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Spring 1996

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Recommended Citation

Gere, Anne Ruggles, and Sarah R. Robbins. "Gendered Literacy in Black and White: Turn-of-the-Century African-American and European-American Club Women's Printed Texts." Signs 21.3 (1996): 643-678. Print.

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Gendered Literacy in Black and White: Turn-of-the-Century African-American and European-American Club Women's Printed Texts

Anne Ruggles Gere
and Sarah R. Robbins

AT THE TURN OF THE century women across the United States had organized themselves into a variety of single-sex groups to effect social change. Yet most of the shared spaces of agency that women seemed to control were shaped—often, in fact, constrained—by forces beyond them, so that what looked like women-led initiatives functioned in a context where female agency was highly contested.[1] The women's club movement created one such complex social space. Clubs flourished between 1880 and the mid-1920s, leading an estimated two million women from varying class, racial, and ethnic/religious backgrounds to join organizations for self-improvement and so-

We are grateful to the University of Michigan's Rackham Research Partnership for its support, to the Nineteenth Century Club of Oak Park, Illinois, and the Trustees of the Boston Public Library for permission to photograph club documents, and to the anonymous reviewers who responded so helpfully to earlier versions of this article.

[1] For example, Jane Addams's campaign for improved "municipal housekeeping" in the streets and alleys around Hull House was successful in that it forced the city of Chicago's political leaders to improve garbage collections, but Addams soon found herself stripped of the appointed post of garbage inspector; the paid position was given over to a man ([1910] 1990). Florence Kelley's National Consumers' League (NCL) led fights for a reduced workday and a minimum wage but, as Kathryn Kish Sklar points out, often found such efforts "enormously frustrating," not only because of the power still held by supposedly "private" industry, but also because male-dominated social organizations like the American Association for Labor Legislation did not provide support coordinated with the NCL's work (1995, 60). Similarly, despite impressive gains in women's higher education, alarmist rhetoric of physicians and educators purportedly concerned about young women's health being undermined by rigorous study contended with claims for women's education. See, e.g., Moore 1886 or Clarke 1873.

[*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1996, vol. 21, no. 3]
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cial benevolence.[2] Club women from all social locations enacted a variety of cultural practices including pageants, banquets, and musical productions that fostered solidarity within groups and, in some cases, enhanced their standing within the larger community. Producing and circulating their own printed texts constituted another of club women's cultural practices, and these activities occupy our attention here because of their capacity for fostering women's self-representation and because of the cultural authority assigned to print.[3]

While women's clubs contended with continuing denigration of their organizations and their work in the mainstream press, and alternating dismissal or appropriation by men, they retained considerable autonomy in club texts that remained largely outside male-dominated tradition and political power.[4] Specifically, their shared club literacy practices gave both

[2] Although some clubs were formed well before 1880 and many continue to exist today, both their membership and social influence were greatest during the four decades at the turn of the century. Membership in the National Council of Jewish Women peaked at fifty thousand in 1926 (Rogow 1993, 241). Membership in the General Federation of Women's Clubs approached one million in 1926–27 (Blair 1994, 200). In 1923, the National Association of Colored Women (which included a greater range of cross-class membership than its white counterparts) had approximately fifty thousand members (Giddings 1984, 95). Membership in the League of Working Women reached approximately fourteen thousand in 1914 (Reitano 1984, 115). A large number of women from these various social locations plus smaller numbers of Mormon, Catholic, and Native-American women belonged to clubs that maintained no national affiliation (the National Council of Catholic Women was not formed until 1920). While estimates of the number of women involved in these groups vary, it is reasonable to assume that unfederated clubs included almost as many members as the national associations.

[3] Michael Warner's discussion of the cultural meaning of printedness, although it focuses on an earlier historical period, informs much of our thinking about the authority or "political condition of utterance" that marks print (1990, 8). Contests, such as that recounted by Ava Baron (1992), about access to the means of producing print between 1850 and 1920, show its continuing authority and prestige at the turn of the century.

[4] Denigration of women's clubs began with their emergence. The first meeting of New York's Sorosis was greeted with an announcement in the *New York World* of this "authentic though disgusting fact" (March 27, 1868, 5); in 1893, Hannah Solomon prophetically warned founding members of the National Council of Jewish Women to be prepared for critics to "mourn over our neglected children, and wonder how our husbands manage without us" (Rogow 1993, 33). Fannie Barrier Williams, writing in 1905, defended herself and her peers against continuing attack by asserting, "We are scarcely open to the charge that colored women's clubs have had the effect of making us neglect the precious interests of home and motherhood" (3). Even former President Grover Cleveland attacked club women in the pages of the best-selling *Ladies Home Journal*. Charging women's clubs with disturbing "the even tenor of the ways of womanhood" and with threatening "the integrity of our homes," he asserted, "the best and safest club for a woman to patronize is her home" (1905, 4). Karen Blair explains the continuing deprecation of women's abilities in the arts and how this extended to club women's projects in music, visual arts, and theater (1994, see esp. 16–42). Blair's observation that such projects were absorbed into the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s (105–6) shows that denigration extended into appropriation. Similarly, Abigail Van Slyck illustrates how men's groups appropriated the libraries initiated by women's clubs, particularly when Carnegie funds became available (1996).

European-American and African-American club women an avenue to collaborative agency. Products of club literacy practices included letters, papers delivered to the membership, minutes of meetings, petitions, and poems. One of the most significant sites of club literacy practices was the printed texts they published for each other and for larger audiences. Within a subculture shaped by their printed yearbooks, club newspapers, and various occasional pieces, club women constructed an alternative ideology of literacy, fashioned themselves as managers of textual production, and appropriated authority for their own projects of self-education and cultural change. But if their common goal of using literacy to re(de)fine gender roles made European-American and African-American club women's writings similar in several ways, racial differences also shaped their printed texts.[5] We use two brief illustrations from somewhat representative texts—a yearbook and a newspaper—to introduce key terms in our argument about club women's literacy.[6] Then we consider the common features of club women's printed texts before turning to the ways racial differences also shaped these products and processes. This examination represents neither a comprehensive survey nor detailed case studies of individual clubs, but it offers a first step in looking at the complicated and never entirely recoverable textual negotiations enacted by club women at the turn of the century.

Two examples of club texts

On the cover and within the pages of the Oak Park Nineteenth Century Club's printed yearbooks, from 1894 onward, a motto appeared. A quotation from Robert Browning, the line served as headnote for the paper-bound booklets in which the club women listed their officers, general membership, and meeting programs for the year. Today, with the club still active so many years after its 1891 founding, the question may seem merely figurative: "Why stay we on the earth unless to grow?" But through the first few decades of this organization's life, at least, the query would have been discreetly challenging on several counts. First of all, to form themselves into a "we" for self-improvement still made women vul-

[5] Of course, we also recognize that regional differences shaped club texts, as did the unique identities of individual clubs. For example, African-American club women operated under different constraints in the rural South than they did in, say, Boston. We find convincing Linda Nicholson's argument that the meaning of *woman* is better illustrated as "a map of intersecting similarities and differences" than some specific characteristic (1994, 101).

