day by flaunting gold coins, jewelry, and teeth—and by sharing stories of his trysts with black and white women in the northern cities where he lived.[50]

Joe's fascination with Slemmons compels him to take Missie May out and display his own treasure. In his haste, however, Joe does not calculate his wife's intrigue over the man's gold, nor does he anticipate Slemmons' intention to seduce his wife. When Joe finds them together he is distraught, and nearly beats Slemmons to death. In her own frenzy, Missie May explains by telling Joe "he said he was gointer giver me dat gold money and he jes kept on after me."[51] The couple live distantly together, for months and though they do not speak about it, both realize that the gold money and jewelry carried by Slemmons was plated. When Missie May gives birth to a child that is undeniably Joe's, they reconcile fully and Joe is able to spend the gilded coin that reminded them both of their ignorance and of Missie May's infidelity.

Joe and Missie May reflect many of the stereotypes about black southerners, and Hurston offers nothing in the way of explanation or excuse for their action. Their voices stand alone. Nonetheless, the couple in the "Gilded Six Pence" offers a powerful lesson. Their childlike infatuation with Slemmons' money, his northern travels and his flashy

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[50] Zora N. Hurston, "The Gilded Six-Pence," *Black Writers of America*, 1st ed., eds. Richard K. Barksdale and Kenneth Kinnamon (New York: Macmillan, 1972),
[51] Ibid., 617.

clothing, nearly destroyed them. Yet, the silence between them after Missie May's affair opens the space and opportunity for them to mature and strengthens their bond. Slemmons is, after all, no richer than they—and perhaps poorer because he has no one while they have each other. Consequently, Slemmons' coin become a symbol of the couple's foolishness and neither wants it. Hence, Joe attempts to leave it on the kitchen table where Missie May will find it. She, in turn, puts it back in his pants pockets where he will be unable to avoid it. It is only after they have both rejected the coin that they realize it is gold plated.

Hurston's stories demonstrate that both racism and poverty in the South were linked to the legacy of slavery, as well as they do underscore the deleterious impacts of this legacy on the relationships between black men and women. Hurston's work paralleled Bonner's in its interrogation of black patriarchal attitudes and middle class Christian values. In her ethnography and her fiction Hurston's also mirrored Bonner's juxtaposition of black male patriarchy and middle class Christian ideals with the tragedies of black life. Her female characters are nearly always embroiled in a battle over their autonomy. In her first novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and her acclaimed *Their Eyes Were Watching God* we see this clearly. The narrative of John Pearson in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* details his struggle to overcome alienation and poverty. His self- discovery and call from God elevate his social status and garner the love of his wife, Lucy. Yet John grows arrogant and calloused, leaving Lucy for another woman, and avoiding her until she is about to die. John's refusal to heed Lucy's warnings of his impending downfall foreshadow the undoing of both characters.

After his wife's death, John learns that he has been under the control of a conjurer and his lover Hattie, whom he married. Hattie's flamboyant use of conjure destroys his position in Eatonville and ruins the couple's relationship. He leaves her, but does not learn from his mistakes, and his attitudes about women do not change. John remarries near the end of the story, but his incessant sexual affairs do not end. His demise comes in the end of the story when John's car is hit by a train as he drives home from a secret meeting with his lover.[52]

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* the main character Janie struggles against the legacy of slavery through the alienating social attitudes of those around her. Not white enough to pass, or black enough to be accepted by the other African Americans in her community, she is overrun by her longing for love and community. In an attempt to divert Janie from engaging with the wrong black men, and having to endure the intensive labor of most rural black women, her grandmother Nanny gives her away in marriage to a man considerably older, Logan Killicks. Janie is confined and further isolated in her first marriage, but finds momentary reprieve in her elopement with Joe Starks.

