

The New Negro Woman: African-American Womanhood, Respectability, and Power in the Early
Twentieth Century

By

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Between 1900 and 1919, fashion actively facilitated the shift of Black women's identity from stereotyped enslaved women to New Negro Women. Black women's fashions reveal a history of strife and triumph, as Black women, consciously or unconsciously, used their dress as a way to take back the agency and power that were stolen from them during slavery. The shift in identity from the enslaved woman to the New Negro Woman is evidenced by Black Women's fashion trends and magazines. The relationship between ladyhood, respectability, class, and colorism present in these magazines reflected who had power in feminine Black spaces. Thus, the New Negro Woman's wardrobe became a political stage, on which different classes and shades of Black women claimed their own power and advocated for Black people using their ladyhood, femininity, and social grace.

Black women's history in the United States is one fraught with horrific violence, glorious triumphs, and numerous changes in status. Many Black women's journeys began with slavery and being taken from their homes in West Africa and being treated like animals or property. These women were forced into an inferior status for both their race and sex for much of the time in American history.¹ Black women were forced to do strenuous tasks for no pay, such as working in the fields harvesting and plowing. Other enslaved women worked as kitchen workers, cooks, house maids, and servants.² Black women were not legally allowed to marry, thus they were pushed out of traditional roles for White women, leading to further ostracization and assumptions about their femininity. These women endured sexual assault, racial violence, and a number of stereotypes that affected them within and without slavery. For example, Black women were thought of as overly sexual, ignorant, and masculine.³

¹ Patricia S.E Darlington and Becky Michele Mulvaney. *Women, Power, and Ethnicity: Working Toward Reciprocal Empowerment*. (Philadelphia: Haworth Information Press, 2003), 30.

² Nancy, Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*. 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 179, 181.

³ Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*., 181 - 183.

In terms of clothing, slavery often did not give these women a choice. Harriet Jacobs, in her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is an example of the relationship between clothing and the status of slavery. Clothing was a signifier of her status. She compares her thin “linsey-woolsey” dress from her neglectful and abusive master, Dr. James Norcom, to a badge that displayed her slave status. However, after escaping bondage, her career as a seamstress was crucial to supporting her abolitionist career and life during freedom.⁴ Harriet Jacob’s story shows that status and clothing are tied together. As she went from being considered property to becoming her own woman and an abolitionist, her choice and quality of dress changed with her status and new sense of agency. One's relationship with fashion can reveal one's identity, status, personality, gender expression, and agency.

After enslavement, Black people went through a series of changes in status: freedom, migration, and participation in activist movements. Despite their new-found freedom, these women still carried the wounds and stereotypes from enslavement. They asked themselves: *How do we become Americans with respect and rights?* Conforming to Eurocentric roles and behavior, referred to as Racial Uplift, was one of the strategies for integration. Middle class Black elites, such as Mary Church Terrell and Booker T. Washington, attempted to uplift the Black race by integrating Black people into Eurocentric culture. This participation in Eurocentric culture was thought to help Black people escape racism and achieve progress after the horrors of slavery. Black Middle class elites dictated proper behavior that involved proper conduct, manners, education, and most interestingly, proper dress, spawning the New Negro Movement, a period in Black history, which refers to the social, cultural, political, and intellectual advancement of Black people after emancipation. In essence, this movement was the spark that

⁴ Jonathan Michael Square, “Slavery's Warp, Liberty's Weft: A Look at the Work of Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Enslaved Fashion Makers and Their Legacies,” In *Black Designers in American Fashion*, Elizabeth Way, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 34 - 35.

crafted the image of Blackness we understand today.⁵ Scholars cite this period as the beginnings of male Black organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League, and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). It is marked by the rise of many male political figures in the Black community, such as W.E.B Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Booker T. Washington. The movement spanned from the 1890s all the way into the 1920s, with the Harlem Renaissance and further formation of Black culture.⁶ The New Negro Movement is important context for this paper, which will primarily focus on Black women and their advancement during the early twentieth century. Rather than focusing on both the New Negro Woman and the New Negro, this paper examines the shifts in the representations of Black women, their notions of respectability, and how these ideas are related to power and class demographics.

For Black men, the New Negro Movement emphasized political involvement, education, financial security, social advancement, and community organization. Similarly, the New Negro Woman was a new symbol of hope and progress for many Black women in the segregated South, in large garment hubs like New York, and even in rural states like Kansas. There is evidence that the New Negro Movement affected fashions throughout the United States. For many formerly enslaved women and their daughters, fashion was a tool used for advancement. Dressmaking brought these women income and agency. Fashion and clothing were tools in gaining rights for all Black people. And ladyhood, a term I will use for New Negro Womanhood, was a tool for liberation, but also a point of contention. The Black women of the 1900s and 1910s grappled with depiction, representation, and the creation of Black womanhood stripped of stereotypes and

⁵ Katharine Capshaw Smith, "Childhood, The Body, and Race Performance: Early 20th-century Etiquette Books for Black Children," In *African American Review* 40 (2006): 797.

⁶ Einav Rabinovitch-Fox, "Fabricating Black Modernity: Fashion and African American Womanhood During the First Great Migration," *International Journal of Fashion Studies* Volume 6 no.2 (2019): 241.

trauma. The New Negro Movement created a new construct of Black womanhood in the early twentieth century: the New Negro Woman. This new construct influenced how Black women viewed their power, resistance, and respectability. In a world where Black women were stereotyped as ugly and ignorant, the New Negro Woman was a symbol of subversion with racial stereotypes being turned on their head. Contemporaries defined the New Negro Woman as modest, hardworking, educated, and ladylike. The New Negro Woman was not just a construct or an ideal for Black women, it was a statement that demanded respect.

I. The New Negro Woman

“Rough Sketches: A Study of the Features of The New Negro Woman” was an article in a 1904 issue of the African American magazine *Voices of a Negro*. In the text, John H. Adams, Jr., an African-American illustrator and art instructor at Morton Brown College in Atlanta, Georgia, explains the construct of the New Negro Woman. He describes the New Negro Woman as having “race greatness” or qualities greater than negative stereotypes surrounding the color of her skin. He extols her greatness and pure beauty that “tames generations,” contrasting her beauty with prejudice and oppression against Black people in Atlanta, Georgia.⁷ In essence, this is the goal of the New Negro Woman, who seeks to fight a Eurocentric vision of beauty with her own beauty and modest sophistication. It is not that Black women copied White women exactly, but that they performed Eurocentric gender norms to their own liking. The modern silhouettes, delicate lace blouses, sweeping skirts, and elaborate hairstyles of the early twentieth century became a way to defy harmful stereotypes that deemed Black women ugly, mannish, ignorant, and overly lustful.⁸ Fashion and behavior was one way to combat racism and to integrate themselves into White American society. Fashionable Black women were using their wardrobe as a way to carry out

⁷ Henry Adams Jr., “Rough Sketches: A Study of The Features of The New Negro Woman (1904),” In *The American New Woman Revisited*, Martha H Patterson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 168 - 169.

⁸ Rabinovitch-Fox, “Fabricating Black Modernity,” 241 - 242.

their own form of political resistance, in that, these women were expressing Blackness as a positive and subverting racial stereotypes. Going against White supremacist notions from society, Black women used these fashions to express that intelligent refined Whiteness and ignorant uncivilized Blackness was not biologically determined. Black people developing themselves in this way, reveals the farce of racism and states that race could be easily performed and replicated. Taking on the New Negro Woman's form of respectable femininity was a way to claim equality with White women in terms of dress and character, as if to say: *We are just as beautiful and capable as you are.*⁹

Fashion in the 1900s and 1910s had shifted with the new surge of modernism, optimism, and high living in Europe and the United States. Therefore women shifted as well. During the turn of the century, the White women's fashion ideal became more sensual, daring, and bold. The 1900s saw the rise of the Gibson Girl, famously depicted by Charles Dana Gibson. The Gibson Girl was a daring, independent, active, and educated ideal woman. This figure was often depicted as outdoorsy and busy bicycling, playing golf and tennis, or playing music.¹⁰ Fashion was influenced by the Gibson Girl image, as the Gibson silhouette became popular. The style depicts a voluptuous woman in a puffy-chested white shirtwaist (or blouse) and a flowing A-line skirt with flounces. The bust and abdomen appeared to go in opposite directions, simulating an S-shape.¹¹ [Figure 1] In the 1910s, stage and screen actresses, artists, and dazzling cities like Paris dominated the cultural landscape.¹² Silent film stars, like Helen Gardner and Pola Negri starred in sexy productions, like *Cleopatra* (1912) and *Slave of the Senses* (1914). Fashion was

⁹ Rabinovitch-Fox, "Fabricating Black Modernity," 244.

¹⁰ "The Gibson Girl's America: Drawings by Charles Dana Gibson" Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/gibson-girls-america/the-gibson-girl-as-the-new-woman.html>.

¹¹ "Women's Fashion Evolution: from Gibson Girl to Flapper" The Grace Museum.org. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/gibson-girls-america/the-gibson-girl-as-the-new-woman.html>.

¹² Rosemary Torre, *20th-century Fashion Illustration: The Feminine Ideal*, (North Chelmsford, MA: Courier Corporation, 2013), 21 - 22.

influenced by a new cosmopolitan spirit and worldly outlook. Designers like Paul Pirot and Lady Duff Gordon created the silhouette of the decade. They emphasized loose flowy garments and thin body types without an hourglass figure. Grecian and orientalist motifs became popular, as fashion co-opted the aesthetics of kimonos, turbans, and Ottoman harems.¹³ [Figure 2]



Figure 1: Charles Dana Gibson, “*There’ll Be Some Changes Made!*” Public Domain.

¹³ Torre, *20th-century Fashion Illustration*, 24, 26 - 30.



Figure 2: “Day Dress 1912,” Brooklyn Museum (Bendel Collection, HB 002-46)

Despite adopting the aforementioned styles, Black women still determined their own fashion sense. Black women used these Eurocentric fashions to convey their own messages. High fashion went sexy as Black fashion went austere and dignified. The fashions of Black women at the time were more aligned with the Victorian ideal of “True Womanhood,” in which values of modesty and thrift were an imperative. Furthermore, these modest styles were a response to rampant sexual violence towards Black women, a problem for both enslaved women and New Negro Women alike. Black women desexualized themselves by avoiding makeup, jewelry, and other signs of flashiness in an attempt to avoid sexual assault and harassment.¹⁴ New Negro Women took on these issues by educating other Black women about femininity. Julia Ringwood Coston’s *The Ringwood Afro-American Journal of Fashion*, which ran from 1891 to 1894, sought to tackle Black women’s strife, giving them advice on preventing sexual assault,

¹⁴Rabinovitch-Fox, “Fabricating Black Modernity,” 244.

feminine fashion, homemaking, and lady-like etiquette.¹⁵ *The Ringwood Journal* makes it clear that protection was tied to modesty and conservative fashion choices. One article in *The Ringwood Journal* tells readers which styles would lead to the most communication of sexual unavailability. A woman had to consider the color, decoration, and design of the dress or hat she wore. Bright garish colors like red were off limits, due to their sexually provocative nature, as well as fringed garments.¹⁶

Fashions for Black women of the early twentieth century would be illustrated in *The Colored American*, a prominent Black magazine for Black middle class readers. The magazine ran from 1900 to 1909 and focused on the literature, science, music, art, and history of Black people, intending to counter stereotypes by showcasing Black scholarship and art. The magazine featured Black authors, activists, and famous abolitionists, such as Pauline Hopkins, W. E. B. Du Bois, Angelina Grimké, and Booker T. Washington. The magazine also featured news about successful middle class African Americans. Despite its short run, the magazine would be a key component in shaping middle class identity and politics of Black people.¹⁷ Madame Mumford's "The Prevailing Styles For Early Summer" written in *The Colored American* features an immense attention to detail when considering color, material, and cut of skirts and blouses for the June 1901 summer season. Madame Mumford's designs show an incredible knowledge of style and trends. Mumford dictates the style of the summer to her readers and displays them with illustrations. Mumford's explanations on how these styles should look reflect the readership of *The Colored American*. The fashions described in her article are expensive, ornate, and

¹⁵ Caroline Krieger, "Julia Ringwood Coston," last modified June 28, 2008, [Julia Ringwood Coston \(?-?\) • \(Blackpast.org\)](http://blackpast.org).