[6] While African-American club women produced yearbooks and European-Americans created national newspapers, the African-American newspaper and European-American yearbook illustrate central priorities and printing practices of these distinct—although related—groups.

nerable to criticism, given the ideology of nineteenth-century domesticity for European-American middle-class females.[7] By the turn of the century, especially in communities like this comfortable suburb of Chicago, gendered middle-class social roles were clear. Men left the house daily to work in the public arenas of capitalistic competition; women stayed home with their children. Although the long tradition of women's charitable work generated some support for clubs that focused on philanthropy, the middle-class wife/mother's primary responsibility was to nurture her family—to "grow" others—not to seek self-fulfillment. Thus, the opportunity for women to "grow" intellectually was often restricted, even for those from the privileged class in this club's member list.

And yet, as their appropriation of the male poet's words so succinctly represents, through reading and writing about the texts listed in their yearbooks, club women like those in Oak Park claimed their own right to grow in a time when their literacy was carefully regulated by a society that actively questioned the appropriateness of higher education for women and offered few organized opportunities for female self-improvement not centered on religion and/or home teaching of children.[8] While foregrounding the ideology of domesticity, and claiming that intellectual growth would enhance their abilities as wives/mothers, white middle-class club women developed new literacy practices for their own purposes. More specifically, by taking control of the technology of print in their club writing—by domesticating it, in a sense—they used their own printed texts to formalize, authorize, and promote this collaborative redesigning of American middle-class femininity.

African-American club women, whose traditions of meeting to share reading and writing extend back to the 1830s, created similar—yet different—printed spaces for controlling and shaping their literacy and their identity.[9] The inaugural issue of *Woman's Era* (1894a), appearing in the

[7] In his *Ladies Home Journal* attack on women's clubs, Cleveland took a particularly harsh stance toward the socially disruptive nature of clubs designed for self-culture or personal growth, arguing that they encouraged woman to focus on her "discontent with the humdrum of her home life" (1905, 4). Other critics of women's clubs included novelist Edith Wharton; satirist Edward Beer (1926); Henry Ford, publisher of the *Dearborn Independent;* and Edward Bok (1908), editor of the *Ladies Home Journal.*

[8] Although, as Barbara Solomon notes, the number of women matriculating in colleges and universities multiplied "almost eightfold" from 1870 to 1900, and the percentage of women among all students rose from 21 percent to 35 percent during the same period, "the very success of collegiate education for women induced strong waves of reaction" (1985, 58). Negative responses to women in higher education echoed through the turn of the century, and G. Stanley Hall's 1908 claim that intellectually ambitious women would "become functionally castrated, unwilling to accept the limitations of married life" typifies the ongoing resistance to women's attempts at self-improvement (quoted in Solomon 1985, 60).

[9] Anne Firor Scott (1990) asserts that "the history of black women's voluntary associations is as long as that of white women's" (5–6) and that "by 1910, in proportion to popu-

same year as the Oak Park white women's printed yearbook, was the first newspaper printed by and for African-American club women. It included several items highlighting the need repeatedly invoked by both black and white club women—to educate themselves for more informed fulfillment of the domestic role. It also included this explanation, written by club secretary Florida Ridley, of the founding of the Woman's Era Club: "The idea of a Woman's Club, not necessarily a colored woman's club, but a club started and led by colored women had been dormant in the minds of a few women of Boston for some time" (*Woman's Era* 1894a, 4).

Ridley's analysis, which the *Era* says had been "read" at a club meeting before being printed in the national newspaper, embodies several of the complicated and sometimes conflicting issues facing African-American club women as they sought to affiliate with their white sisters but also to assert their own unique race-related interests. While her distinction between "a colored woman's club" and "a club started and led by colored women" might seem overly subtle, Ridley goes on to signal some of the specific differences that promoted such careful wording in a text positioning the African-American club women both inside and outside the white women's club movement. Though welcome in theory in many white organizations, Ridley asserts, "colored" women must recognize that some members of their race might feel and/or be excluded in practice.[10]

Nonetheless, while constantly noting the distinctive race-related needs that distinguished them from their white counterparts, African-American club women also recognized crucial gender-related concerns connecting their organizations with European-American women's clubs, and their rhetoric regularly affirmed these bonds. For instance, "Domestic Science," another selection included in this inaugural issue of the *Woman's Era*, showed these club women engaged with the same (self-)educational concerns and methods as their contemporaries in white groups like the

lation, black women had developed at least as many, possibly more, voluntary associations than had their white counterparts" (5); Dorothy B. Porter (1936) describes the work of women's groups such as the Female Literary Society of Philadelphia (founded in 1831), the Minerva Literary Association of Philadelphia (founded in 1834), the African-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston (founded in 1832), and the Ohio Ladies Education Society (founded in 1842) and argues that antislavery organizations weakened the strength of these and similar organizations. See also McHenry, in press.

[10] Indeed Ridley's words proved prophetic in 1900, when Josephine Ruffin, founding president of the Woman's Era Club, was denied entrance to the Biennial of the General Federation as a representative of a colored women's club. (The Federation had accepted the Woman's Era Club without realizing it was composed of African-American women.) Although she could have entered as a representative of the Massachusetts Federation or the New England Woman's Press Club, Ruffin refused on principle, arguing that the original acceptance of the Woman's Era Club should hold. Ruffin's experience of being at first accepted and then, when her color was discerned, rejected from the meeting highlights the complicated position club women of her race occupied in relation to their white peers. See Gere, in press, for a detailed discussion of this event.

one in Oak Park. Drawing simultaneously on the ideology of domesticity and on feminine anxiety about how to carry out at-home responsibilities despite restricted opportunities for learning, the essay begins by asserting, "As the homes are so will the nation be, for the nation is nothing more than a collection of what is produced in the homes" (*Woman's Era* 1894a, 6). Comparing a "civilized home" to a "greenhouse in which are to be grown the choicest products," the piece moves on to emphasize the many and varied types of knowledge that a woman must cultivate in herself to succeed as homemaker and admits that "so broad is the knowledge, so varied the skill, so incessant the performances demanded of her by her office that any woman might well tremble before her responsibilities" (1). Club writers regularly used rhetorical moves such as these to provide justification for the seemingly selfish projects of self-improvement.

In its "News from the Clubs" section, the inaugural issue of the *Woman's Era* included an observation that could easily have been echoed by both white and black club women from New York, Washington, Atlanta, Providence, or Denver as they argued for their own shared agency. Reviewing comments from their recent English guest speaker, Mrs. Laura Ormiston Chant, the Woman's Era Club contribution to the roundup of articles declared, "A great deal of the advice given to women about their staying at home . . . is wrong altogether, for if a woman stays at home too much she will forget how to manage that home. At the club she will get new ideas from other women of how to live and manage her home and great help in training her children, and to gain experience in various domestic trials. Women's clubs are educators of mothers and women who have not homes" (1894a, 4). Like the name "Woman's Era" itself, this call for women's club–centered education echoed others across the nation, justifying club women's efforts to enact gender-shaped literacy practices through reading and writing texts that addressed their lives.[11] Thus, although our analysis of European- and African-American club women's writing will examine race-connected differences in their literacy practices, we believe it is important, first, to outline in more detail common traits within their club-made printed texts. One major focus of the writings of both groups, for instance, relates to their efforts to develop their own model for literacy.