Janie's marriage to Joe, however, is even more repressive. Joe is jealous, possessive, controlling, arrogant, and insensitive. His insistence that Janie remain separate from the working-class men and women of their rural town make her a source of scorn and extract the remaining joy of her youth. Janie frees herself of Joe's tyranny when she openly rebukes him for his selfishness, jealousy and greed, and reasserts her

[52] Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (New York: HarperCollins Books, 2009).

autonomy. She realizes her youthful aspirations in the aftermath of Joe's death when she meets Tea Cake. Though he is considerably younger than Janie, Tea Cake loves her intensely and ushers her into the welcoming community she has hoped for her entire life. Even when rabies consumes him, and violent possessive fits ensue, Janie does not lose her love for him or her sense of community. Rather, she sees herself more clearly as she watched and waited for God. Janie's triumph is symbolic of the deep wisdom, strength, and beauty Hurston highlights in many of her female characters. Most certainly, Janie's strength, and her ability to tell her own story, reflect Hurston's personal victories over racial tensions, gender bias, and her own struggles to find community support among her critical intellectual peers.[53]

Despite the harsh realities of black rural life, Hurston located and celebrated African American resiliency and complexity. Both qualities emerge as the central pieces of rural black survival in the South. They also provide a clear perspective on the links between African American culture and continental African belief and practice. In her personal and professional life, Hurston was adamant about the importance of African cultural continuities. A student of Franz Boaz, and a contemporary of Melville Herskovits, Hurston's work underscored the growing early twentieth century literature that rejected academic assertions about the loss of African culture in the western world because of slavery.[54] On the contrary, Hurston's work illuminated the fundamental ways in which American black culture derived from and survived through Africanisms. Yet her

[53] See Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: HarperCollins Books, 2009)
[54] See Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 261-268.

literature also works to acknowledge and celebrate the distinct markers of southern Afro-American culture. Hurston's effort to highlight the narratives of marginalized southern African Americans through her stories ultimately served as the basis for her use of the jeremiad.

Like Bonner, Hurston's jeremiad was also three-fold. In one sense, it rejected Eurocentric aesthetics and ideals, arguing that they were foreign and unnatural to African descended people. African Americans' embrace of these ideals, created internal crises and fostered harmful intra-racial dynamics. Hurston's attitudes on this are most pronounced in her ethnographic work on African Americans of the deep South and the Caribbean. Her essay, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," for example, delineates the fundamental differences between black and white linguistic patterns and link each to diverging epistemologies. "The stark, trim phrases of the Occident," she wrote, "seem too bare for the voluptuous child of the sun." Hurston contended that the simplicity and rigidness of standard English was ill-fit for the dynamic linguistic traditions of African people. Therefore, she emphasized the artistic use of language among African Americans and the ways in which this infused meaning into the English language for them. Likewise, she laid out the links between black creativity and folk tradition, art, dance, and spirituality. "Whatever the Negro does of his own volition," she declared, "he embellishes."[55] Hurston even quipped that "the beauty of the Old Testament does not exceed that of a Negro prayer." Just as African Americans felt the need to creatively use

[55] Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1997), 53-54.

language, Hurston asserted, they were also naturally keen to embellish decoration and art for added dramatic effect. People of color, she noted, retained an affinity for paradox, angularity, syncopation, and asymmetry in their movements, art, music and dance. The complex and ornate form of their cultural expression, she suggested, was a reflection of their own layered identities.

Hurston's unpacking of African cultural traditions in black communities was a reminder of their originality and creative genius—a reminder she believed was necessary given the number of African Americans who seemingly eschewed their own cultural richness in favor of white middle class ideals. Hurston conceded that African Americans mimicked white culture to some extent, but argued this was merely a practice of humor and satire. Even so, she was deeply offended by those who embraced the racist attitudes of white Americans, explaining "the group of Negroes who slavishly imitate is small…the self-despisement lies in a middle class who scorns to do or be anything Negro." "The truly cultured Negro," she assured, "scorns him, and the Negro 'farthest down'…likes his own things best."[56] Thus, Hurston rejected the primacy of white ideals and lambasted African Americans who did not do the same. Here too, she paralleled the sentiment found in Bonner's work. Where Bonner called for black people to reject white racist attitudes in their own communities, Hurston added that they should reject whiteness altogether. Both women maintained that true black racial identity rested on Afrocentric

[56] Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*, 59.

ways of knowing and being. Hurston and Bonner also suggested that without authentic black identity, African American communities would deteriorate.