¹⁶ Rooks, *Ladies' Pages*, 50, 52.

¹⁷ "History," The Digital Colored American Magazine – A Digital Humanities Project. <http://coloredamerican.org/>

impractical for working class Black women, featuring skirts with long trains, an abundance of flounces, expensive silk trim, and hats piled with tulle and golden flowers.

Mumford describes the pigeon-chested blouses fit for the new S-Curve shape for women at the turn of the century, the Gibson Girl, which she calls, “The Shirtwaist Girl.” Shirtwaists, or blouses, should have a smooth back and puffy front that laps over the belt, buttons should be used in place of studs on women’s blouses. She recommended wearing this blouse with a lower bust corset for the best shape. Mumford writes that in the new style, casual women’s shirtwaists will have sleeves that are fitted close to the arm and sewn with one seam. These shirtwaists will be straighter and narrower cuffs than last year. These sleeves will be smaller, approximately three inches in length. Fancier shirtwaists will still have puffy sleeves, but they are narrower than last year. Collars on shirts have changed completely, as they now stand straight up, called standing collars. New collars are the same color and material as the shirtwaist. Materials for shirts can be silk, cotton, chambray, linen pique (mechanically made), and gingham. Lavish trimmings are now popular again on silk, organdy, cotton lawn shirtwaists. [Figure 3] Trimming includes inserting lace into the shirt or decorative pleats in the shirt. Mumford suggests “Scotch” flannel as an excellent material for summer blouses, especially when playing sports like golf or visiting the seashore. French flannels, she writes, are a less expensive option with the same effects. This points to wealthier Black women’s readership, as they had more time for such summer leisure.¹⁸

Skirts in the summer season have a specific look and silhouette. Skirts should be tighter around the waist and hips. They should be elaborately trimmed with wide flounces at the bottom. Pleated flounces are popular. Mumford writes that the most fashionable and expensive skirts will have “Spanish” flounces with accordion-like plaits of fabric and black chenille lace trim is very in season. Taffeta is a popular material for skirts and can be worn with a delicate cotton

¹⁸ Madame Mumford, “The Prevailing Styles For Early Summer,” *The Colored American* 3.2 (1901), 130.

shirtwaist.¹⁹ “Four African American Women Seated On Steps of a Building at Atlanta University” from 1899 - 1900 [Figure 4] fits Madame Mumford’s description. These women wear long pigeon-chested shirtwaists. These shirtwaists have puffy sleeves, but are still narrow - keeping with Mumford’s writings. The women in the interior wear white shirts with standing collars and lace, while the other two women wear striped shirts with standing collars. Each woman wears a belt, which helps their silhouette. Despite their pose, their skirts are thinner at the top and fuller at the bottom. Mumford’s descriptions of middle class fashions for Black women highlights the goals of Black middle class women, who were using elaborate hats and expensive dresses to signify their educated and privileged status. These women wear bright colors and silk trimmed blouses to show they could afford to leave the manual labor, drudgery, and dull colors of their enslaved past behind them. They were no longer enslaved women, but new American women with sophisticated tastes and manners. Wearing Eurocentric fashions in such boldly feminine colors, a visible sign of wealth, was an affront to a society where Black women were assumed to be domestic workers swamped by poverty. Their clothes communicate the fact that beauty and elegance was not just a White woman’s domain.

¹⁹ Mumford, “The Prevailing Styles For Early Summer,” 131- 132.



Figure 3: *Shirtwaists and Skirts Designed By Mrs. Mumford*



Figure 4: *Four African American women seated on steps of building at Atlanta University (1899 - 1901)*

Another similarity with *The Ringwood Afro-American Journal of Fashion*, is the importance of color and accessories. Mumford explains which colors are most appropriate for the summer season and when they should be worn. She also describes the new popular styles of hat. Mumford writes that lilac, lavender, violet blue are the best for early summer. In midsummer, one should wear sapphire, gray, "old rose," pink shades, seafoam green, emerald green, and "leaf shades," like olive.²⁰ The prevalence of bright pastel colors also indicates that middle class Black women were less likely to worry about getting their clothes dirty. They did not need to do domestic work, nor did they need to worry about expensive laundry costs.

Hats were another important part of the Edwardian woman's wardrobe and Black women were not different. As in *The Ringwood Journal*, Madame Mumford describes new elaborate hat styles fit for wealthy young Black women. She explains that "flat hats" with heavy trim, such as flowers and foliage, had usurped the bonnets and turbans of the previous century. Hats in 1901 are closer to the head and hair than previous styles. A popular hat, she describes, is made from many layers of black tulle dotted with gold and silver flakes mixed with gold leaves and Black and white crepe roses, peonies, and poppies that have gilded stamens. These elaborate flowers are made into a wreath that completely covers the brim of the hat. On black and white hats, she writes, the brim consists of four layers of white tulle edged with a Black velvet ribbon. The crowns are black tulle topped with white lace and plumes of black and white ostrich feathers. These feathers go from the back to the front and are accompanied by more flowers with golden stems and a jeweled buckle. Ribbons, roses, and flowers are used to fill up spaces in any of these hats.²¹ These hat styles reflect the economic and social status of the magazine's readership. Manual labor, such as domestic work or field labor, would be impractical and expensive in these

²⁰ Mumford, "The Prevailing Styles For Early Summer," 131.

²¹ Mumford, "The Prevailing Styles For Early Summer," 133 - 134.

hats. Thus, Mumford's designs highlight a major difference in class in the Black community.

[Figure 5]



Figure 5: *Stylish Hats Designed by Mrs. Mumford*

Black women's fashion used this attention to detail to take on an uplifting role for Black women. Seeking to lift themselves out of the stereotypes that had followed them out of slavery, many Black women focused on femininity, domesticity, and motherhood. Avoiding stereotypical behavior, such as improper speech, uncleanliness, ignorance, and broken family dynamics, could allow for Black social mobility and economic power.²² These sentiments are echoed in the statements of three women: Margaret Murray Washington, Sarah E.C. Dudley Pettey, and Eleanor Tayleur. These women emphasized that the domestic sphere and home life were important to the character of the race, either helping to improve it or hindering it. It was the job of mothers, no matter their color, to influence their families and set them on a path for good,

²² Smith, "Childhood, The Body, and Race Performance," 796, 797.

meaning that mothers themselves needed to be well-equipped with a domestic spirit, moral values, and an education.

Margaret Murray Washington was a notable New Negro Woman as an activist, educator, and essayist. She served as the Director of Domestic Service training at the Tuskegee Institute, an agricultural school that she founded with her husband, the famed Black activist, Booker T. Washington.²³ She describes the effects of her courses in her speech titled “The New Negro Woman” published in 1896. She seeks to uplift formerly enslaved Black women by making them into modest tidy homemakers and feminine well-mannered mothers in new calico dresses and leather shoes, no longer treated like unloved animals by their masters. She pushes the idea that women determine the character of their race, encouraging Black women to become more active in the domestic sphere. Motherhood was not a role allowed to Black women during slavery, she says, rather it was a job stolen by the mistress of the plantation. In effect, Black women had no home and no family to call their own. By teaching these skills, Murray’s work is not just improving the lives of Black women, giving them loving homes, but it is creating a new dignified Black community.

Sarah E.C. Dudley Pettey was a contemporary of Margaret Murray Washington. Dudley was the wife of Bishop Charles Calvin Pettey. Her father, Edward Richard Dudley, was a former member of The General Assembly of North Carolina during the Reconstruction Period and a famed orator.²⁴ Sarah Dudley Pettey was an early Black feminist and women's suffragist. She witnessed the optimistic improvement of Black people over the course of the 1890s, before the advent of Jim Crow in 1898. She was an educator early in her career. She then became an orator

²³ Margeret Murray Washington, "The New Negro Woman (1896)," In *The American New Woman Revisited*, Martha H Patterson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 54.

²⁴ Sarah E. C. Dudley Pettey, "What Role is the Educated Negro Woman to Play in the Uplifting of Her Race," in *Twentieth Century Negro Literature, or a Cyclopedia of Thought on the Vital Topics Relating to the American Negro by One Hundred of America's Greatest*, edited by D.W. Culp and J.L. Nichols. (Naperville, IL: J.L. Nichols, 1902), Print Page 1.

herself, giving speeches on women's suffrage and feminism. She wrote a column in *Star of Zion*, an A.M.E. Zion Newspaper, called the "Women's Column."²⁵ Her definition of Black women's roles is similar to Washington, in that she sees domesticity and motherhood as valuable to the character and success of a race. In "What Role is the Educated Negro Woman to Play in the Uplifting of Her Race," she writes: "In the civilization and enlightenment of the Negro race, its educated women must be the potent factors."²⁶ Dudley seems to agree with Washington's ideas of womanhood, writing that motherhood is the key to a successful race, but she emphasizes that intelligence and education should be the most important part of Black domesticity. Mothers are the soul of the home, therefore they must be intelligent to create an intelligent home. She must be familiar with "wholesome literature, periodicals, papers and books," reading them and supplying them in her home. She states that having an "intelligent home" produces children that are politicians and doctors. Educated Black women should also volunteer in Women's Missionary groups and teach Sunday School, providing a moral and spiritual enlightenment. Black women, she writes, must rely on their own identities and not imitate other races' manners and customs. Black women should embrace their Blackness and cultural identity.²⁷ In terms of fashion, she voices similar ideas to *The Ringwood Journal* and *The Colored American*, emphasizing modesty and practicality in dress. She writes: "Our young women must be taught that gorgeous dress and fine paraphernalia don't make a woman. They should dress modestly, becomingly and economically."²⁸ Sarah E.C. Dudley Pettey's words remind us that the New Negro Woman's goal was not to merely imitate White women and their roles. She emphasizes that taking on the

²⁵ Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, "Gender and Jim Crow: Sarah Dudley Pettey's Vision of the New South," *The North Carolina Historical Review* Vol. 68, No. 3 (July 1991): 261, 263, 273.

²⁶ Margeret Murray Washington, "The New Negro Woman (1896)" 58-59.

²⁷ Dudley Pettey, "What Role is the Educated Negro Woman to Play in the Uplifting of Her Race," Print Page 4 - 5.

²⁸ Dudley Pettey, "What Role is the Educated Negro Woman to Play in the Uplifting of Her Race," Print Page 4.

domestic role is about improving the race. Motherhood is a tool used to fight racism, not to perpetuate it internally.

Dudley and Washington's words speak to the stereotypes surrounding Black women's home life and motherhood. Black women were thought of as unrefined, hostile, ignorant about womanhood and motherhood, due to working in the fields and not being able to care for their children during slavery. Eleanor Tayleur, a Southern White woman, used these stereotypes while voicing her concerns about Black crime in her essay "The Negro Woman - Social and Moral Decadence" from 1904. She wrote that crimes committed by Black people were caused by Black women and their devious unsubmitive nature. She writes that "no people can rise higher than their source," meaning that mothers determine the character and destiny of their race.²⁹ Black women were considered devious because they did not stay at home with their children, practice feminine domesticity, or work hard as domestics in White households.³⁰ Black women were overly lustful, having too many children with abusive men, and even became abusive or neglectful to their children themselves.³¹ They were not feminine and failed to be ladies while wearing outlandish clothes. Tayleur may mean that wearing the elaborate hats and extravagant dresses seen in *The Colored American* was above Black women's station. Tayleur pins these vices on emancipation and Black women's newfound hatred of White women. She claims that slavery and proximity to White women truly uplifted the Black woman by showing them femininity and giving them shelter.³² Tayleur's ideas about slavery and freed black women highlight how pervasive stereotypes surrounding Black women were to White people. The stereotypes surrounding Black women were assumed. Black women were thought of as

²⁹ Eleanor Tayleur, "The Negro Woman-Social and Moral Decadence," In *The American New Woman Revisited*, Martha H Patterson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 72.

³⁰ Tayleur, "The Negro Woman-Social and Moral Decadence," 73.

³¹ *Ibid*, 75 - 76.