[11] The term *woman's era* can be traced to Frances Harper's 1893 speech at the Chicago Exposition, where she described her audience at the World's Congress of Representative Women as standing "on the threshold of woman's era" (Carby 1987, 1). Harper, a frequent speaker at African-American women's clubs, served as a vice president of the National Association of Colored Women, and several clubs (in St. Paul, Jefferson City, and St. Louis, for example) were named after her.

Club women's redefinitions of literacy

Clubs offered both white and black women spaces in which they developed and enacted ideologies of literacy that stood in contrast to those of the larger society, which, as instantiated in schools, legislation, and public policy discussions, figured literacy as secular, gendered, and asymmetrical. Beginning with the colonial period, tax-supported schools had reinforced Puritan values with a standardized progression of texts from the hornbook, to the primer, Psalter, and Bible that guaranteed exposure to the religious codes of the community. But, by the last decades of the nineteenth century, secularization, aided by the forces of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration, prevailed. Even though literacy still carried strong moral force, particularly with regard to citizenship and patriotism, it served secular rather than religious functions.[12] Literacy's secular nature heightened its importance to the worlds of work from which women were still largely excluded at the turn of the century.

Women also had a long history of exclusion from literacy itself. As Jennifer Monoghan has documented, women were discouraged from writing (although not necessarily from reading) during the colonial period, and concerns about women's use of the pen continued through the end of the nineteenth century.[13] While reading cannot be described as entirely passive—readers do, after all, actively construct texts in their heads—it provides only limited opportunity for the individual to constitute a new relationship to the culture. The introduction of writing changes the nature of reading, transforming it from a public performance to what Francois Furet and Jacques Ozouf describe as "a great silence,

[12] See Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens's (1981) discussion of the changing role of literacy in American society, beginning in the later years of the nineteenth century. See also their treatment of the shifting of greater responsibility for helping children acquire literacy and its purportedly attendant political and economic benefits to the common school and away from the maternal teacher at home.

[13] Monoghan 1989 documents the gendered nature of literacy acquisition in the colonial period. Reading instruction began in dame schools, run by women and housed in their homes, where children decoded texts orally, using an alphabetic method of spelling out words and syllables. Comprehension in reading was ignored or assumed, and because "the child did not write in the course of learning to read, the teacher did not need to know how to write either" (58). Writing instruction, directed by male writing masters, was more expensive because it required consumable paper and quill pens cost more than reusable books, and parents, who saw their male children headed for business careers that necessitated writing, often omitted this instruction for female children. Instead of the pen, women were encouraged to use the needle, and images of women doing needlework in preference to writing persisted throughout the nineteenth century. As Rozsika Parker put it, "Domestic arts were equated with virtue because they ensured that women remain at home and refrain from book learning. Ignorance was equated with innocence; domesticity was a defense against promiscuity. By the late 19th century, embroidery was to become synonymous with chastity" (1984, 75).

inside which the individual carves out a private space for himself" (1982, 310). As enacted in schooling and cultural expectations, literacy functioned in gendered and asymmetrical terms.

An immigration bill passed in 1917 offers an accurate representation of dominant views of literacy at the turn of the century. Congressional debates about the fin de siècle wave of immigration eventuated in legislation that required a reading test of all would-be newcomers.[14] This law applied only to male immigrants, reinforcing, thereby, the long-standing gendered view of literacy that required different capacities of men and women. In requiring reading but no writing, this bill underscored an asymmetrical version of literacy that had emerged during the colonial period. Those who supported (and drafted) the Literacy Act conceptualized literacy only in its consuming mode, as the taking in of text. By defining literacy in the gendered and asymmetrical terms that required immigrants to "read the words printed on the slip" of paper, the 1917 bill gave prominence to its public and performative aspects, minimizing its personal and secretive force. The lack of any attention to religious dimensions in this literacy requirement underscored the secular posture literacy had assumed.

Although the dominant culture at the turn of the century constructed literacy in clear terms, club women created for themselves spaces in which they resisted and/or redesigned these terms. Meeting in homes and club rooms, members controlled access to their minutes and financial records, guarded club transactions from the gaze of nonmembers, and attempted to regulate representations of themselves in the public press.[15] Through

[14] Beginning in the late 1880s, Congress struggled with legislation that required literacy of all immigrants. Each of the three presidents preceding Woodrow Wilson vetoed such bills, but in 1917, Congress overrode Wilson's veto to pass Public Act no. 301, which excluded from immigration "all aliens over sixteen years of age, physically capable of reading who can not read the English language, or some other language or dialect, including Hebrew or Yiddish."

[15] Records show that even members were not always allowed full access to club materials. The Saturday Morning Club, e.g., required written permission for members to view the contents of its "Green Trunk" archive (letter from Eleanor W. Allen to Miss Fitz, June 16, 1921, Saturday Morning Club records, Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, Mass.). Even today, many clubs, including the Nineteenth Century Club, resist depositing their records with archives because they wish to retain control over them. (We viewed the Nineteenth Century Club's records, with special permission of the officers, at the clubhouse in Oak Park.) Many clubs avoided publicity altogether, e.g.: "An imperative rule of the New Century Club has been from the first that no public reports should ever be made of its work or its meetings. This rule has been relaxed of later years. But in the beginning, in so conservative a city as Philadelphia, it was necessary to woman's club life and growth" (Croly 1898, 1023). Others limited reporters' access to sensitive discussions, and still others wrote their own reports of their work and offered them to local newspapers for publication. Mrs. Waldon, president of Denver's African American Taka Club, became enraged "when someone told her that some member of the club was talking club news to other than club members, and she would find out who it was if it was the last thing she did" (Dickson 1982, 155).

these efforts, club women created shared zones of privacy wherein they determined, to a large degree, "when, how and to what extent information about them [was] communicated to others" (Innes 1992, 58). Thus partially screened from the dominant culture and its attempts at regulation, club women could appear to accept social constraints while quietly (re)defining literacy in their own terms. The lines from the *Woman's Era* describing clubs as places where a woman could learn "how to live and manage her home and [get] great help in training her children" illustrate the conservative rhetoric of female domesticity behind which women could collaboratively construct their own ideology of literacy. This ideology balanced reading with writing. While club women in all social locations certainly read, they also wrote extensively. In addition to publications such as the Nineteenth Century Club yearbooks and the *Woman's Era,* they wrote constitutions and bylaws, minutes of meetings, letters, memorial statements about deceased members, poems, papers delivered at meetings, scripts for plays, club histories, and resolutions.