Extending this idea, Hurston's use of the jeremiad embraced Pan-African identity and spirituality. If black people wanted to achieve equality, she suggested, they needed to preserve the foundations of their culture. Implicit in this assertion was a rejection of traditional Christianity. More so than Bonner, Hurston advocated African derived spirituality as the only natural and redeeming form of sanctity. This was particularly important for Hurston because of the way it freed African American women. Hurston's emphasis on conjure practice, Voodoo and Hoodoo, were central themes in nearly all of her work. In her portrayal of rural southern priestess and deity, "Mother Catherine," she notes the grandeur and ease of the women whose religious commune houses images of snakes and a placard that reads "speak so you can speak again." Mother Catherine is witty, compassionate, discerning, independent and maternal. Her theology, like Bishop Robinson's, emphasizes the importance of female leadership, motherhood and the ability of women to house and represent the divine. Hurston quotes the woman as saying, "A womb was what God made in the beginning, and out of that womb was born Time and all that fills up space."[57]

Hurston also offered subtle and explicit critiques of black churches. While the divine call to preach, or serve, is frequently the saving grace for the men in her stories, the gospel itself is never enough to protect the women around them from abusive violent

[57] Ibid., 26.

whims or sexual coercion. John Pearson, for example is portrayed as a respected and gifted preacher, but his private life is wrought by vanity, adultery and pride. Yet Hurston added to her critique of black church social practices, an astute interrogation of its foundational charismatic demonstration. In her description of shouting she noted, "there can be little doubt that shouting is a survival of the African 'possession' by the gods. In Africa, it is sacred to the priesthood and acolytes, in America it has become generalized."[58] Given the negative associations many black Christians maintained about African culture and spirit possession outside of Christianity, Hurston's commentary was somewhat damning. Extending this, Hurston wrote that Holiness-Pentecostal churches were fundamentally African, particularly in the elaborate demonstrations of their music, preaching and shouting styles. Thus, she noted, "the congregation is restored to its primitive alters under the new name of Christ."[59]

Most gripping, however, was Hurston's insistence that "the Negro is not a Christian really." Extending this, she wrote, "the Negro has not been Christianized as extensively as is generally believed. The great masses are standing before their pagans alters and calling old gods by a new name."[60] In this way, Hurston's comments about black church traditions bolstered her primary theme of complexity. Not only were people of color culturally complex, their spiritual practice and expression was also multifaceted. Freedom then was also premised on an open embrace of a multilayered African spirituality. Hurston reinforced this through the illustration of conjure and Hoodoo

[58] Ibid., 91.
[59] Ibid., 56; 103.
[60] Ibid.

workers that retain as much power and respect as the Christian leaders in their towns. Yet this tense relationship was also evident in Mother Catherine, who "takes her stand as an equal with Christ," while also representing "the beautiful spirit."[61] The overlapping themes of black godhood, and of black women's divinity in particular, permeate Hurston's work and point to the final theme in her use of the jeremiad.

Finally, Hurston shared with Bonner a sense that self-discovery was the only route to a meaningful and truly equal existence in the United States. Hence, nearly all of her ethnographic collections and many of her stories aimed to support the theory that African culture was not lost in slavery, that its continued survivals made all the difference for African American people. This is evident in her depiction of "Uncle Monday," a hoodoo worker feared and respected by black and white citizens who had come from nowhere and had no apparent roots or family lineage that anyone knew.[62] Uncle Monday's powerful spiritual knowledge give him the ultimate freedom, and he is unbothered and unmoved by the petty events of the rural town in which he appears. Similarly, Mother Catherine's interracial commune is unfettered by the cares of the outside world and her power as a priestess and sacred being grant her freedom from the racial and gender constraints of the world.

Yet the theme of self-discovery is most evident in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. An advocate and student of Haitian Voodoo, Hurston uses Janie to symbolize the black women's godhood. Janie is, in effect, the Haitian goddess Erzulie, the duplicitous

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[61] Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*, 27.
[62] Ibid., 30.

goddess of love, beauty and fortune, jealousy, vengeance and discord. In Janie's narrative, each of these plays an important role, and each one hastens her personal awakening. Yet Janie is also representative of Erzulie's physical depictions, one light and the other dark, whose dual representations mirror the dichotomy of her personality. Janie's life is enmeshed by her own duplicity as a mixed raced woman and her struggle to find a place of acceptance. Janie, like Erzuli, is also unsuccessfully married three times, and each marriage bears its mark on her. Still, she is triumphant, as Erzulie is triumphant in the pantheon of Voodoo gods. She dreams, hopes, and loves as women do, and she dwells in water. Comparatively, while Janie does not dwell in water, her experiences with the hurricane in the final chapters of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are transformative. It is in the aftermath of this crisis, that she finds herself and loses Tea Cake.[63]