³² *Ibid*, 74.

imperfect women more fit to be enslaved or under the tutelage of White women. This is why the New Negro Woman's role in motherhood was so important. The construct was used to fight these assumed stereotypes, proving that Black people could also be beautiful and educated.

Murray, Dudley, and Tayleur have drastically different statements, but both independently settle on the conclusion that racial uplift was tied to motherhood and femininity. Embracing fashion took on a civilizing role in an attempt to combat stereotypes and uplift Black people. Fashion and domesticity were a part of the new agency and status that Black women now wielded; they could afford to leave their "linsey-woolsey" dresses behind in favor of new "calico dresses" with shiny black shoes. Black women became their own uplifters. Black women took such measures to appear ladylike and demure to remove these stereotypes. These measures point to an initiative in Black feminine circles to embrace the domestic sphere in order to start raising themselves, their children, and the entire race out of the shadows of bondage by gaining the values and skills of proper citizens, proper mothers, and a sense of domesticity.

Due to these stereotypes, middle class Black people of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century emphasized their separation from lower class Black people based on class, social behavior, and proximity to whiteness. This led to these middle class Black elites educating lower class Black people on propriety and modesty, as a form of racial uplift.³³ This class separation was emphasized in the Black beauty standard's desire for lighter skin and straighter hair. Afiya Mbilishaka explains that enslavement and survival forced these colorist ideas upon Black people. Straighter hair and lighter skin benefited enslaved women by providing them with easier work in the Plantation house and access to better resources. Thus, linking more

³³ Smith, "Childhood, The Body, and Race Performance," 796 - 797.

Eurocentric features to desirability in the minds of Black people.³⁴ This colorism is evident in *The Ringwood Journal's* use of the word "Lady." Darker-skinned Black women had to work harder to earn the title of "Lady," an already esteemed title for Black women, as they were rarely acknowledged as ladies. For example, Mrs. Reverend Thompson is the lone dark-skinned lady in a sea of light-skinned women. Thompson is only praised for her accomplishment, being an esteemed abolitionist, other "Ladies" were praised for both their beauty and accomplishment. Julia Mason is described as tall and beautiful with bright eyes, but her main accomplishments are being active in church, and serving as the only Black delegate at the Sabbath School Convention of 1890. These accomplishments are both astounding, yet beauty is still a dividing line between Black women.³⁵ Class, beauty, and white features are seemingly linked in the Black cultural zeitgeist of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

Mbilishaka writes that the desirability of Eurocentric features causes physical and mental pain for Black women. Metal flat irons and hot combs, which heated hair until it was smooth section by section, caused scalp burns and permanent hair damage or hair stress. The psychological aspects of these fashions could include lower self-esteem and shame, especially for darker-skinned women with kinkier hair.³⁶ Despite the truth in her statement, color was a dividing line for the Black community, affecting individuals and systems. A form of discrimination which determined status and created a hierarchy. Unfortunately, beauty was also tied to survival, despite the pain it could cause. Lightness was tied to middle class success and its values. Dark skinned women were more likely to be attached to stereotypes surrounding

³⁴ Afiya Mbilishaka, "Combs and Curling Irons: The Psycho-Emotional Tools for Shaping Black Hair Textures and Cultural Consciousness" in *Textures: The History and Art of Black Hair* (Kent, OH: Kent State University, 2020), 33.

³⁵ Rooks, *Ladies' Pages*, 53 - 55.

³⁶ Mbilishaka, "Combs and Curling Irons," 33.

ugliness, poverty, and ignorance about their desirability and mannerisms. Skin tone mattered as much as the color of a hat or dress. It was a marker of social status, beauty, and femininity.

Social clubs, such as the Bon Ton Society in Washington DC and the Blue Veins Society in Nashville, Tennessee had “color conscious” policies, allowing membership for lighter-skinned people only. Neighborhoods would also be divided by the shade of skin, as well as Black churches. The “comb test” and the “paper bag test,” used to test hair texture and skin lightness, were seen as tools for colorism and social stratification. Historically Black Colleges, such as Wilberforce, Howard, Fisk, Atlanta University, Morgan, Hampton, and Spelman, also had these discriminatory colorist policies.³⁷ Beauty and fashion were a part of survival. The black community had unwittingly been influenced by racist notions surrounding skin tone, respectability, and eurocentrism, but it is not unreasonable to suggest that Eurocentric features brought an advantage to both the enslaved and freed woman. Despite the pain and low self-esteem brought on by colorism, historically speaking, having a lighter skin tone could bring more privilege, social connections, and opportunity within the black community.

Another example of colorism is seen in the advertisements featured in *The Colored American*. A 1901 issue of the magazine featured an advertisement for “Ozono Hair Straightening Remedy.” [Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.2] The advertisement promises long wavy hair and light skin to their Black female customers. The advert compares darker skin and naturally textured Black hair to an itching scalp or dandruff.³⁸ “Black Skin Remover” advertisement by Crane and Co. of Richmond, Virginia [Figure 7] was a similar advertisement in a 1903 Issue of *The Colored American* featuring “A Wonderful Face Bleach” and “Hair Straightener.” The advertisement again equates Black women’s natural hair texture and skin color to conditions, like

³⁷ "On Dark Girls," The Association of Black Psychologists, 2018. <https://static.oprah.com/pdf/dark-girls.pdf>

³⁸ “Ozono Hair Straightening Advertisement,” *The Colored American* 3.1 (1901), 1.

liver spots, pimples, smallpox marks, and bad complexion. It promises to lighten dark Black skin by four to five shades and that it makes mulatto women “perfectly white.” The product boasts that skin color will improve in at least 48 hours and that the skin will bleach all over, not just in blotches. The hair straightener causes hair to quickly grow out “straight and soft” and has a perfumed scent.³⁹ Madame Mumford’s “The Prevailing Styles For Early Summer” features White women in the fashion plates for dresses and hats.⁴⁰ The fashion trends and beauty standards described in *The Colored American* were expressed throughout Black newspapers, with other notable examples being *The Washington Bee* and *Voice of A Negro*.⁴¹

King of all Hair Dressings.

OZONO

An Honest Guaranteed Remedy—Money Refunded if You are Dissatisfied.

Positively straightens Kinky, Nappy, Kinky, Troublesome, Refractory Hair. Cures Baldness, Dandruff, Itch, Tetter, and all itching, itching, and humulating Scalp Diseases. Causes the hair to grow long and straight, soft and fine, and beautiful as an April morning. Price, 50c a box. Four boxes does the work. OZONO cannot fail.

OUR GRAND OFFER—Send us One Dollar and we will immediately send you four boxes of OZONO and one bottle SKIN REFINER, guaranteed to make rough skin soft, and black skin bright like our bottle SKIN FOSS, which cures all Skin Diseases, removes Wrinkles, Freckles, Mole Patches, Tan, Liver Spots, and all Facial Blemishes; also one package ANTI-ODOR, removes all odors arising from the human body; cures Warts, Chills, etc.; also one cake of our improved SCALP SOAP, absolutely pure, worth 50c. All the above, worth \$4.00, we will send for \$1.00. This grand offer is unprecedented. Parties sending \$1.00 will receive four boxes.

Boston Chemical Co., 310 E. Broad St., Richmond, Va.

Figure 6.1: Ozono Advertisement, May 1901

OZONO

KING OF ALL HAIR TONICS

The peer of all medicines for straightening kinky, curly, refractory, troublesome hair. Not a worthless mass of illuminating literature, but a delicate perfumed ointment, made to beautify the hair, soften the gentleman, benefit youth and gladden old age. Cures all people of color and refractory as a certain medicine to produce a long and luxuriant growth of soft fine hair. Cures dandruff, tetter, eczema, scurf and all itching, humulating scalp diseases. It removes gray hair, to its natural color, causes the hair to grow out on all bald places, especially so about the temples. It never fails to improve all grades and conditions of hair. Cures is guaranteed as represented, or money refunded.

BEFORE **AFTER**

The price is 50c. a box. Four boxes are, in most instances, a complete treatment. In order to introduce this tonic, especially to the colored people of the world, we make the following liberal offer. Send us \$1.00 and we will send you 4 Large Boxes of Ozone Hair Grease and Hair Straightener, worth \$2.00; also 1 Bottle of Electrical Skin Restorer, which restores black skin bright and lightens any complexion several shades; also 1 Jar of Electrical Skin Food, which cures all facial imperfections, such as boils, pimples, tan, sunburn, eczema, acne, itch. It also removes wrinkles, liver spots, small-pox pits and all disfiguring imperfections of the skin. We will also include 1 package of our Purify Scalp Soap, and one "jar" to prove our liberality, we will put in a 1 pint package of Anti-odor, the great deodorant, which removes all odors arising from the human body. It also cures chills-blains, sore and festered feet, sore throat, and is used as a douche for female complaints.

The Warrenton—Numerous unperforated areas are feeding the country with circulars, offering so-called hair tonics and hair straighteners. Be sure that you use the firm's name—Boston Chemical Co.—on every package of our goods that you may purchase, so as to be sure of getting the genuine, and not a spurious article. Remember OZONO is the only guaranteed, perfect and unperforated hair tonic on the market and that every box is guaranteed, or money refunded. Do not hesitate, but send us six months' \$1.00 and the goods will be sent the same day that we receive your order. Parties sending \$1.00 will receive 4 boxes. Send all orders to:

BOSTON CHEMICAL CO.,
No. 310 E. Broad St., Richmond, Va.

Figure 6.2: Ozono Advertisement, January - February 1902

BLACK SKIN REMOVER.

BEFORE **AFTER**

A Wonderful Face Bleach.
AND HAIR STRAIGHTENER.

both in a box for \$1, or three boxes for \$2. Guaranteed to do what we say and to be the "best in the world." One box is all that is required if used as directed.

A WONDERFUL FACE BLEACH.
A PEACH-LIKE complexion obtained if used as directed. Will turn the skin of a black or brown person four or five shades lighter, and a mulatto person perfectly white. In forty-eight hours a shade or two will be noticeable. It does not turn the skin in spots but bleaches out white, the skin remaining beautiful without continual use. Will remove wrinkles, freckles, dark spots, pimples or bumps or black heads, making the skin very soft and smooth. Small pox pits, tan, liver spots removed without harm to the skin. When you get the color you wish, stop using the preparation.

THE HAIR STRAIGHTENER.
that goes in every one dollar box is enough to make anyone's hair grow long and straight, and keeps it from falling out. Highly perfumed and makes the hair soft and easy to comb. Many of our customers say one of our dollar boxes is worth ten dollars, yet we sell it for one dollar a box. **THE NO-SMELL** throws in free.

Any person sending us one dollar in a letter or registered money order, express money order or registered letter, we will send it through the mail postage prepaid; or if you want it sent C. O. D., it will come by express, 25c. extra.

In any case where it fails to do what we claim, we will return the money or send a box free of charge. Packed so that no one will know contents except receiver.

CRANE AND CO.,
122 West Broad Street,
RICHMOND, VA.

Figure 7: Black Skin Remover, 1903

Despite the advertisements from middle class Black magazines to buy these skin lightening and hair straightening products, lower class Black women, and some middle class

³⁹ "Black Skin Remover Advertisement," *The Colored American* 6.5 (1903), 1.

⁴⁰ Mumford, "The Prevailing Styles For Early Summer," 131- 133.

⁴¹ Smith, "Childhood, The Body, and Race Performance," 797.

Black women, did not use these hair and skin treatments. In "Two Young African-American Women from Virginia (1910)," [Figure 8] shows how darker-skinned Black women dressed. Overall, these unnamed women seem to be altering their old clothes and adapting to the new style as best they can or are just keeping up with the old style. They are using their means to communicate their femininity and ladylike status. These women, possibly sisters, are wearing similar plaid suits and black hats. Their skirts are wider than the column-like style of 1910. The woman on the left wears a single breasted style with a shorter skirt, showing her white stockings and boots. She is wearing a large ribbon tied into a bow around her neck. Her hat is similar to the woman on the right, a wide-brimmed hat with a bend on the side to hold trim. She has black feathers and flowers. The woman on the right has a single breasted suit with a longer skirt. Her skirt might have been altered, judging by the seam in the middle. She wears a white shirt with a folded collar, a belt with an ornate buckle, a tie, and a tie pin. Her hat has lighter trim with a light ribbon being tied around the hat. The similarity in hat and suit styles could suggest a shared pattern or use of the same fabric to cut the cost of making something new. Yet, these stylistic differences, such as trim and accessories, still distinguish these women from one another.