Both in their choices of texts and in the ways they read and wrote, club women worked against the gendered literacy fostered by the dominant culture. During the nineteenth century, as Kate Flint has observed, discussions about the dangers of women's reading moved from "specialist texts to a range of publications with the potential to reach a wider readership," reflecting an increased cultural anxiety (1993, 57). In addition to warnings about the potential loss of fertility, health, and sanity consequent to reading, the popular press included many forms of advice on books suitable for women. Although club women noted and often adhered to some of the admonitions offered by the American Library Association, the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, or Edward Bok in the *Ladies Home Journal,* they also moved beyond recommended texts to read books by Sarah Grand, Margaret Deland, Frances Harper, or Anna Cooper. Even Ibsen's *A Doll's House* found its way onto club programs, as did other club women's writing. Club women's textual transgressions extended to *how* as well as what they read. Through shared readings of texts, committee assignments for writing, lively discussions of their own and others' compositions, and regular sharing with other clubs, these women enacted literacy in collaborative, interactive, and highly social terms.[16]

By sharing and circulating their texts in these ways, club women enacted an ideology of literacy consistent with Michael Shapiro's view of writing as a political act, a form of "representation" that does not simply "imitate reality" but, rather, carries out a practice "through which things

[16] See Gere 1994 for a detailed discussion of the social and collaborative nature of club women's literacy practices.

take on meaning and value" (1988, xi). Like Shapiro, we emphasize that discourse, as politicized representation, can both (and sometimes even simultaneously) reinforce and challenge received value/meaning systems, so that club women's readings and writings could, on one level, reaffirm a female social role consistent with the "traditional" view of "woman's place" (i.e., *in* and *for* the home) yet on another level work to redefine that space, its attendant responsibilities, and middle-class women's identities. Hence, for instance, the seemingly roundabout rhetoric of Mrs. Chant's contribution to the *Woman's Era,* cited earlier. (She reaffirms *and* redefines domesticity by claiming that "if a woman stays at home too much she will forget how to manage that home.") In a broader context, we might view both Mrs. Chant's specific phrasing and the literacy often practiced in turn-of-the-century clubs as characteristic of what Judith Butler has called "gender performativity," an agency-crafting move that can draw, in sometimes paradoxical ways, on "discursive conventions" to shape individual and cultural change.[17]

Preparing and sharing their own printed texts played an especially important part in this process because, by the turn of the century, technological advances in papermaking and in printing itself, along with passage of the international copyright law in 1891 and the continuing professionalization of the literary marketplace, all combined to lend new prominence to print's position of authority in American culture. Evidence of this heightened stature for printed text appeared as increased numbers of authors became self-supporting professionals, as modern mass literary media emerged, and, as Christopher Wilson puts it, "the American marketplace of words finally achieved a fully national reach and modern structure" (1985, 2). Small wonder, then, that, as Barbara Sicherman has suggested, by the turn of the century, "the printed word was venerated" (1989, 215).

In exploring printed texts as a particular site and practice of club women's textual negotiations, therefore, we see print itself as an especially complex conjunction of the public and the private exercise of literacy. Preparing their own printed texts played a crucial part in club women's efforts to redefine their literacy and—simultaneously—themselves. In ap-

[17] Butler, writing in part in reaction to Seyla Benhabib's reading of her "theory of performativity" (1995, 133), observes, "I would argue that there is no possibility of standing outside of the discursive conventions by which 'we' are constituted, but only the possibility of reworking the very conventions by which we are enabled. Gender performativity is not a question of instrumentally deploying a 'masquerade,' for such a construal of performativity presupposes an intentional subject behind the deed. On the contrary, gender performativity involves the difficult labor of deriving agency from the very power regimes which constitute us, and which we oppose. This is, oddly enough, historical work, reworking the historicity of the signifier, and no recourse to quasi-transcendental selfhood and inflated concepts of History will help us in this most concrete and paradoxical of struggles" (136).

propriating the authority of print to publish their own club materials, club women also assumed increased control over their self-representation while addressing multiple audiences. On the one hand, these printed texts anticipated a kind of private, individual reader who could shape meaning in unanticipated ways, so that the printed club writing invited personal reformation.[18] On the other hand, these texts were also crafted for the whole club audience. Thus, developing our interpretation of turn-of-the-century club women's printed texts as central to their ongoing self-education, group-identity-making, and cultural reformation efforts necessitates, first, an emphasis on *print* as an ideological/contested term and, second, a close examination of its use in the specific context of the women's club movement during that era.

Club women's printing

Print is usually conceptualized as a technology, its meaning identified with a machine-based process or an unchanging material reality appearing on a page. An alternative to the more common technological view of printing, an ideological model assumes that printing, like other aspects of culture, interacts with, shapes, and is shaped by the various contexts in which it appears and that even the practices of its technology are structured as a meaningful dimension of culture. Here we identify print as more than multiple identical copies of a given text and seek to avoid what Michael Warner calls "technological determinism," a belief that "technology has an ontological status prior to culture" (1990, 6–7).[19] In the printed texts of club women, we see more than their expedient adoption of new technology to circulate versions of themselves and their activities

[18] Drawing on work by Geoffrey Bantock, Soltow and Stevens have argued that *printed words,* as opposed to other forms and products of literate activity like oral communication, carry with them an implied possibility for "personal psychic mobility and acceptance of change," because "the experiences which [print attempts] to convey and to link to future behavior become private and idiosyncratic compared with the impact of oral communication" (1981, 60). Because print by its very nature assumes the probability of an individual reader who can shape meaning in unanticipated ways, in other words, it invites personal refashioning.

[19] This view makes it possible to assign a rather uncomplicated agency to printing, as Elizabeth Eisenstein does in titling her book *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979), and as Allan Dooley does as he begins his book with the assertion that "the central proposition of this study is that printing technology shapes texts" (1992, 1). For Eisenstein, Dooley, and the many others who see it in technological terms, printing exists as an entity separate from culture and thus not only accompanies but actually *causes* change. This technological view implies that print carries with it certain fixed qualities that impose themselves on human minds and behaviors regardless of the specific cultural context. At the same time that this underconceptualizes print, it also treats script reductively because, as Jonathan Goldberg (1990), among others, has demonstrated, script can assume features—such as permanence and authority, accuracy and private silent reading—assigned to print.

among their own membership and to the larger culture. We also see complicated attempts to redesign literacy and, simultaneously, the club women's individual and group identities. Like historian Natalie Zemon Davis, who describes a printed book "not merely as a source for ideas and images" but also "as a carrier of relationships," we believe that "social structure and values channel the uses of literacy and printing" (1975, 192).[20] In the case of turn-of-the-century club women, then, both their particularly situated club membership itself and the shared values for literacy associated with that affiliation affected the ways they consumed and produced printed texts together.

Paramount among those purposes was achieving an authoritative brand of resistance against others' printed representations of club women and their activities. After all, stereotypical portrayals of them in mainstream magazines, from the emergence of the club movement after the Civil War through the middle of the twentieth century, were hardly flattering. With both words and images, these printed representations created by others trivialized club women and their activities, erasing not only the dynamic, sometimes contradictory aspects in much of their shared literacy but also the individual differences distinguishing the activities of different groups and specific individual women within these groups.[21] In response, club women looked to print as a means of displaying or advertising themselves in their own terms. Minutes of the African-American Women's Improvement Club of Indianapolis, for example, include this

[20] Davis focuses on the reading of social groups in sixteenth-century France, whereas we explore the reading and writing of Progressive Era club women. But much of Davis's view of print is consistent with ours. She argues, e.g., that the readers she studies "were not passive recipients (neither passive beneficiaries nor passive victims) of a new type of communication. Rather they were active users and interpreters of the printed books they heard and read, and even helped give these books form" (1975, 225). See also Roger Chartier, who describes print culture as "the set of new acts arising out of the production of writing and pictures in a new form" to introduce a series of case/object studies that focus on printed matter other than books, emphasize particularity, and examine the use of printed materials "within the precise, local, specific context that alone gave them meaning" (1989, 3). Jerome McGann also makes a related point as he examines the relation between fine-press printing and the modernist poets, arguing that the modernists used print for their own sociopolitical purposes of exploring the physicality of language, its resources as "a literal event (an event of letters)" (1993, 179).