The symbolism in Hurston's novel indicates a dual meaning for her title, and suggests that Janie's look to God may really have been an introspective journey. Janie's silence during her trial for Tea Cake's murder is equally duplicitous. Is she silent because she believes she will not receive a fair trial? Or, is her silence comparable to the "quiet" described in Bonner's "On Being Young—Colored—And A Woman?" Certainly, she capitalized on the time she has after the trial to tell her story, and her remembrance is, in itself, an act of self-discovery. Janie redeems her story by telling it on her own terms and she solidifies the importance of this process of reclamation by encouraging her friend to

[63] For a discussion on Hurston and Erzulie references see Elizabeth J. West, *African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction: Threaded Visions of Community, Memory, Nature and Being* (New York: Lexington Books, 2011). See also Jean Joseph Jean, *God in The Haitian Voodoo Religion* (Pittsburgh.: Dorrance Pub., 2004).

share it widely. Consequently, the more clearly Janie sees herself, the more she sheds the social constraints that have limited her growth throughout the narrative.

Through Janie's character, Hurston aligns with Bonner in the assertion that self-discovery is the only means of attaining freedom. Ultimately, Hurston's work, like Bonners was a call for black America to embrace a new vision of itself, predicated on the ancient traditions of Africa and the eastern world. It was equally a rebuke of black men and women who internalized the racism of white Americans. In their own replications of white racist attitudes and Christian middle class ideals, Bonner and Hurston pointed out, African Americans inflicted generational harm on each other and augmented black suffering. Reversing this required self-actualization and collective mobility predicated on community accountability.

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Marita Bonner and Zora Neal Hurston reflect the significant changes the twentieth century produced in the use of black women's jeremiadic discourse. Both women emphasized complexity as the epitome of black racial identity, making room for a pluralistic understanding of blackness for the rest of the century. Hurston and Bonner also reinforced the idea that black identity was linked to the divine, that black women specifically were sources of the divine. For both women, Eurocentric epistemology was harmful to people of color, and each writer rejected it in her own way. Additionally, Bonner and Hurston advocated the celebration of and responsibility to find the true self through alternative spirituality and introspection. Only through self-discovery could black

women free themselves of race, class and gender oppression in the United States. Bonner and Hurston's jeremiadic calls then challenged other black women to remember, reclaim and redeem themselves. And though it was not answered fully in their lifetimes, these calls were not lost on subsequent generations. The works of Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, and many others answered—providing the nation with another generation of black women Jeremiahs and carrying their traditions into the twenty-first century.[64]

[64] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983); Toni Cade Bambara, *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: New American Library, 1970); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

Conclusion

> *i sat up one nite walkin a boardin house screamin/ cryin/ the ghost of another woman who waz missin what i waz missin i wanted to jump up outta my bones & be done wit myself leave me alone & go on in the wind it waz too much i fell into a numbness til the only tree i cd see took me up in her branches held me in the breeze made me dawn dew that chill at daybreak the sun wrapped me up swingin rose light everywhere the sky laid over me like a million men i waz cold/ i waz burnin up/ a child & endlessly weavin garments for the moon wit my tears i found god in myself & i loved her/ i loved her fiercely.*[1]

I began this journey by interrogating the concept of black godhood. As an avid student and scholar of black messianic studies and Hip Hop, I knew this concept well. How did African American people (and by people I thought of men first) used this idea to survive the racist and oppressive systems of the United States? Furthermore, what was the impact of that discursive tool for black people and the nation? I assumed that blackness was largely ontological – though I would never deny its material results – and I was disappointed and surprised to find that women were significantly missing from what I viewed as a revolutionary rhetoric. I searched unsuccessfully for them, until I realized that I was looking in the wrong places.

My error began in assuming – like many do I suppose – that racial oppression united black men and women indefinitely. If racism is a common problem for all people of African descent in the United States, I assumed, women's issues would also be articulated in the language of the spiritual and the divine used to contest racist public

[1] Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When The Rainbow Is Enuf*, 1st ed. (New York: Scribner, 2014).

discourse. And yet, they weren't. I took from this a very serious lesson about American exceptionalism and its deep impacts on racial identity. For one, I concluded that common circumstances of oppression did not always equate to a deeper understanding of intersectional oppression or even a compassionate posture on them. I also surmised that African American people are just as susceptible to the powerful scripts about their nation as any other group in the United States. While the black narrative is a counter to the American mantra of freedom and democracy, it is also a story of overcoming unwieldy hurdles. In this way, black citizens too had plenty of reason to subscribe to the powerful myth of America's exceptional and sacred place in the world. If any group of Americans could claim to be exceptional, certainly black citizens could.