These women are not elites, but this does not mean that these women were any less fashionable than their elite counterparts, as a large part of respectability was social conduct and destabilizing race categories. Race and respectability were a performance. Thus, wearing a clean white shirt in public or modest affordable ornaments helped to define Blackness as good and in proximity to progress and respectability. These women and middle class Black women both have the same goal of expressing their own agency using their dress and separating themselves from stereotypes from American society. New Negro Womanhood was about demonstrating that they can fulfill aspects of womanhood as well as White women. It was also about establishing the

humanity of Black people. These women care about looking dignified in public, because they are consciously or unconsciously always being stereotyped due to their race. These stereotypes are what these two women are combating by expressing their individuality and agency, despite their economic and racial status. Even if these women are not extremely trendy, these women express pride in their clothes, especially the woman on the right who opens her jacket to show her tie and brilliant white shirt. Their clothes are not only an adherence to the new style, but also a sign of status and civility. They demonstrate the fact that, despite being seen as just Black women or darker-skinned Black women, that they are still human women that deserve the same rights and respect as others.



Figure 8: *Two Young African-American Women, Virginia (1910)*

Black women with a mix of natural hair, darker skin, and Black fashions communicated beauty and status, especially when entering the workforce. “Mr. and Mrs. McBride” [Figure 9] is a photograph published in 1907 of a working class Black couple from Chicago. The photo comes with a small caption, which explains that Mrs. McBride works with her husband. Both McBrides are described as hard working, an ideal for the New Negro and the New Negro Woman. They are both clean cut, wearing modest clothes. They are neither too flashy, nor uncouth and sloppy. Mr. McBride wears a suit with a large bow tie and a stiff collar on his shirt. Mrs. McBride wears a

lacy white blouse with a standing collar. Her hair is styled into a Gibson Girl bun and may be straightened. The McBrides dress in a way that communicates their industriousness and respectability. Another photograph “Mrs. Frances Smith; keeper of Boarding House, Battle Creek, Mich.” from 1907. [Figure 10] Mrs. Frances Smith was photographed wearing a simple white dress with a white rose in her hair. The white dress has puffy sleeves and seems to have a proper silhouette. She seems to be wearing an elegant lace brooch. She looks confidently into the camera, with a fresh dark face with no makeup or skin creams. Hair is unstraightened and appears to be natural textured hair, formed into a popular style. She affirms her status within her means, presenting herself as a respectable lady, without minimizing her natural features, such as her hair texture and nose.

Mrs. McBride and Mrs. Smith’s clothing items are an indicator of their status as a married Black woman who was either a business owner or well employed. McBride living in Chicago and Smith's boarding house being located in Battlecreek, Michigan may indicate a sort of migrant status for both women, as Black people migrated out of the South into the North providing them with opportunity. Business, marriage, and migration elevated these women’s statuses and relationships with fashion. Notice that Mrs. Smith and Mrs. McBride wore white in their portraits, wearing brilliant unsmudged white in such a variety of materials was another sign of their status. It indicates purity and wealth. It is a signifier of an elevated status, showing that these women do not work on the ground or cook in the kitchens of their workplaces. Consciously or unconsciously, Mrs. Smith and Mrs. McBride are women who use their clothing to communicate their status. New Negro Women used their clothing to indicate their changes in social status, breaking away from assumptions about their intelligence, livelihoods, and moral

fibre. Black women, regardless of status, were not just into fashion, but they used it to display their uplifted status, industriousness, and ladyhood.

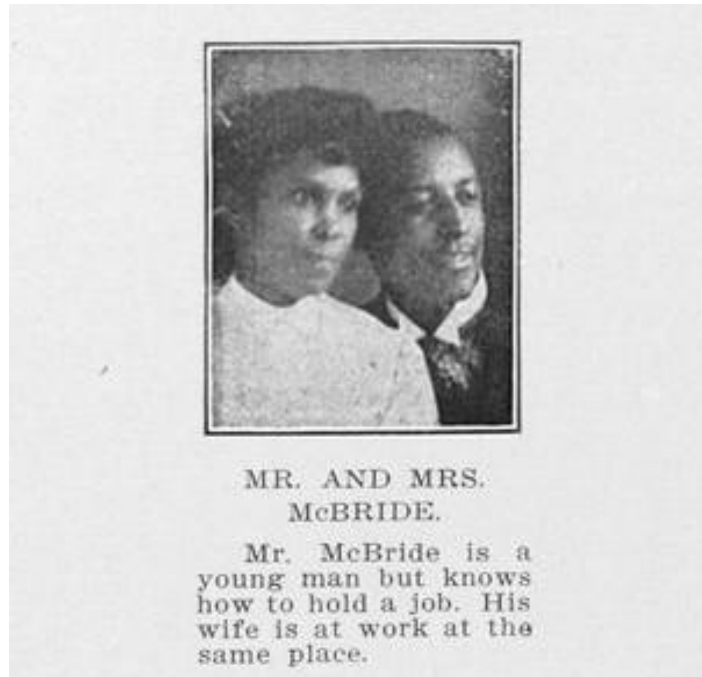


Figure 9: *Mr. and Mrs. McBride*, Chicago, (1907)



MRS. FRANCES SMITH,
Keeper of Boarding House,
Battle Creek, Mich.

Figure 10: *Mrs. Frances Smith; Keeper of Boarding House, Battle Creek, Mich. (1907)*

II. Freedom, Migration, and Respectability

The New Negro Woman's respectability was prompted, in part, by migration to the North for opportunity. Black women migrated to the North to elevate their status by opening businesses and profiting off of trades in the North. Even before the Great Migration, which was a mass exodus out of the South in the early 1910s and 1920s, Black women used their wits to achieve more for themselves.⁴² However, the chance for an opportunity came with struggles to overcome. Black women had to advance against pressures of racial violence and injustice. Black America was progressing despite the racial violence faced by Black people across the country. For example, when Black people were pushed out of their homes in Greenwich Village in New York

⁴² Rabinovitch-Fox, "Fabricating Black Modernity," 241.

City by Italian immigrants and they had to move north to a neighborhood called Tenderloin Village.⁴³ These incidents of racial injustice both justified and transformed Black notions of respectability and citizenship. At first, attitudes towards racial tension were shaped by middle class Black elites. These elites were often torn between racial pride and separating themselves from other Black people to avoid misconceptions and stereotypes, hoping to stave off racial injustice with conformity. Thus, Black elites played both sides. They sought acceptance from White society, but heavily criticized White racism. They advocated for Black heroes and Black excellence, while conforming to Eurocentric social norms.⁴⁴ But, this behavior was a contradictory way to proclaim that Black lives had the potential for greatness and were worthy of their success. Racial tensions soon overtook the Black elite's position, leading to new ideas about Black citizenship, which extended into Black women's fashions. Black women would take on a brutal balancing act of surviving racial violence, facing new opportunities, and seeking racial equality through the means of dress.

The opportunities and trials of migration are illustrated in Elizabeth Keckley's story detailed in *Behind The Scenes: Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, published in 1868. Her narrative encapsulates and introduces the experiences of migrating Black women post-emancipation. She was born into slavery in 1818 and earned her freedom by working as a *modiste* (dressmaker) in St. Louis, Missouri. In 1861, she opened a dress shop in Washington and worked for famous White Washington elites, such as Varina Davis and Mary Todd Lincoln.⁴⁵ Keckley navigated gender and race as a freedwoman, by presenting herself as a hardworking example of the American Dream, who refused to take a passive role in her story. She calls her clients "friends," offering advice and conversation to her clients, seeking to create

⁴³ Way, "A Matrilineal Thread," 55.

⁴⁴ Smith, "Childhood, The Body, and Race Performance," 797.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Michael Square, "Slavery's Warp, Liberty's Weft," 35 - 36.

an understanding between White and Black women through gender. Keckley used the status of her wealthy White clients to her advantage, claiming that this proximity generated her own respectability.⁴⁶ She reveals her clients' lives as an observer and often puts herself in front of her clients. She insists that the money she used to buy her freedom was a loan from her clients, not that they had given it to her.⁴⁷ She claims to have financially supported her former masters, The Burwell Garlands, during their financial struggles.⁴⁸ Both of these experiences center Keckley in her own story, showing that it was her own tenacity, not White charity, that pushed her forward. Her autobiography pushed the boundaries of Black respectability by taking this active role in her story, putting herself above or equal to the white masters, patrons, and companions present in her story. And, like many Black Americans, Keckley's opportunity became coupled with racial tensions and injustices. Despite the inspiring and honorable story, Keckley's autobiography was misconstrued as the eavesdropping of an angry Black servant by the public.⁴⁹ In her narrative, Keckley pushed the boundaries of Black respectability, foreshadowing the dilemma Black women faced as they migrated and integrated into American life.

⁴⁶ Xiomara Santamarina, *Belabored Professions: Narratives of African American Working Womanhood*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 140 - 142.

⁴⁷ Santamarina, *Belabored Professions*, 150 - 153.

⁴⁸ Jonathan Michael Square, "Slavery's Warp, Liberty's Weft," 36.

⁴⁹ Santamarina, *Belabored Professions*, 142, 157 - 158.



Elizabeth Keckley, Mary Lincoln's Dress. Circa 1861. Purple Velvet, 60 in x 48 in (Dress on Mount). Smithsonian Museum Collection (Accession Number: 70138).

As with Elizabeth Keckley, many Black women created their own respectability and wealth via the dressmaking trade. As in Washington DC, dressmaking in nineteenth and twentieth century New York City gave Black women social mobility, allowing them to become Black elites, gaining respectability and wealth.⁵⁰ Black dressmakers worked with Black patrons, advertised in Black newspapers, and worked in Black neighborhoods, as Black women could not shop nor work in White women's dress shops.⁵¹ An example is Harriet Harding, who owned a dress shop in Upper Manhattan, a prominent area for Black people. Dressmaking was a lucrative and respectable profession that depended on one's creativity, skill, reputation, marketing, and funds to pay for equipment and assistants.⁵² They produced custom-made dresses using the

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Way, "A Matrilineal Thread: Nineteenth-and Early Twentieth-Century Black New York Dressmakers" In *Black Designers in American Fashion*, Elizabeth Way, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 47.

⁵¹ Way, "A Matrilineal Thread," 58.

⁵² Way, "A Matrilineal Thread," 55.

draping technique to create custom fit bodices for their clients. This technique was carried out by pinning inexpensive fabric or cut paper to their clients bodies - ensuring a great fit and shape. Dressmakers such as Miss. M.A Felton advertised her skills in newspapers, such as *The New York Age*, Felton boasted her expertise as a “Fashionable Dressmaker, Cutter-Fitter, and Draper” in 1891.⁵³ Entering the business world was a risky move, especially for women with little social and economic capital. However, in the nineteenth century, it reaped massive rewards. Gertrude Mossell wrote for *The New York Freedman’s* column “Our Women’s Department” that Black women in 1886 could make the most money as a schoolteacher or dressmaker, earning 15 to 20 dollars a week, compared to the three dollars a week that servants earned.⁵⁴

By the early twentieth century, Dressmaking had become a strategy that helped Black women avoid domestic work. Domestic work was plentiful for Black women in New York and was often a selling point for migrating there. Ninety percent of working Black women were domestics in the early twentieth century. Black women could earn up to 16 to 25 dollars, or even 30 to 50 dollars working in boarding houses or for private families as a nanny or maid. However, the work involved abuse, long hours, living away from their families, and hard labor. Many Black women went into dressmaking or became seamstresses to avoid this fate. Due to the benefits, the high earnings, and relatively peaceful environment, many Black women became dressmakers. By 1900, there were 813 Black female dressmakers and 249 Black female seamstresses in the city.⁵⁵ Dressmaking, a skill pushed onto many enslaved women, including Keckley, now became an accessible path to wealth and employment.

Dressmakers joined the ranks of the Black middle class, as professionals and entrepreneurs. Miss Adella Richardson, who owned a shop on MacDougal Street, was featured in

⁵³ Way, “A Matrilineal Thread,” 59.