[21] Nearly all the newspaper and magazine representations of women's clubs portrayed them as groups of silly white middle-class women, simultaneously rendering African-American club women invisible and trivializing the activities of all club women. Most humorous commentaries emphasized the theme of the world turned upside-down by women entering the public realm. Sorosis, founded in 1868 by women denied entrance to the New York Press Club's dinner for Charles Dickens, was a particular target of critics. Cartoons featured men holding babies and/or knitting while stern and umbrella-pointing women conducted meetings (see *Harpers Weekly* 1869 and "Sorosis Society, c. 1870" for examples). Written commentaries joked with remarks such as "Woman has laid down the broomstick to pick up the club" (Blair 1980, 24) and "the stiffest crinoline encircles the severest virtues" ("The New Ladies Club"). Helen Hokinson (1956), who drew cartoons

comment: "The President asked for expressions from the members concerning the printing of a folder setting forth the history of the club . . . this folder to be sent out with all communications of the club as an advertisement of our work."[22] This self-published variation on the literary marketplace became a new space where women could draw on the authority and power of print to "sell" their own brand of literacy and the representations of womanhood depicted therein directly to other women without having to tailor their writing to the restrictions of the male-administered publishing industry. Explicit statements of this intent appear in the records of European-American club women such as this excerpt from the minutes of the Indianapolis Women's Club (IWC): "The committee recommend that following the example of Sorosis, the New England and the New Century, the IWC at the end of each club year have printed—in the neat pamphlet form adopted by the New Century—the annual reports of its officers, and that copies of these be in the hands of the Cor Sec [Corresponding Secretary] to send to other clubs throughout our own and neighboring states to those who make application for aid in forming mutual improvement circles similar to our own."[23]

Club women's production of printed texts for their own audiences and purposes paralleled the female literary marketplace of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, in some ways, club women were more successful in this effort than the professional women authors whose names were well known during their own day and who are being reappreciated through current feminist scholarship. Although American women novelists, magazine editors, and authors of children's literature had clearly emerged as professional writers well before the turn of the century, their paid labor in words was carefully regulated by male publishers who managed (and thus often constrained) women's professional writing.[24] In contrast, club women created and regulated their own printed

to the captions of James Reed Parker, portrayed club women as overweight, middle-aged whites saying things such as "I'm sorry, Madame President, there won't be any treasurer's report this month because we have a deficit," or "The Garden Committee reports that Mrs. Bernard Thayer, Mrs. Harrison S. Quigley and Mrs. Thompson Sperry have all seen pussy willows."

[22] Minutes, September 24, 1909, Women's Improvement Club, W. H. Smith Memorial Library, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

[23] Minutes, November 3, 1882, Indianapolis Women's Club, W. H. Smith Memorial Library, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

[24] Although, as Susan Coultrap-McQuin (1990) has noted, women achieved success in the literary marketplace well before the turn of the century, even highly successful writers such as Susan Warner and Rebecca Harding Davis had to fit their plots to the requirements of their male publishers. See Olsen 1965, 69; Tompkins 1985, 31; and Yellin 1990, 287–90. An 1854 male reviewer of Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* wrote: "If Fanny Fern were a man,—a man who believed that the gratification of revenge were a proper occupation for one who has been abused, and that those who have injured us are fair game, Ruth Hall would be a natural and excusable book. But we confess that we cannot understand how a

texts with relatively few male restrictions placed on production and dissemination. As club officers contracted with printers and oversaw their work, in fact, the more traditional relations of female labor being directed by male management were inverted. Many clubs established, along with programming and nominating committees, printing committees to oversee club printing and negotiate with local printers, as many club records indicate. Records of Boston's New England Women's Club (a white women's club founded in 1868), for instance, include mention of the printing committee beginning in 1880. As this excerpt from the 1900 minutes of the Naugatuck Study Club indicates, club women did not hesitate to exert their managerial authority over the (male) printers they hired: "The corresponding secretary reported an interview with Mr. Perry regarding the prospectus not being satisfactory to the club, the work and the paper being inferior to that of previous years. Mr. Perry expressed regret and promised it right, which he accordingly did."[25] The combination of their economic power to purchase the services of printers and their collectively developed standards of quality led club women to assume administrative roles often denied them by the larger society.

In addition to this common goal of controlling self-representation, European- and African-American club women's printed texts shared several other key features, including ritualistic, tradition-building traits. Club yearbooks, in particular, used print to stress a sense of history, and the link between printed presentation and tradition building is clear when we trace the development of individual clubs' publications over the years. The 1889 issue of the New England Club's yearbook, for example, included the annual calendar, the 1899 edition added a list of all members, and the 1918 version inserted a history of the club's first forty years. This evolution from a bare listing of names to a fuller description of the membership and activities of the club typifies the development of yearbooks in many clubs. As clubs established a history and tradition, they used print to display and lend authority to their past. Minutes of the Chautauqua Circle, an African-American women's club founded in Atlanta in 1913, indicate that this group allocated funds for a yearbook within its first year of existence: "Mrs. Johnson stated for the program committee

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delicate suffering woman can hunt down even her persecutors so remorselessly. We cannot think so highly of [such] an author's womanly gentleness" (Warren 1992, ix). Turn-of-the-century writers such as Kate Chopin and Sarah Orne Jewett never achieved canonical status, and Willa Cather achieved and then lost it because, as Sharon O'Brien explains, "the literary men who defined the canon during this period placed Willa Cather in the foothills of American literature—the appropriate landscape, many critics assumed, for a woman writer" (1989, 242).