In my search for the godhood of black women, I began my story here. How do black women talk about themselves in the public sphere? How do they imagine themselves in a nation that ritually mocks, attacks and rejects them? As I wrote the proposal for this dissertation, the readiest reference for me was the emerging social media trend #BlackGirlMagic, a celebration of all diasporic black women in the United States and beyond. "Magic" as it has been used by the women of color who employ it denotes several of the things I hoped to capture. In one sense, it symbolized black women's historic resistance to public deprecation, racial stigma, and class divides. It also denoted the allure of the unknown, the irresistible and the indescribable. #BlackGirlMagic also encompassed the undying spirit of black women, their insistence on redefining and reshaping public discourse—and even creating a discourse—to include themselves in national debates about civil liberty and humanitarianism.

In another sense, #BlackGirlMagic spoke to the generational modes of survival sustained in black communities through the unseen and unspoken. The term "magic," that is, signifies traditions of spirituality and self-discovery often dismissed as taboo or as superstition in many mainstream communities. Certainly, the very use of the word magic, in connection to black women, also played on the deep and ambivalent popular culture references that link African descended people – and specifically women – to the occult, superstition and charismatic religiosity. In American pop culture, the connection between black women and the supernatural is often flouted through comedic parody or crass satire. Nonetheless, the intersections of black spirituality developed throughout the western world and the constructions of black womanhood that parallel them are the crux of the gendered epistemologies that undergird black women's strategies of resistance to social, political and economic marginalization.

I thought too of the cultural worship of pop star Beyoncé – affectionately called Queen Bey by her devoted international "Bee-hive." Even now, I am reminded of her powerful 2017 Grammy performance, in which she wore a gold costume and crown to invoke the imagery of Saint Mary and the Yoruba goddess of fertility Oshun – while also singing two of the songs from her most radically political album to date, *Lemonade.*[2] Beyoncé's performance further cements her as an international superstar, but it also exemplifies black women's use of their Jeremiad in the public forum. At a time when public concern over police brutality, incarceration rates, and political corruption have

[2] "Beyoncé's Grammy Performance Made The Internet Lose Its Mind," Time.Com, 2017, http://time.com/4668455/grammys-2017-beyonce-performance/.

surged, black women continue to rely on the Jeremiad developed by their foremothers. In her performance, and most certainly in her support of the Black Lives Matter campaign and other community based activism, Beyoncé warns the nation about its racism, yet she also echoes the call for a return to the divine self, found in black women's modernist literature during the twentieth century.

Beyond the most contemporary examples of black women's expressions of the Jeremiad, I thought of even earlier expressions. Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls*, Maya Angelou's *And Still I Rise*, Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye and Sula* all encompassed the same powerful imagery of protest and lamentation.[3] In every sense, the imagery and the language of the Jeremiad was there, but it differed necessarily from traditional espousals because of gender, historical context and class. Still, black women's Jeremiad is consistent and powerful enough to sustain a presence in the public forum. The symbolism of black women as sacred or divine beings who use their creative intellectual traditions to challenge traditional notions about gender, race, class, citizenship, and faith is so powerful and present, I was initially surprised that I hadn't noticed it before. More

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[3] See Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf: A Choreopoem* (New York: Collier Books, 1989); Maya Angelou, *And Still I Rise*. (New York: Random House, 1978); Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983); Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Vintage Books, 2016); Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973).

importantly, I wondered what its origins were? When did black women begin speaking about themselves in this way? My research carried me back into the nation's own self construction, and that is where I began my story.

Reading about the American Jeremiad in the work of Perry Miller and Sacvan Bercovitch, I found that black women had their own errand to accomplish.[4] They arrived in the United States carrying only their memories of an African past, and were forced to forge an understanding of themselves that pieced together the fragments of their identities as Africans and Americans. What they produced is nothing short of amazing. The experiences of black women in the United States forged a jeremiadic tradition that broke with orthodox conceptions. Theirs was necessarily more fluid and amorphous than its masculine counterpart because of black women's marginal place in American society. African American women's jeremiad was also more malleable because their places of resistance often rely on available spaces in the public sphere. That is, the constraints of gender and race for black women isolated their use of the jeremiad to social and political spaces where they were more visible and could subsequently ferment collective activism.