⁵⁴ Way, “A Matrilineal Thread,” 56.

⁵⁵ Way, “A Matrilineal Thread,” 57 - 58.

the society pages of *The New York Age* in 1891. She is described as a fashionable dressmaker, who wore fabulous dresses to high society events in the Black community. Richardson attended The Edmonia Serial Club wearing an electric blue silk gown in February. And in March, she attended the 42nd Annual Terry Lodge Reception in a white “surah,” or bonnet, with black ostrich feathers. Black elite dressmakers provided opportunity to other dressmakers as assistants or apprentices in shops and formal workshops, but there were also dressmakers who hired themselves out to private homes. Julia Hunt and Victoria Peterson, used this strategy by advertising their services and skills in newspapers.⁵⁶ Black women learned how to make dresses and hats in professional schools. From 1904 to 1910, the Manhattan Trade School taught hand sewing and novelty making. A public night school “on Forty Six Street” taught classes on sewing, dressmaking, millinery, and faux-flower making.⁵⁷ Taking these courses gave working class Black women a chance at social mobility, business ownership, and Black elite respectability. In effect, the dressmaking trade was a way for Black women to earn wealth and escape the degradation of domestic work through dress, not only helping dressmakers with their respectability, but helping the Black public as experts of fashionable dress and high society.

⁵⁶ Way, “A Matrilineal Thread,” 56, 59.

⁵⁷ Way, “A Matrilineal Thread,” 60.



Women's Dressmaking Course (1900),
 Images collected by W.E.B. Du Bois and Thomas J. Calloway for the "American Negro Exhibit" at the Paris
 Exposition of 1900. Collection of the Library of Congress

Urbanization and migration would not only bring new opportunities for Black people, but it would expose the rift between representation and class in the Black community. The New Negro Woman and her respectability politics had two key flaws, those being classism and colorism. Katherine Capshaw Smith calls the classism and colorism that working class Black people experienced from Black elites “class condescension.” Black elites separated themselves from the masses of Black people. Black elites uplifted the accomplished over the masses and dictated good manners, dress, and speech to the poor.⁵⁸ The Great Migration in the late 1910s challenged all of these contradictory factors, through an openness to new ideas and depictions of Black women. In 1916, Black magazines began to feature dark-skinned Black women in their

⁵⁸ Smith, “Childhood, The Body, and Race Performance,” 796 - 797.

fashion plates. Much of the gatekeeping from earlier black magazines was questioned in 1916, as Black magazines, newspapers, workers, and scholars debated heavily over the fate of the Black community after incidents of racial violence and injustice. These incidents included Woodrow Wilson's segregation of federal jobs in 1912, which hurt the Black elite. Black elites became more active and less conformist at this time. Racial injustice and the death of Booker T. Washington caused Black elites to join The National Association for The Advance of Colored People (NAACP) en masse. These new ideas also influenced ideas of social behavior and power as new Black elites in the late 1910s and early 1920s placed more emphasis on wealth as a source of power.⁵⁹ The debates had a definite effect on fashion and representation in Black magazines. Einav Rabinovitch-Fox adds that these debates were not a major permanent shift in Black culture, as eurocentrism was still a constant force in Black life and beauty. But these discussions were so revolutionary, because they recognized Black women of all shades as a market for consumerism and consumption. Dark-skinned Black women were allowed more representation in these magazines, which shook up the dividing line of ideal light-skinned beauty seen in *The Ringwood Journal* and *The Colored American*.⁶⁰

A prime example is *Half Century Magazine*, which was edited by Katharine Williams from 1916 to 1925. Its earlier volumes of publication from 1916 to 1917 would become a major factor in this debate. The Chicago-based magazine catered to the urban lower class Black population and new Black migrants living in America's cities during the early twentieth century.⁶¹ The magazine showed lower class Black women and men how to maintain the home, dress well, and save money while attaining Black elite respectability. The magazine depicted everyday Black women and Black models in photos taken by Black photographers. This act

⁵⁹ Smith, "Childhood, The Body, and Race Performance," 798.

⁶⁰ Rabinovitch-Fox, "Fabricating Black Modernity," 247.

⁶¹ Rooks, *Ladies' Pages*, 68 - 70.

delighted the Black community and broadened readership for the magazine. *Half Century* featured “What They Are Wearing,” an advertisement created in 1916, which contained revolutionary fashion plates with Black women of all shapes and shades in fashionable walking suits, skirts, shirtwaists, and hats that could be mixed and matched interchangeably.⁶² These segments contained a great deal of elegant practicality. In October 1916, an advert titled “Pin Money Frocks,” [Figure 11] advertised more affordable heartier fabrics and adhered to the new World War I silhouette with shorter A-line skirts. The column explains that suits are an outfit for any occasion or season and can save their wearers “many an anxious hour.” The column displays a practical checked velour suit with black tortoise buttons for “chilly autumn days.” The suit is paired with a wide-brimmed Black velour hat with a “black beaded ornament against the crown.” A six gore skirt made from black gabardine, a tougher fabric for suits, with an open panel front and ten buttons on the side as trim. The column provides their lower class readership with useful tips on improvising fashionable fur trimmings on hats and suits, such as repurposing an old fur muff into fur bands with a bit of cutting and sewing.⁶³ The magazine introduced a mail order shopping service in 1916 for rural and Southern women who could not find fashionable items locally. It may have been used by urban Black women, who were discriminated against in department stores.⁶⁴ A 1917 advert, “Smart Styles For The Autumn Days” [Figure 12] advertises the service. It reads: “The *HALF CENTURY* Shopping Service will be pleased to purchase Suits and Hats described for any of our readers as per prices quoted. Send description and money to Miss Jane Hudson ... Half-Century Magazine, Chicago, Illinois.” Additionally, this issue advocates similar styles to the 1916 issue, advertising two coats for the fall season. The more expensive 30 dollar coat on the left is a velour trench coat. The \$28.50 coat on the right, which is

⁶² Rooks, *Ladies' Pages*, 70 - 71, 75, 84 - 85.

⁶³ Madam F. Madison, “Pin Money Frocks - What Are They Wearing.” *Half Century Magazine* 1.3., October 1916.

⁶⁴ Rooks, *Ladies' Pages*, 67 - 68.

marketed as appearing more lavish, is a velvet coat with a band of fur around the shoulders. Both coats conveyed style in a way that was accessible to the lower class Black women of the war period. The description advertises an “indispensable” tailored skirt with side pleats, button trim, and pockets. The advert goes on to say that Black women with little income should choose stronger fabrics for clothing, such as serge, gabardine, and ribbed fabric such as “cotes-de-cheval,” whipcord, and “rep. [repurposed] velvets,” and satin for afternoon dresses and suits. Satin suits should be lined with cloth to make them warmer for the winter. For footwear, black and tan shoes are always in style.⁶⁵

The existence of *Half Century Magazine* proves that fashion and respectability were not just concerns of the Black elite. As the urban Black population grew, lower class Black people became more concerned with public appearance and respectability. Discussions of how black people should confront racial violence and tensions brought on a new inclusivity towards darker-skinned Black women. Although these magazines still promoted straightened hair and White fashions, *Half Century Magazine* shows a movement away from the classism and eurocentrism of earlier Black magazines. *Half Century*'s acknowledgement of darker-skinned Black women is an extension of black respectability to these women. Class and color still traveled in tandem, but Katherine Williams, just by including dark-skinned women in her magazine, had stated that these women were beautiful too. The magazine would be published from 1916 to 1925, its longevity capturing all Black women as they were and what they could become: true Americans thriving in their new urban landscapes.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Madison, “Smart Styles For The Autumn Days - What Are They Wearing.” *Half Century Magazine* 3.5., November 1917.

⁶⁶ Rooks, *Ladies' Pages*, 67 - 68, 79.

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Suits by The Ideal Tailoring Co., Chicago Hats by Madam Rosa Morgan, Chicago

Pin Money Frocks

1007. When chilly autumn days are here, you will need just such a suit as this one, which has a great deal more than utility to recommend it. The material is of checked velours trimmed with black tortoise buttons. A picturesque black velours hat, designed by Madam Morgan, is effectively trimmed with a black beaded ornament placed against the crown.

1110. A very smart six-gore skirt with a panel front finished with open welt seams. The side gores terminate in open plaits, trimmed with ten buttons. The material is of black gaberdine.

1015. For the tall slender figure of fine lines, there is a stunning model in redingote style that has been developed in black and white checked dovevyn with a Chin Chin convertible collar of self material. This suit is very appropriate for both fall and winter wear.

What They Are Wearing

By MADAM F. MADISON

WHEN you have torn the September sheet from your calendar and you see October looming before you, unconsciously you find your thoughts instantly centered upon your fall clothes. By way of suggestion, let your first purchase be an attractive fall suit; for such a garment is absolutely essential at this season of the year. And if you should be so fortunate as to have one of these indispensable garments, you have saved yourself many an anxious hour. Don't decline an invitation because of "nothing to wear," for a suit is appropriate for nearly every occasion.

As trimming, there is nothing quite so fashionable as fur. Any kind and as much as you like, but I dare say you will not care for more than a few narrow bands, owing to the "high cost of fur." Even the Kolinsky

fur, which is nothing more nor less than dyed rabbit, is beyond the modern pocket-book, and is almost as expensive as the seal of yesterday. After all, there is a whole lot in a name. I am sure somewhere you have a little old-fashioned muff stored away in campher, where it is doing no earthly good to any one, so let me suggest that you get it out and cut it into strips for fur bands. It is surprising the long strips of fur that can be obtained from an exceedingly small muff. In cutting fur always use a sharp knife, cut on the wrong side and sew the strips together with coarse thread, as silk is apt to cut the skin.

The fabric world has been putting its shoulders to the wind and at last we have a few new smart materials. Soft, clinging materials such as dovevyn will be used exclusively for the tailleur, and will be labeled smart. The taffetas will make their disappearance and will be supplanted by satins of medium weight. Hats of almost any shape and description can be worn, but the small hats with the tall crowns, like those of our Puritan fathers, artistically draped with the soft silk veil with a band of wide fur fastening around the neck, will cut quite a figure.

The boot for Autumn will be characterized by extreme simplicity, depending upon graceful lines and a perfect fit for distinction. A very fine grade of black patent leather with the white kid top will appeal to one's good judgment as well as to one's eye. Let your homony be of white silk with large polka dots of black French knots.

And so we have searched up and down Fifth Avenue together—the street with the interesting little French shops which dictate the fashions of the world.

Figure 11: What Are They Wearing "Pin Money Frocks" Half Century Magazine 1.3 October 1916.

November, 1917

SMART STYLES FOR THE AUTUMN DAYS



808—What is more serviceable than a good, warm coat of velvet? The model shown is Burgundy, has deep patch pockets, buttons, stitching, and buckles make most appropriate trimming. Price \$30.00.
Chic is the only description we can give for this white velvet tricorn. A gold ornament with its two pendants is the only trimming. Price \$4.95.



705—The tailored shirt is indispensable. With side plaste, commodious patch pockets, and button trimmed, this model in black broadcloth is the most striking of the season. May be had in almost any color, \$2.95.



807—A fur band may not make the coat any warmer, especially when it is on the tip end of the collar, but it looks more like winter. This charming coat in blue, brown, black, green or Burgundy is an excellent investment. Price \$28.50.
A wide brimmed hat of Canary Georgette, faced with black velvet and trimmed with burnt astrich may be purchased for the sum of \$7.50 at the Morgan shop.



806—A wide brimmed hat of Canary Georgette, faced with black velvet and trimmed with burnt astrich may be purchased for the sum of \$7.50 at the Morgan shop.

What They Are Wearing - - - By Madam F. Madison

THE toothpick silhouette is the thing this season. All of the clothes are soft and gracefully modeled and in them there is frequently a good deal of material. Plaits and folds, however, prevent them from standing out or giving bulk to the figure. The tendency is toward simpler fashions, yet there was never a greater variety of materials from which to choose.