[25] Olive M. Foltz, "Eightieth Anniversary—Women's Study Club" (paper delivered to club members, Naugautuck, Conn., September 19, 1974). Private communication to Anne Ruggles Gere.

that as a personal favor the printer would make 50 books for $3 using black letters on the back. It was voted that the committee have the work done. To pay for these books it was voted that $2.25 be drawn from the treasury and that the ladies be assessed 5 cents each to make up the difference."[26] Discussions of the yearbook continually punctuate the minutes of the Chautauqua Circle: "The committee on yearbooks reported that the books cost $5. The committee was asked to find the cost of 50 more books. A motion was carried that the secretary send a yearbook to the honorary members of the circle."[27] This type of attention to the cost of production and the terms of circulation of club yearbooks appears in the record books of many clubs. For some smaller clubs (with fewer than fifty members) printing yearbooks represented one of the major items in the annual budget, but even in the face of financial difficulties, few clubs relinquished the printed yearbook. Instead, they exhibited pride in the continuity of their printed texts, as did this historian of the Monday Club in Clinton, New York: "The first calendar was written in long hand in 1897. In the following year it was typewritten. Since that time, for thirty-eight years without a break, the yearbook of the Monday Club has been printed every spring in the print shop of Mr. H. P. Osborne."[28]

As the Monday Club records suggest, printed yearbooks created historic significance for individual clubs. Even though their activities often remained invisible to the larger culture, clubs asserted their own importance by regularly chronicling the significant persons and events of their organization in a form recognized as authoritative. At the turn of the century both European-American and African-American club women belonged to what might be described as a subculture. Prohibited, on the basis of gender, from voting, attending many colleges, and assuming most professional roles, they could not be described as citizens in the same terms as their male counterparts. Printing fostered their subculture by creating texts that Michael Warner describes as "normally impersonal," ones by which "the reader does not simply imagine him- or herself receiving a direct communication or hearing the voice of the author. He or she now also incorporates *into the meaning of the printed object* an awareness of the potentially limitless others who may also be reading. For that reason, it becomes possible to imagine oneself, in the act of reading, becoming part of an arena of the national people that cannot be realized except through such mediating imaginings" (1990, xiii). Warner argues that the

[26] Minutes, November 25, 1913, Chautauqua Circle, Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center.

[27] Minutes, November 19, 1915, Chautauqua Circle.

[28] This statement is included in a paper written and presented at the Monday Club by Eleanor Benton on the occasion of the club's fiftieth anniversary, May 18, 1942, 1, Hamilton College Library Archive, Clinton, N.Y.

concept of print as normally impersonal emerged in this country in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as individuals, through reading, began to see themselves participating in a national culture.

We extend his argument to the subculture constituted by club women because it, like the earlier republic, brought together an emerging political language (for women) with new rules for discourse in the relatively private yet potentially expansive sphere of the club. Thus, for turn-of-the-century club women as for earlier American male political writers, printed text served as both representation and promoter of language as political change agent. Club women who read printed texts composed by other club women could, despite separations of time and distance, imagine themselves as part of a larger federation of women's clubs.[29] They could, thereby, inhabit new discourses, new ways of thinking about themselves and their positions in the social world. Kate Flint has argued that the woman reader of literature created a community that stretched "beyond the reader's immediate social world to incorporate other readers whom she may never meet in person, but with whom she shares horizons of expectations which have to a significant extent been built up through their common reading material" (1993, 42).[30] We, in turn, argue that the printed texts club women themselves produced opened new horizons of expectations for both writers and readers.

African-American club women's uses of print

The contours of these horizons varied with club women's social locations, and race was a major factor shaping such differences. In their purposes and priorities for creating printed texts, as well as in some of the genres they tended to use most frequently and the extraclub audiences to whom they wrote, African-American and European-American club women made different choices consistent with race-related needs. A typical indication of these contrasts appears in S. Elizabeth Frazier's introduction to Victoria Earle Matthews that appeared in the second number of the *Woman's Era* (1894b; see fig. 1). Frazier begins, "We read daily of the progress women are making for the elevation of their sex and we are proud to note noble examples among us, who follow in their train, laboring earnestly, yet modestly for their sex and the upbuilding of the race.

[29] See Robbins's (1994) analysis, in her treatment of Jane Addams's Rockford College experiences, of a similar process linking the women college readers of newspapers and magazines from around the country as they regularly exchanged copies of their publications during the late nineteenth century.

[30] For a variation on this argument, see Barbara Sicherman's "Sense and Sensibility," where she describes the "symbolic code and shorthand for experience" the Hamilton family was able to draw on "throughout their lives" to communicate, even when geographically distant, on the basis of readings they had shared (1989, 209).

The Woman's Era.

VOL. I. NO. 2. BOSTON, MASS., TUESDAY, MAY 1, 1894. PRICE 10 CENTS.

THE WOMAN'S ERA.

The WOMAN'S ERA, the organ of the Woman's Era Club, and devoted to the interests of the women's Clubs, Leagues and Societies throughout the country.

Published monthly in Boston, by

JOSEPHINE ST. P. RUFFIN.
FLORIDA RIDLEY.
Editors and Publishers

Special Contributors.

MEDORA W. GOULD, LESLIE WILMOT, MARION RIDLEY, IRENE DE MORTIE, HANNAH SMITH, M. ELIZABETH JOHNSON,

Entered at the Boston, Mass., Post Office as Second Class Mail Matter,

Subscriptions.

PER ANNUM $1 00
SINGLE COPIES, . . . 10
RATES TO CLUBS, One Hundred Copies, 7 00

Checks, drafts and post-office orders should be made payable to the WOMAN'S ERA. All communications should be addressed to

"THE WOMAN'S ERA,"

185—187 CAMMBRIDGE STREET.

MRS. WM. E. MATTHEWS
(VICTORIA EARLE.)

We read daily of the progres women are making for the elevation of their sex and we are prouds to note noble examples among us, who follow in their train, laboring earnestly yet modestly for their sex and the upbuilding of the race. Surely we cannot know too much of their genius and merits, for the inspiration of our girls.

Among our prominent progressive women is Mrs. William E. Matthews, known in the literary world as "Victoria Earle."

Mrs. Matthews, so desirous of doing what she can for her race, with a few others saw the practical need of banding together well-thinking women with the hope that they might in their generation pave the way for the success of the futurity of the race, and organized The Woman's Loyal Union. We are favored to exist in the seed planting time.

Mrs. Matthews has been the president of the Woman's Loyal Union since its organization.

Its members have found her loyal, unswerving' embracing every opportunity for the accomplishment of the aims of the Union.

Realizing the wrongs perpetrated upon our race in the South, the injury occasioned by opinions that have been freely expressed in several leading magazines and newspapers, as to the retrogression of the race morally, Mrs. Matthews has been exceedingly anxious to ascertain the truth of such statements.

With this idea in view she wrote a set of questions, submitted them to the executive board of the Union with the hope of their approval, and expressed the desire to have said questions sent to the ministers, school teachers and other representative men and women throughout the country for the purpose of eliciting from them the true statistics of our people morally.

The [illegible] is bright, progressive. We, co-workers, appreciate her efforts, her executive ability, and shall ever give her our hearty support.

"Her great fondness for research and her splendid memory make her quite an authority on literature, art, history and philosophy. Her historical researches have led her to the determination to write a series of text books, historical primers for the youth of the race, which will trace the history of the African and show that he and his descendants have been prominently identified with every phase of this country's history including the landing of Columbus.

She has also a number of stories and a play which is yet unpublished.

When all these shall have been given to the public, race literature will be enriched and the name of Victoria Earle become a household word."

S. ELIZABETH FRAZIER,
141 West 17th street,
New York City.

This month our title page has a cut and sketch of Mrs. W. E. Mathews, '(Vctoria Earle) president of the Women's Loyal Union of New York and Brooklyn. As well know as is Mrs. Mathews, her face and history are comparatively new to people of this section who will be delighted with this opportunity to make a closer acquantance with this distinguished lady.