The spaces for African American women to voice their frustrations with the social, political and economic oppression that shaped their lives were very few in number during the Antebellum period. Yet the ideological underpinnings of the Second Great Awakening and the American Revolution helped to forge a powerful discourse for black

[4] See Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939); Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956); Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

women leaders to challenge this oppression. Nonetheless, racialized sexism in American society made it difficult for black women intellectuals to challenge democratic inequalities in the public sphere. The expansion of slavery and the negative stigma attached to black female identity meant that African American women were constantly working to undermine stereotypes about themselves.[5]

For women like Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, and Zilpha Elaw, this meant that their public writing and oratory was permeated by a language that portrayed them as spiritually pure. Each of these women relied on spiritual discourse to remind the nation of its importance as a global leader of republican virtue. Rehearsing the larger national narrative of their moment, which described the United States as a nation ordained by Divine providence, Stewart, Truth, Lee and Elaw criticized the country for its complacency with the institution of slavery and the oppression of free black people. More than this, however, each of these women argued that the country's unwillingness to acknowledge the sexual assaults on free and enslaved black women was a spiritual blight on the nation. And in the tradition of Jeremiah, they each asserted that there would be divine consequences for the inequalities that pervaded American society. In their discourse, Stewart, Truth, Lee and Elaw laid the foundation of African American women's jeremiad, tying together the powerful language of American democratic ideals with its underlying belief in Judeo-Christian values.[6]

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[5] See Patricia Morton, Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

[6] See David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

In the aftermath of the American Civil War, black women continued to face racism and sexism, and their lives in the North and South were marked by Jim Crow racism and segregation. Freedom changed their contexts, but did not greatly improve their socio-political circumstances. Black women, in particular, struggled to secure better living and working conditions that did not mirror historic patterns of slave labor. Consequently, African American women intellectuals and activists drew on the jeremiadic tradition of Stewart, Truth, Lee and Elaw, keeping issues of racial and gender oppression at the fore of their national movements. Churches remained pivotal in to the success of these moments, giving women like Frances Harper, Ida B. Wells, Mary Terrell, and Anna Julia Cooper spaces to organize other black women and to speak publicly. The larger Temperance Movement was also useful, and for many black women, it offered interracial networks of support and larger national platforms for public speaking.[7] Similar to the African American women jeremiahs of the Antebellum period, women like Harper, Wells, Cooper, and Terrell relied on the language of purity to substantiate their calls for socio-political justice in the United States, even as they also used this language to reinforce their own notions of God represented through them. The black women leaders of the late nineteenth century also enacted their jeremiadic discourse through civic engagement meant to advance racial progress and compel African

[7] Bettye Collier-Thomas and Anna D. Gordon *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts press, 1997).

American communities to redefine their public image through middle class Christian education and etiquette.[8]

The intellectual and civic activism of African American women leaders during the late nineteenth century, remained important at the beginning of the twentieth. Indeed, as African American people began to move away from the rural South and into the major metropolitan regions of the United States from the 1890-1940, these ideals were integral to many black women's sense of dignity and self-worth. In particular, the high percentage of black women in the domestic service industry, and the related dangers of sexual molestation and assault, meant that African American women intellectuals needed to remind the women in their communities that they were sacred and valuable citizens. In the context of the Great Migration, these messages complemented the emergence of African American Holiness-Pentecostal churches in the South, Midwest and in the North. Early Pentecostal organizations lacked the strict gender hierarchies of their Methodist and Baptist counterparts, which allowed for the ordination and training of African American women as spiritual leaders. By the 1920s, however, African American male leaders began to limited the leadership roles and ordinations of black women, arguing that it was out of sync with biblical scripture.[9] Even so, black women founded their own organizations, rejecting the idea that God chose men over women, and promoting egalitarian gender roles in their preaching and teaching.

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[8] See Jennifer DeVere Brody, *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity and Victorian Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).
[9] Estrelda Alexander, *Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 23-25.