The most favored materials for the woman of limited income seem to be serge, gabardine, and ribbed cloths such as *cotes-de-cheval*, whip-cord and rip. Velvets, especially those on the plush order, and satins promise to hold their own all winter for afternoon costumes, and they will be combined with lighter materials. Velours and duvetyns are splendid for coats and are sometimes seen in checks, and cross barred effects, though invariably they are of one tone. There are many kinds of silks and voiles, in vogue this season, to say nothing of Jerseys, Tricotines, and the ever reliable mohair.

It can hardly be said that any particular color will be given the preference. Particularly serviceable, however, are the new shades of blue known as Jeffrey and Amiranite as well as several shades of gray. Browns, tans and drabs are seen in great variety, and so are purple, maroons and deep reds. Several shades of green have a large following, namely the bright ivy and the harsh billiard cloth green, as well as the more modest reseda, jade and serpent green.

Satin suits are seen lined with cloth. This is a novel as well as a practical idea because the cloth supplies the warmth and makes the suit appropriate for cold weather. A few suits are shown with thirty-inch coats, and there are some with coats that do not exceed half-lengths. However, the three-quarter length or something over seems to be the measurement adopted for coats of some of the smartest costumes.

The high-neck is the thing for theatre and dinner wear; it will be almost unpardonable to wear a low necked dress on such occasions this season. Although the neck is high, and in some cases the collar is of fur, there is a goodly showing of cuticle just below the collar line. Sleeves are transparent and of varied lengths. The tunic sleeve is popular and so are the Japanese or bell sleeves. The latter are found in elbow length or they may come right down to the wrist. For late Autumn and Winter wear, the transparent sleeves are seen with a simple border of fur, or with a deep cloth cuff of the gauntlet variety.

Many of the newest shoes and hosiery match the costume, but of course, black and tan shoes of an appropriate and becoming style are always good.

The HALF-CENTURY Shopping Service will be pleased to purchase Suits and Hats described for any of our readers as per prices quoted. Send description and money to Miss Jane Hulson, care Half-Century Magazine, Chicago, Illinois.

Figure 12: What Are They Wearing "Smart Styles For The Autumn Days" Half-Century Magazine 3.5. November 1917

Another example of this new style is a 1919 photo of a sixteen year old girl called "Rebecca Louise Coffey" [Figure 13] taken in Frankfort, Kansas. This may be a postcard to relatives or a boyfriend, judging by the words "To the One I Love," written at the bottom of this

card.⁶⁷ Therefore, Rebecca is probably wearing her nicest clothes. She is dark-skinned, wearing an apron dress with a low neckline and a wide skirt with vertical stripes. The skirt has a long pleated flounce, sewn on with a decorative seam. The style of the apron dress fits with the late 1910s, since it has a wider skirt. The dress has decorative straps and gathered fabric on the shoulders. She is wearing a white long-sleeve blouse with a short standing collar. This could be an older shirt modified to fit the style, as shorter collars are more fashionable. Her hair appears to be natural and styled in an Edwardian hairstyle with a braid going through the center. Her hair has two large bows on the side of her head, which could indicate her young age and unmarried status. She is wearing a wide dark brimmed hat with a folded brim, it could be simple or decorated at the back. If the trim for a hat was too expensive, she might have put the ribbons in her hair instead. Her hat and simple dress indicate her finances or status after the war, since she fits with the fashion and the atmosphere of the time. Another example of the clothes featured in *Half Century Magazine* is in an undated photo "Lincoln School Kindergarten" [Figure 14]. These women are Elementary School teachers from Kansas. Their clothing exudes practicality as they are young women educating children. They wear simple white blouses and wide skirts, like those in "Smart Styles For The Autumn Days." The woman on the left wears a large scarf tie. *Half Century Magazine* shows a fundamental change in Black women's fashion. The magazine speaks to new trends during World War I, as practical shorter simpler styles helped the war effort. But, it also speaks to how racial injustice brought new representations for Black women. Black people were rethinking how respectability, justice, and Blackness looked. They were leaving the Black middle class elite strategy of teaching respectability to the lower class and moving towards more active pushback against racial violence with the NAACP.

⁶⁷ "Rebecca Louise Coffey, Frankfort, Kansas (1919)," Black Archives, Kansas City, MO., Digital Gallery. http://blackarchives.org/collection_item/rebecca-louise-coffey/



Figure 14: "Rebecca Louise Coffey," Frankfort, Kansas (1919)



Figure 14: *Lincoln School Kindergarten, Kansas*

III. New Negro Womanhood, Feminism, and Activism

Fashion and activism also meshed during the early twentieth century. The New Negro Woman used her femininity to advocate for Black people and Black women, connecting their womanhood to their leadership and power. Political power was obtained through networks with churches, community outreach, and organizing. Banners, pins, and hat decorations were not the only tools for feminist activists of this time. Black women's fashion communicated certain messages to its viewer, regarding the respectability, leadership, and patronage of these women. This section focuses on the representations of Mary Church Terrell, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Ida B. Wells, tracing their fashion back to their activism and how it was perceived by the world. Fashion could bring opportunity to women who wanted to help and fight for other women.

Madame C.J. Walker used New Negro Womanhood and respectability to grow wealthy. With her wealth, she engaged in economic activism, patronizing Black civil rights leaders, such as Booker T. Washington. Likewise, Terrell and Bethune use their respectability to their advantage, successfully gaining patronage and the trust of the Black community. Whereas Wells represents the determination Black women needed to use to be heard, as their voices were still marginalized in their political spaces.

Patricia S. E. Darlington and Becky Michele Mulvaney note that Black women were often left out of the political narratives surrounding White women's politics and Black men's politics, caught in between the two groups fighting for their rights. However, they posit that these women began to clear the path for Black people reclaiming their right to vote from White American society.⁶⁸ Black women have always been political activists, even before emancipation. The New Negro Woman was involved in women's rights, like many other New Women were in the early twentieth century.⁶⁹ There was a notable difference between Black women's politics and White women's politics. First, Black women did not just fight for their own right to vote. Black women became involved in the fight for their own rights and the rights of their brothers and husbands. In a society that saw both Black men and Black women as inferior, Black women were a double minority, being discriminated against on the basis of both their gender and race. Black women had two political goals in mind: improving race and gender relations.⁷⁰ Black women allied with wealthy White women while organizing, but they had more behind the scenes activism.

Black women's political spaces were often centered around community and religion. Black women were politically involved in churches and other community spaces. Church

⁶⁸ Darlington and Mulvaney, *Women, Power, and Ethnicity*, 30.

⁶⁹ Darlington and Mulvaney, *Women, Power, and Ethnicity*, 29.

⁷⁰ Darlington and Mulvaney, *Women, Power, and Ethnicity*, 30.

organizations were the rock of many Black communities and churches often campaigned for community improvement, which was not as precarious as preaching about civil rights directly. Along with these functions, the church provided moral education to Black youths through Sunday School, taught by Black women. Sunday school was thought to improve the children's future households, by improving education, home life, and building bonds in the community. Black women spoke to motivate other Black people. They took actions to seek government grants to help improve their neighborhoods.⁷¹

Black women also advocated for themselves in women's clubs. According to Nancy Woloch, women's clubs emerged in the 1890s and resembled women's organizations during the Civil War. They were secular and provided charity and volunteered. Black women modeled their own women's clubs off of White women's clubs after being denied membership in White women's clubs.⁷² Black women's clubs and Black clubwomen provided many of the same services as White clubwomen did in their communities. Women's clubs provided nurseries, reading rooms, and social welfare. Josephine Ruffin was a prominent clubwoman in Boston and founded the New Era Club for Black women in 1896. She described Black women's clubs as a way for Black women to mold children into upstanding citizens from the home, provide leadership, and assert dominance over moral decay.⁷³ Additionally, women used these clubs as a space to convene and discuss new ideas and hear talks from prominent Black women in the community. For example, the *Los Angeles Times* described a Black women's club convention held in 1918. Four hundred women attended the convention as delegates, and likely many more

⁷¹ Darlington and Mulvaney, *Women, Power, and Ethnicity*, 30.

⁷² Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 287, 291.

⁷³ Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 291 - 292.

attended as spectators. These women listened to talks such as "The Best Way to Develop Strong Character In Girls" in between discussing domestic science and their sons at war in France.⁷⁴

The beauty industry, a facet of fashion, was also involved in the fight for civil rights and women's rights. Madame C.J. Walker [Figure 15] was a businesswoman and the founder of a Black beauty product empire and numerous beauty schools in the 1910s. She developed the Walker hair-growing treatment and is considered one of the first black female millionaires. Although she is sometimes derided as a promoter of hair straightening, she is still an example of how fashion and beauty were tied to early twentieth century activism for Black women. She used her wealth, power, and philanthropy to help the Black community and Black women.⁷⁵ Kate Dossett writes that Madame C.J. Walker used her wealth to become a beacon of respectability and femininity, becoming a success story for the American Dream and the New Negro Woman. She was an image of what Black women could become compared to where they had been. Walker constructed her own representation, gaining control over how their pasts, achievements, and charitable actions were perceived by a contemporary public and future historians alike. Madame C.J. Walker dramatized her life story while publishing several versions of it in newspaper advertisements, brochures, and speeches surrounding her products. In the most popular versions of her story, Walker begins her narrative as a young girl raised in Southern cotton fields. Walker then became a modest washer-woman in St. Louis, Missouri. She developed her products' formula after her own struggles with hair loss and began recruiting Black women across the United States to sell her product. By 1918, Madame Walker concluded that she was earning \$250,000 a year through sales and had 20,000 sales agents in her company.⁷⁶ Walker's own

⁷⁴ "Negro Women's Clubs Convene," *Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 1918, 112.

⁷⁵ Kate Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides: Black Nationalism, Feminism, and Integration in the United States 1896-1935*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2008), 107.

⁷⁶ Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides*, 108-109.

narrative presented her as a modest, hard working, ingenious woman, fitting the image of the New Negro Woman. She used her embellished life story, wealth, and prestige to turn her individual success into the promotion of the New Negro Woman and Black ladyhood.

Madame C.J. Walker used her wealth and image to sponsor the projects of early Black civil rights leaders and prominent clubwomen, such as Booker T. Washington and Margaret Murray Washington. She gained the respect of the Washingtons, through her own narrative and New Negro Womanhood. She used her respectable rags-to-riches life story to enter the male-dominated National Negro Business League in 1912, of which Booker T. Washington was a delegate. She told her story of the American Dream and aspirations to uplift Black women through industry and sales. She pushed the idea that it was her business and employment of Black women that linked them to New Negro Womanhood and respectability. This narrative convinced the NNBL to let her into the league, which gave Washington access to her patronage.⁷⁷ Thus, Walker served as a patron for Booker T. Washington's projects, becoming a major source of funding for Washington's Tuskegee Institute. She continued to donate to the school even after his death in 1915.⁷⁸ Walker's respectable image helped her form relationships with prominent clubwomen. In 1916, Margaret Murray Washington invited her to Tuskegee to deliver a speech for her lecture tour. In 1918, Madame C.J. Walker served on the Advisory Committee for the Circle for Negro War Relief with Margaret Murray Washington. The organization helped support black soldiers and their dependent families during the war.⁷⁹ Walker's funding demonstrates how the beauty industry, New Negro Womanhood, and activism were linked. The economic activism of Madame C.J. Walker had an active role in funding the activism of Booker T. Washington and Margaret Murray Washington. Her control over her own narrative and respectability showed

⁷⁷ Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides*, 113 - 114.

⁷⁸ Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides*, 116, 117.

⁷⁹ Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides*, 117 - 118, 119

New Negro Womanhood and fashion gave women an entrance into their own empowerment and activism. Overall, fashion was not a frivolous pastime for Black people, it was a tool used to gain the upper hand and advance the Black community.