Our readers who need to have any tailoring work done are urged to patronize Miss Butler, 84 Mason st. Boston.

See Ad.

FIG. 1 *Woman's Era*, vol. 1, no. 2 (May 1, 1894). Courtesy of the Trustees of Boston Public Library.

Surely we cannot know too much of their genius and merits, for the inspiration of our girls." Starting with a statement about the accomplishments of women in general, Frazier moves quickly to those who work "for their sex and the upbuilding of the race," couching this activism in terms of "laboring . . . modestly." Introducing Matthews as one who organized a club to help the race, Frazier uses her own printed text to explain Matthews's attempts to redress "the wrongs perpetrated upon our race" by "leading magazines and newspapers." Frazier also draws attention to Matthews's plan to write "historical primers for the youth of the race." In positioning Matthews as working for both women's progress and that of the race, Frazier echoes Florida Ridley's characterization of "a Woman's Club, *not* necessarily a colored woman's club, *but* a club started and led by colored women." Like Ridley, she seeks to craft a qualified rhetorical space paralleling the complicated social one occupied by African-American women's clubs themselves—a site connected to yet distinct from those white groups also committed to "the progress women are making" but not fully invested in the particular needs of African-Americans. Embedded within Frazier's prose, in other words, is a recognition of the contested nature of such a phrase as "the progress women are making" and a willingness both to define it somewhat differently from her white contemporaries and to seek to adjust their thinking through a sharing of her own in print. The printed text itself, in this case, helps to redefine for European- and African-American women readers the points of overlap and of distinction between the two groups and their club-associated literacy practices.

This complicated move is replicated in more epigrammatic fashion in the motto the Woman's Era Club printed at the beginning of its report for the newspaper—"Help to make the world better." With its announcement of the group's commitment to foster improvement, this motto matches the "to grow" one for the white Oak Park club cited at the beginning of our article. But the notably broader focus here—to improve the whole "world" rather than merely "to grow" through shared learning—also suggests a crucial way in which the Woman's Era Club was not like white women's groups, which tended to be far more focused on local concerns, far less inclined to conceive of their work in terms of whole populations. As our analysis of additional writings from the two groups will show, whereas African-American club women's printed texts often directed their self-consciously reformist enterprise directly outward to the whole society, white club women's were more likely to be indirect, to represent club-based education as leading first to particular domestic and/or local rather than broad cultural improvement. Despite their commonalties, in other words, the "we" of membership and the goals of shared

literacy carried different meanings for African-American and European-American club women.

The meanings attached to print by African-American club women drew on slave-era representations of blacks as uneducated and uneducable. Reconstruction fueled vicious discourses about the limitations of African-Americans that persisted into the twentieth century. Many of them centered on questions of literacy, and some were crafted by other women—a fact that highlighted the double jeopardy faced by women of color.[31] Some white club women even joined in deprecating blacks in terms of literacy. An explanation of the Oklahoma Federation's long-term commitment to women's suffrage includes this statement: "By the Fifteenth Amendment . . . suffrage was conferred on thousands of negroes, the vast majority of whom possessed little or no property and could neither read nor write" (Rainey 1939, 20). As numbers of researchers have documented, during the slave era, African-Americans in both the North and South had frequently been prohibited from reading and writing because, in addition to the practical fact that these skills might have enabled them to write their own passes to freedom, literacy provided a measure by which whites defined themselves as distinct from African-Americans, thereby justifying slavery.[32] Because withholding literacy provided one means for maintaining a false distinction between white owner and African-American slaves, reading and writing assumed special importance for both groups after the Civil War. By clinging to the construct of the illiterate African-American, European-Americans could retain distance from these newly enfranchised fellow citizens. As Matthews's planned history primers (to show that Africans "have been prominently

[31] In 1904, Eleanor Tayleur, e.g., described the African-American woman as decadent, animalistic, and Frankenstein-like and claimed: "It is nothing uncommon to see a girl go to school, session after session, for eight or ten years, without achieving anything more than the ability to read and write like a child in the second grade. . . . This tentative education . . . implant[s] in her breast an insatiable ambition to be a school-teacher—an ambition that must be futile unless the supply of scholars can be miraculously increased, or the Government subsidizes every kinky-headed little coon and farms him out among the several million negro girls . . . who are looking forward to the glorious career of being school-ma'ams" (1904, 269).

[32] Michael Warner (1990) makes this point explicitly as he observes that "white colonists early learned to think of themselves as inhabiting the pure language of writing and to think of blacks as inhabiting a dialect, a particularized speech that expressed their racial nature." Lacking mastery of "pure" and universal language suited blacks for servitude while "reading was a way of being white" (13–14). As Sarah Robbins observes, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can be read as a testimony to the (social) empowerment enabled by literacy. Harriet Beecher Stowe realized "that shared literacy was a potentially efficacious tool for undermining slavery" (1993, 136). In her *Key* Stowe asserts that literacy for slaves threatened the status quo because "the result of education would be general intelligence; that the result of intelligence would be a knowledge of personal rights; and that an inquiry into the doctrine of personal rights would be fatal to the system" (1896, 349).

identified with every phase of this country's history including the landing of Columbus") indicate, African-Americans, in contrast, saw literacy as a means of countering stereotypes that reduced them to subhuman terms and as a way of affirming their importance to the nation.[33]

Representing their literacy in print thus carried special implications for African-Americans.[34] Both the means of production and the results of printing implied ownership, something long unattainable for persons who had been themselves considered the property of others or who were, through racist generalization, associated with those classed as property. Because printing presses operated within a capitalistic system of private ownership and because the texts produced by printing presses were purchased by individuals for their own use, printing served, through the end of the Civil War, to emphasize the differences between propertied white males and the "others" to whom the means for and products of printing were less available. These factors contributed to the importance African-Americans attached to print. The first "race" paper, *Freedom's Journal,* began publication in 1827, and by 1921, there were 492 papers published by African-Americans. Of these, according to Frederick Detweiler ([1922] 1968), 253 were weekly newspapers dealing with race issues. Categories of news included sports, the city, the country, the church, the lodge, the school, politics, society, music, and theater. Because none of these categories focused on women directly, it is not surprising that club women faced difficulty getting adequate representation in such papers. Minutes of the Indianapolis Women's Improvement Club, for example, include this exchange:

> Mrs. Brown asked if any members of the club wished to purchase the picture of the [club-sponsored] camp [for tuberculosis patients] which recently appeared in the *Sunday Star.* Mrs. Porter expressed her opinion of the unfairness of the advertisement of a few of the members of [the] club contributing to the support and success of

[33] Frances Harper, e.g., in 1870, during a visit to Athens, Georgia, wrote: "Here is ignorance to be instructed; a race who needs to be helped up to higher planes of thought and action; and whether we are hindered or helped, we should try to be true to the commission God has written upon our souls. . . . I don't think that I have visited scarcely a place since last August where there was no desire for a teacher; and Mr. Fidler, who is a Captain or Colonel, thought some time since that there were more colored than white who were learning or had learned to read" (1990, 124–25). By 1888, writing an essay for the *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review,* Harper could observe, "Schools have sprung up like wells in the desert dust, bringing the races nearer together on the intellectual plane, while as a participant in the wealth of society the colored man has, I believe, in some instances, left his former master behind in the race for wealth" (284).