Bishop Ida B. Robinson and Mount Sinai Holiness Church of America are prime examples of these larger cultural shifts. A southern migrant from Florida, she moved to Pennsylvania with her husband in search of economic opportunity. Robinson's dynamic preaching style and charismatic personality garnered the attention of African American leaders in the United Holy Church of America (UHCA), but when she realized that the UHCA was beginning to limit women's opportunities, she separated from the denomination and founded her own where she trained and ordained hundreds of men and women. Through her preaching and community outreach, Robinson challenged the idea that black women were unfit for leadership positions in the church and their communities, even as she also affirmed the idea that black women leaders were sacred representatives of the Divine. She also spoke openly against the social and political injustices of the United States, denouncing lynching in the South and American racism against the Japanese during World War Two. Like all of the women in this project, Robinson relied on jeremiadic discourse to criticize American injustice and she also urged her followers to exemplify Christian behaviors that would defy racial stereotypes. Smoking, drinking, dancing, pre-marital sex, jewelry, and makeup were all prohibited. Public leisure was also restricted, and members were discouraged from going to public amusement parks and night clubs where they would be exposed to the social vices Robinson preached against.[10]

[10] See Harold Dean Trulear, "Reshaping Black Pastoral Theology: The Vision of Bishop Ida B. Robinson," *Journal of Religious Thought,* 46 (Winter 1989/Spring 1990); Bettye Collier-Thomas, ed., *Daughters of Thunder* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1998); James R. Goff and Grant Wacker. *Portraits of a Generation: Early Pentecostal Leaders* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2002).

Although her ministry helped hundreds of African American men and women transition from their rural southern lives into urban communities, her teachings were well behind the changing social culture of the nation. That is, Mount Sinai's beliefs and practices were repressive in a society that was beginning to embrace and celebrate public leisure, personal indulgence and sexual freedom.[11] Consequently, the use of the jeremiad among black women intellectuals was not exclusive to black churches at the turn of the twentieth century. The prevalence of African American cultural leaders in the public eye through the Negro Renaissance movements from 1920-1940 created new spaces in the public sphere for black women intellectuals to protest racism and sexism. Blues culture opened the door for black women's creative feminist expression and the literary movement of the New Negro Renaissance complemented their socio-political critiques of American inequalities.[12] Accordingly, women like Marita Bonner and Zora Neale Hurston are exemplary of the ways in which black literature extended and reshaped African American women's jeremiad in the early twentieth century. Both women drew on the Afro-American spiritual language and symbolism of the nineteenth century to bolster the impact of their works between 1920 and 1940. As I have argued here, black women writers like Hurston and Bonner point to the ways in which African American women's jeremiadic discourse continued as an intellectual trend well into the twentieth century. Unlike their foremothers, women like Bonner and Hurston rejected traditional Judeo-Christian ideology and pointed to Afrocentric spirituality as a space of agency,

[11] See Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).
[12] See Davis, Angela Yvonne. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. (New York: Vintage books, 1999).

protest and self-discovery. Consequently, African American women's jeremiad is at once a secular and orthodox theology. It operates in and out of religious institutions, while maintaining a deep connection to the spiritual language of the women who formed its cornerstone. Embedded in this connection are central themes of womanhood that rest on spiritual purity, divinity, motherhood, feminism, racial pride, civic virtue and self-discovery.

In essence, black women who employ the jeremiad found that they indeed reflected the image of God and that therefore they were entitled to and worthy of full equality in the United States. To some extent, black women Jeremiahs even argued that the nation was a more whole and just place because they ensured it would be. But, in a modern sense, those who rejected traditional conceptions of the Divine found that the image was their own. These Jeremiahs took their message to the public forum through creative expression, celebrating their bodies, language, and their own sacredness before the public. In doing so, they paved the way for women like Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Angela Davis, and countless others who found the sacred in themselves and built a language of resistance around that self-reflection.[13]

[13] See Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983); Maya Angelou, *And Still I Rise* (New York: Random House, 1978); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984); Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (London: Routledge, 2014); Angela Davis *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billy Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

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VITA

Full Name: Lacey P. Hunter

Place and date of Birth: New York, New York December 15, 1984

Parents Names: Charles and Patricia Hunter

Educational Institutions:

	School	Place	Degree	Date
Secondary:	County Prep High School	Jersey City, NJ	H. S. Diploma	June 2002
Collegiate:	Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey	Newark, NJ	B. A.	May 2006
Graduate:	Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey	Newark, NJ	M. A.	May 2008
Graduate:	Drew University	Madison, NJ	Ph.D.	May 2017