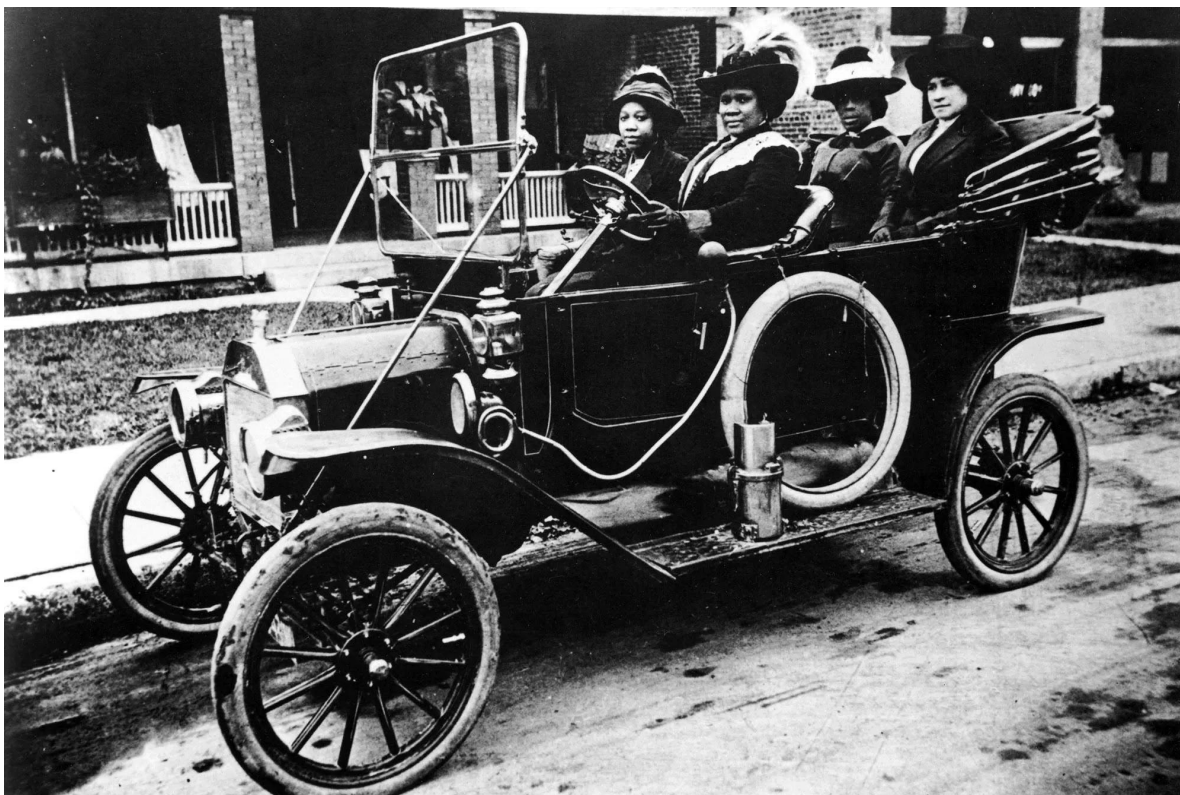


Figure 15: *Madame C.J. Walker Driving* (1911)

Black clubwomen's fashions also affected their activism. "Educator and Activist Nannie Helen Burroughs Meets With Fellow Members of The Women's National Baptist Convention " [Figure 16] is a 1905 image of the titular leader and other clubwomen. The woman to the very left, Nannie Helen Burroughs, is a famous activist and clubwoman who founded the National Training School for girls in Washington DC. She was also a board member of the National Urban League, the National League of Republican Colored Women, and was the founder of the National Association of Wage Earners.⁸⁰ She is holding a banner reading, "Banner State Woman's National Baptist Convention." Each woman fits with the style of the time, presenting a clean and

⁸⁰ Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides*, 33 - 34.

modest image. They are wearing a long A-line dress or skirt with a puffy S-curve bodice. Burroughs wears a gingham dress with an A-line skirt. The skirt has three pleats as decoration. The dress is buttoned down the front and she is also wearing a bracelet or ribbon in her raised arm. She is making a fist in determination for her cause. The dress has a lace collar on the bodice for decoration. The woman to the right of Burroughs wears a similar colored dress. One woman in the center of the photo wears a black skirt and white blouse with a standing collar. The rest of these women wear white, perhaps lace, lawn dresses. These women all wear wide-brimmed and heavily trimmed hats with ribbon and flowers.

It is important to remember that early Black feminists were still Black women. The same stereotypes of being lusty, aggressive, masculine, and ignorant, were still attached to them, especially darker-skinned Black women, like Nannie Helen Burroughs. Even Margaret Murray Washington has said she did not belong to the “aggressive class” of female reformers, referring to White women’s suffrage activists in the North such as Ellen Henrotin and Mary Lowe Dickinson.⁸¹ This highlights a major difference between Black and White feminist activism; appearing docile, respectable, and dignified was done not on a whim, it was an attempt at safety and being taken seriously. Black women had higher stakes, fighting for the rights of every Black person, not just themselves. The fashions of Burroughs and The Women's National Baptist Convention demonstrate a key strategy of early twentieth century Black feminism. Dignity and respectability were not far away from the minds of Black women when participating in politics and activism. The women in this photo used their modest dress to convey their good image as women’s groups. Wearing their dresses and appearing clean cut expresses their respectability, as well as domesticity, community building, and church membership. In essence, these women are wearing Eurocentric fashions to appear aspirational and gentle while organizing. The clothing of

⁸¹ Margeret Murray Washington, "The New Negro Woman (1896)," 54.

activists in the early twentieth century differed greatly from that of the 1970s; militancy and activism masked by respectability was a tactic for women's suffragists. In this era, Black clubwomen used modest, clean, and Eurocentric dress to avoid stereotypes. This hearkens back to ideas about modesty and propriety in Black Women's activism and the Black community. Activists were not only expected to fight, but also to be moral, involved in the church, serving their communities, and helping to improve the image of the Black race.



Figure 16: *Educator and Activist Nannie Helen Burroughs Meets with Fellow Members of The Women's National Baptist Convention, (1905 - 1910)*

Similarly to Madame C.J. Walker, Mary Church Terrell used her ladyhood, along with appealing origins, to achieve the two goals that Darlington and Mulvaney had described. Mary

Church Terrell was a successful public lecturer, feminist, and civil rights activist. She advocated for anti-lynching laws, the reinforcement of amendments created during Reconstruction, and amendments allowing for women's suffrage. She was a founding member of the NAACP.⁸² In the 1890s, she joined the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and advocated for white members to fight against lynching and segregation. In 1908, she joined the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) founded by Nannie Burroughs, and advocated for women's suffrage being extended to women and the protection of Black male voting rights. Terrell believed that Black men were Black women's best allies if they understood that sexism that hurt Black women, just as much as the racism that hurt all Black people.⁸³ In addition to her achievements, Mary Church Terrell was seen as a modern, elegant, and respectable woman. Part of this respectability came from her clothes, which were advertised on pamphlets just as much as the speaker wearing them. Terrell used her fashion and politics to become an inspiring and hardworking role model for Black women, demonstrating to them how to gain respect by using proper dress and decorum. She was a civil rights activist, but presenting and promoting a respectable feminine image to her audience was one of her other goals.⁸⁴ Terrell had said that "Every woman, no matter what her circumstance, owes it to herself, her family and her friends to look as well as her means will permit."⁸⁵ In this 1902 photo [Figure 17], possibly a flyer from one of Mary Church Terrell's lectures. Terrell follows the fashions of the period and embraces the Gibson Girl silhouette. She wears a brilliant white dress, presumably made with lace and cotton lawn. The dress seems to be made of a light material with lace insertions, creating an alternating pattern of material. The dress has a high standing collar and a white floral decorative

⁸² Alison M. Parker, "Mary Church Terrell: Woman Suffrage and Civil Rights Pioneer," (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street, 2015), Print Page 1.

⁸³ Parker, "Mary Church Terrell," Print Page 5.

⁸⁴ Smith, "Childhood, The Body, and Race Performance," 795.

⁸⁵ Rooks, *Ladies' Pages*, 50.

brooch on her right side. Her hair is straightened and arranged in a large Gibson Girl hairstyle underneath a black hat. This hat may be a tam hat or large beret, pinned to one side of her head with a hat pin. She gives off a confident and serious look, as if beginning to impart a grand statement to her audience. She holds a chair, as if she is posing for an official portrait. Mary Church Terrell's clothing is used as a tool to demand respect from her audience and the world at large. The way Terrell wore clothing gained admiration. Clothing and elegance were crucial to gaining the confidence of her audience, thus they were a key part of her activism.



Figure 17: *Mary Church Terrell* (1902)

Mary McLeod Bethune was also a dedicated clubwoman and civil rights leader. In the early twentieth century, she used the power of the New Negro woman to advocate and advantage her race through education and the founding of a school for Black girls in Daytona, Florida.⁸⁶ Kate Dossett, notes that she performed feminine propriety and American independence for Whites, while criticizing their racism and advocating for Black people. She used her story of

⁸⁶ Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides*, 50 - 51.

being born to two former slaves and narratives of Black people's education improving race relations, as a way to earn money for her children's school, as she wanted to help motivate and educate Black girls into becoming their greatest selves. These American Dream narratives appealed to white liberal Northern philanthropists who vacationed in Daytona, Florida, such as James Gamble of Procter & Gamble. She took their wealth and founded a school for Black girls, Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School For Negro Girls, which was headed and funded by an integrated board of trustees. Bethune presented her school as an integrated oasis that proved how beneficial integration was for Black children, and further the Black community.⁸⁷ With her ideas of beneficial segregation, Bethune advocated for Black cultural and economic independence, stating that it is her African heritage that "will not let me rest while there is a single Negro boy or girl without a chance to prove his worth." Bethune herself noted that although she was funded by White philanthropists, her goal was only to help Black children and families. Bethune's efforts paid off as many of her pupils went on to become political activists for the Black community themselves.⁸⁸

In this 1904 photo [Figure 18], Mary McLeod Bethune is seen taking a walk with her students. Perhaps this photo was sent to her sponsors or put into advertisements for the school. Bethune is wearing a practical white blouse with a frilly neck and decorative seam. She is wearing a belt with a decorative buckle. She's wearing a long A-line skirt. She wears a wide-brimmed straw hat. She also carries a book in her hands, perhaps a Bible, to convey intelligence and morality. This reassures her sponsors that she is instilling her students with good values. Her students are wearing wide-brim hats, clean white blouses, practical skirts, and white dresses. The older girls at the back wear modest skirts, much like Bethune's skirt. The color

⁸⁷ Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides*, 50.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

white conveys the cleanliness of the institution and saving pure little girls from poverty. This image is Bethune displaying the fruits of her labor and the purpose of her school, to raise up the next generation of Black women.

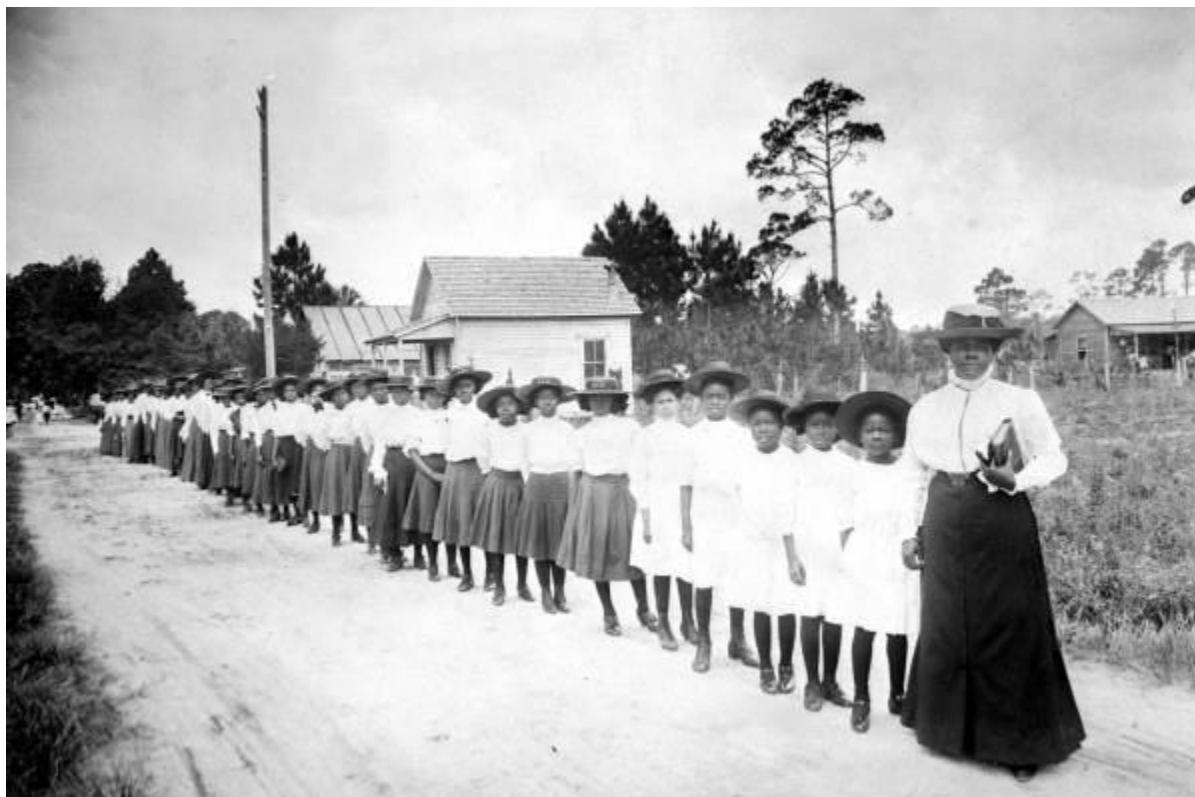


Figure 18: *Mary McLeod Bethune with Her Students* (1904)

Bethune was also a participant in Black women's club life. She became involved in 1912, while attending a convention held by the NACW. She proved to be an eloquent speaker, which helped her gain fellowship with prominent Black elites, such as Margaret Murray Washington, and funding for future girls' schools. She served as the association's president from 1917 to 1924, an indication of the relationship and high status she possessed in the club.⁸⁹ Bethune worked through the 1920s to increase membership in the NACW with membership drives. She pushed the narrative that all Black women, not just wealthy Black elites or humble Black women, should join. She made the NACW an official organization, as she instituted a

⁸⁹ Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides*, 52 - 53.

headquarters in Washington DC, pushed for more record keeping, and gave the association's archive a permanent home. She saw the publishing of a seven point guidebook, emphasizing Black nationalism and integration. These seven points included: "Education, Industry, Thrift, Citizenship, Social Service, Racial Solidarity, and Interracial Relations." During her presidency, Bethune rearranged the NACW's departments to benefit Black communities, shifting to address business, hygiene, social work, and funding Black hospitals and universities.⁹⁰ However, by 1928, she had left the association, rethinking her earlier statements about interracial relations, stating that to achieve true political power, Black women needed to be self-sufficient and represent themselves. Mary McLeod Bethune's change in attitude led her to found a competing national organization, the National Council of Negro Women, in 1935.⁹¹ Bethune's actions became another break away against the respectability politics of the early twentieth century, leading to more active forms of activism and leadership seen in the mid-twentieth century.

Bethune's notion that Black women needed to represent themselves was well-founded. As the New Negro woman faced challenges in her activism, namely organization and discrimination from White women's groups. White and Black women's goals during their struggles for rights and representation were vastly different. White women sought rights for themselves, while Black women sought rights for Black men and women alike. Leadership and representation could be a point of contention for women in the Suffrage Movement, despite their unification under the same flag. "15,000 Colored Women to vote in the Harlem District" from *The New York Age* recounts the election of Ms. Lewis, a white woman, as vice-leader of the Nineteenth Assembly District in Harlem, New York. She was elected by White and Black members of the Women's Suffrage Party. Some Black women's suffragists in Harlem regarded

⁹⁰ Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides*, 54 - 55.

⁹¹ Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides*, 56.

her as their leader, however her seat was still questioned by other groups. Some Black women opposed her election, but no effort had been made to unseat Ms. Lewis. In the end, the party's officials stood by Lewis' leadership, advising her Black opposition to organize themselves and become active members, thus gaining a say in their choice of leadership. And, Lewis celebrated her victory at an annual session held by The New York State Suffrage Party at the Ritz-Carlton.⁹² Another point of contention in the Women's Suffrage party was race. Lewis states that many members in the Party are uncomfortable with Black women joining their ranks, as well as Black women organizing themselves. She says that her one goal is to get both groups to work together as a unit, by getting Black women to understand White women's discomfort, stating that "There is no such thing as the color line in the Woman Suffrage Party and all women are admitted to membership." In her statement, Lewis undermines Black women, as she says White women should also have the chance to serve over Black districts. She again states that if these women want a voice they should put in the work and become active members. Black women's activism was not only emboldened by white racism, but also hampered by it, as Black women would need to fight for representation in their own activist groups.⁹³

Racism amongst feminist groups would also impact the life of Ida B. Wells, leading to her triumphant episode at the 1913 Women's Suffrage March in Washington. Wells was a notable Black female journalist, civil rights leader, and women's suffragist. She began writing in the mid-1880s while working as a school teacher. In 1892, she had become successful, having published letters and articles in local and national press outlets, such as the *New York Freeman* and the *A.M.E. Church Review*. She is most known for her work with anti-lynching, writing and self-published pamphlets starting in the 1890s, such as *Southern Horrors*, *Lynching and the*

⁹² "15,000 Colored Women to Vote in the Harlem District," *New York Age*, November 22, 1917, 1.

⁹³ "15,000 Colored Women to Vote in the Harlem District," *New York Age*, November 22, 1917.

Excuse For It and *Lynch Laws in America*. Wells wrote these pamphlets to bring awareness to lynching in the United States and expose the media's biases, when discussing black people's, especially Black men's supposed criminality. Ida B. Wells was active in Illinois, which had become Wells' new home after her exile from the South. She wrote about a lynching in Cairo, Illinois and her writings advocating for Black suffrage helped elect Edward Green, a black legislator, to the Illinois legislature in 1904.⁹⁴

Similar to Mulvaney and Darlington's theory, Ida Wells fought for Black suffrage as a whole, not only advocating for suffrage for Black men, but also for Black women. In her essay, "How Enfranchisement Stops Lynching" from 1910, she expressed the idea that it was the duty of Black people to use politics to fight racism and segregation. She viewed the ballot as a moral duty and right that should be given to all sexes and colors. She writes: "With no sacredness of the ballot there can be no sacredness of human life itself ... for if the strong can take the weak man's ballot when it suits his purpose to do so, he will take his life."⁹⁵ Ida B. Wells, along with a white women's suffragist named Belle Squire, founded Alpha Club in 1913 in Chicago. The Alpha Club was an All-Black suffragist organization, created to further suffrage efforts in Illinois, which was on the cusp of being the first Eastern State to grant suffrage. Wells' first priority was to organize black women's fight to vote. The year of 1913 was a sign of hope for Women's suffrage. The Presidential and Municipal Suffrage Bill, which allowed women to vote for presidential electors, mayors, aldermen, and judges, had been passed that year. Additionally, California, Nevada, and Arizona granted women the right to vote.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Patricia A. Schechter, "Thinking Suffrage: Ida B. Wells-Barnett on Faith and Politics," (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street), 2014, Print Page 1

⁹⁵ Schechter, "Thinking Suffrage: Ida B. Wells-Barnett on Faith and Politics," Print Page 3 - 4.

⁹⁶ Paula J. Giddings, "A Noble Endeavor: Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Suffrage," *National Parks Service.gov*, last modified: December 14, 2020.

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/a-noble-endeavor-ida-b-wells-barnett-and-suffrage.htm>

In 1913, Wells had traveled to Washington D.C. representing The Alpha Club in a Suffrage March. During the drill rehearsals for the March, national organizers sent word to Wells that her group would not be marching with the White suffragists, but in the back. Wells responded that “if they did not take a stand now in this great democratic parade then the colored women are lost.” Despite the segregation order, Ida B. Wells did march that day, in between the groups of Belle Squire and Virginia Brooks, two white suffragists. Defiant to authority, Wells marched proudly, surrounded by her fellow women’s suffragists. This daring moment was photographed and displayed in the *Chicago Tribune*.⁹⁷ [Figure 19] The women carried white flags, wearing sashes and special decorated turban hats, all of which were adorned with stars. Some of the women are wearing hat ornaments and pins, placed onto arranged ribbons. Their signs read "Women's Party! Cooks County, Illinois" and "No Vote No Tax." In this moment, Ida B. Wells showed that Black women's voices would be respected, despite injustices within the Women’s Suffrage Movement. Wells herself, marches front and center, wearing a large fur muff and a black suit and coat. She wears a large white sash with stars and a white turban hat. These extra accessories may point to her status as leader of the march. She is standing tall in her attire, demanding respect. Her elegant attire and suffragette sash highlight her confidence and the brilliance of the moment.

⁹⁷ Giddings, "A Noble Endeavor."



Figure 19: *Ida B. Wells and The Alpha Club (1913)*

Conclusion

Fashion, beauty standards, and body image can have a transformative effect on identity. Fashion is driven by our values and changes in our status. An example of this is the relationship between Black women, respectability politics, and ladyhood that occurred during the turn of the century. The New Negro Woman was the beacon of a new era of freedom and opportunity for Black people amongst rampant racial violence, sexual assault, stereotypes, and a horrific past of slavery. Black women's identity and status changed heavily after emancipation and during the twentieth century. These changes in status saw Black women go from slaves in the field to affluent dressmakers, aspiring speakers, and daring activists. Black women used fashion to change their status by becoming modest, desexualizing themselves and their dress. They took on a sense of ladylike elegance and education to combat stereotypes. The goal of the New Negro and the New Negro Woman was to become integrated into White society. The New Negro Woman was not just a construct or an individual, it was a tool for combating injustice. The

movement sought to show White people that Black people could be equals, while countering the idea that racial stereotypes and Black inferiority were biologically determined.

The legacy of the New Negro Woman is a complex one. On one hand, it is the building of modern Black Womanhood and a legacy of racial and feminist civil rights. The construct was a mainstream strategy for racial uplift, and a way to craft Black female identity outside of the stereotypes and trauma of slavery. But on the other hand, New Negro Womanhood has its flaws: namely respectability politics, colorism, and classism. Respectability politics could have dire physical and psychological consequences for Black women. Afiya Mbilishaka argues that these Eurocentric beauty standards caused physical and psychological pain for Black women. The respectability politics and colorist strategies of the 1900s and 1910s would have ripple effects in self-esteem and psychology today. On social media and in offices, Black women must have a neat and respectable appearance, with tight braids and edges laid with styling gel.⁹⁸

Yet, the construct of the New Negro woman emphasizes agency. The New Negro Woman's agency is not just immortalized by words, but by image, allowing for multiple views of this agency. The crafting of a Black feminine identity involved these women's agency whether unconsciously, consciously, or by recommendation from teachers and lecturers, such as Margaret Murray Washington and Mary Church Terrell. Lecturers and teachers could promote ideas, but New Negro Women applied it. Taking on the construct allowed formerly enslaved Black women and their daughters to choose their own fates. Not just a choice in their own clothing, but crafting their own identity. Black women could now own businesses, organize feminist movements, found girls' schools, and become the editors of their own magazines. Despite the flaws of colorist and classist prejudices in the Black community, these advancements are astonishing, considering the Black woman's origins in the United States.

⁹⁸ Mbilishaka, "Combs and Curling Irons,"33.

All of this echoes the legacy of the New Negro Woman, but we should not paint with such a wide brush. Thinking historically means stepping out of our modern contexts and thoughts. These women were making these choices for survival in a Eurocentric society. An attitude born and bred from enslavement and trauma. The colorism and classism of this era in Black history are heavy flaws, but also a byproduct of one strategy for liberation, not the root cause of our problems. This paper does not absolve the New Negro Woman of her flaws, but rather seeks to make them understandable. The New Negro Movement and its respectability politics are not shameful, they are a stepping stone. The New Negro Woman is something to understand, but also to surpass.

Despite the truth in Mbilishaka's claims, I still challenge her position. Rather than seeing the New Negro Woman as a fully harmful or fully benevolent figure of the post enslavement Black zeitgeist, we should look at the construct with nuance. Behind the figure, were a significant number of women who used this construct for their own goals. As stated before fashion and respectability was not a pastime or frivolity, they were a strategy for racial uplift, integration, and advancement. The Negro Movement and the New Negro Woman are not shameful parts of our Black past swept away by the 1960s and 1970s, they are a transformative period in Black history. They are a landmark in Black women's journey that we have long since passed, but must respect.

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