[34] We recognize that the freedoms enjoyed by African-Americans in the North differed significantly from those in the South, but regional distinctions usually faded when racist charges were made.

> the camp, when all have taken an interest in the camp and have at some time contributed to its success. After remarks from Mesdames Hummons, Baby and Bond, Mrs. Brown stated that she had given the names of all the members of the club to the reporter, but that they had been cut at the office to the names of those only who appeared in the picture.[35]

If we credit Mrs. Brown's account, it seems clear that editors of the *Sunday Star* denied the Women's Improvement Club the right to full self-representation. Not altogether coincidentally, at this same meeting the Women's Improvement Club allocated funds to print a folder about its work.

Although allied with the men of their race in many ways, African-American club women experienced gender-induced divisions in this solidarity. Records echo with complaints about race papers ignoring or misrepresenting club work, and club women, not surprisingly, emulated their male counterparts by establishing their own publications. While *Freedom's Journal* emerged "as a means of answering attacks on blacks by another newspaper" (Wolseley 1990, 25), the *Woman's Era*, according to editor Josephine Ruffin in an 1894 editorial, was instituted to provide a space where "educated and refined" women of color could, despite geographical distances, mingle with other "people of culture."[36] From its first issue, the *Woman's Era* also served as a vehicle for communication among clubs, publishing reports of club activities, papers written by club women, editorials, and fiction. Information from clubs in New York, Washington, D.C., Kansas City, New Bedford, Massachusetts, and Providence, Rhode Island, for example, appeared in the first edition, and additional cities were included in subsequent editions. In her inaugural editorial, Josephine Ruffin explained the importance of this circulation of information for the African-American club woman who, because of her race, moves in a very "circumscribed sphere" and confronts "the impossibility of mingling freely with people of culture and learning, and so carrying on the mental growth begun in schools, shuts her in with her books but shuts her out of physical touch with the great world of art, science and letters which is open to all other ambitious women" (*Woman's Era* 1894a, 8). This observation helps clarify how the portable and relatively inexpensive

[35] Minutes, September 24, 1909, Women's Improvement Club, W. H. Smith Memorial Library, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

[36] Significantly, Wolseley does not include the *Woman's Era* in his account of the black press, although he does note the accomplishments of Ruffin's contemporaries Ida Wells Barnett and Victoria Earle Matthews. Wolseley's representation of them as "female journalists of the period," at the very end of a chapter on the emergence of the black press indicates the complicated arena in which African-American club women issued their printed texts.

newsprint offered Ruffin and her colleagues one way to create a space in which they could represent themselves and circumvent the cultural isolation imposed by their race.[37] Ruffin's inaugural editorial underscored the need for African-American club women to counter the representations of others: "Let us not be content with being served up as others choose. We are about old enough to speak for ourselves" (8), and Matthews's concern with "race literature" took up the same task.[38] As they learned about one another's projects, received suggestions for reading, and shared opinions—particularly about race-related issues—club women banded together to create shared "culture and learning."

The importance of such efforts toward black club women's self-representation and refinement appeared the next year when J. W. Jacks, president of the Missouri Press Association, published an open letter to Miss Florence Balgarnie of England in which he described African-American women as lascivious and "having no sense of virtue and . . . being altogether without character" (Giddings 1984, 93). This letter came to the attention of Ruffin and galvanized her to call a national meeting of African-American club women in her hometown of Boston. Ruffin, president of the Woman's Era Club, issued her urgent call for a meeting on a single printed sheet with the title "Let Us Confer Together." Besides providing background information on the need for a convention, a justification for the Boston location, and a general agenda, Ruffin explained, "Although this matter of a convention has been talked over for some time, the subject has been precipitated by a letter to England, written by a southern editor, and reflecting upon the moral character of all colored women; this letter is too indecent for publication, but a copy of it is sent with this call to all the women's bodies throughout the country. Read this document carefully and use discriminatingly and decide if it be not time for us to stand before the world and declare ourselves and our principles."[39] In declaring Jacks's letter "too indecent for publication," Ruffin points to the prestige and power of print. Although the *Woman's Era* might have continued to exist without the Jacks incident, his attack led to the formation of a federation of clubs that evolved into the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), and its *National Association*

[37] As fig. 1 shows, the physical features of the *Woman's Era* reflected concerns with economy by framing the feature article with an advertisement as well as editorial and subscription information.

[38] Victoria Earle Matthews gave an address titled "Race Literature" to an 1895 gathering of African-American club women in Boston. (See Logan 1995 for a reprint of this speech.) Described by Henry Louis Gates (1988, xv) as "stunning," this essay argues that women should have a prominent role in the tradition of Afro-American literature.

[39] A copy of Ruffin's "A Call" is included in the papers of Mary Church Terrell at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

Notes took up the *Woman's Era*'s task of circulating African-American club women's refinement in print.

National Association Notes continued the tradition of circulating many kinds of texts to African-American club women throughout the country. In addition to conveying information, this newspaper—like the *Woman's Era* before it—affirmed the personal connections among club women in various regions of the country. A section titled "Personals" in *National Association Notes* and the "Social News" section of the *Woman's Era* printed news about individual club women and their families. "Social News" in the first edition of the *Woman's Era,* for example, included these items: "Mrs. Robert Terrell of Washington gave a very charming reception last week for Mrs. Joseph Lee of Auburndale, who is paying Washington a short visit" and "Mrs. J. H. Lewis, her young daughter Mary, and her sister Miss Melvin were members of the large class confirmed at Trinity church" (1894a, 12). While diction such as "charming reception" may suggest African-American club women's attempts to mimic cultural practices associated with their white counterparts, this language also deploys what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham terms the "politics of respectability" by portraying black women in terms that defy the racist descriptions of them as "lascivious and without character" (1993, 185–230). These items, bearing no apparent relation to club affairs, show black club women as respectable (social/religious) persons who carry out activities similar to but distinct from those of white club women. A 1917 edition of *National Association Notes* included a note from Ida Joyce Jackson of Columbus, Ohio, affirming the newspaper: "I am always glad to receive it and to find out what our dear noble women are doing in all parts of the country" (9). The same issue reported, "Mrs. Katherine D. Tillman has the sympathy of the *Notes* on the loss of her mother. We hope that her little daughter has recovered from her illness" (9). Jackson's comment affirms the subculture created by the "normally impersonal" printed text through which African-American club women imagined themselves as part of a group that extended to "all parts of the country." Juxtaposed with the account of Tillman's personal trials, this acknowledgment of the scope of their work reminds club women of their value as individual persons while simultaneously placing them squarely within a national movement.

In addition to composing their own texts, African-American club women appropriated those of others to enact their politics of respectability. A publication titled "Press Comments" provides one example. Printed by the NACW in 1900, after the group's second (1899) convention in Chicago, this document contains excerpts from editorials that appeared in the *Chicago Daily News,* the *Chicago Tribune,* and the *Chicago Inter*

Ocean during the convention.[40] All of the excerpts describe African-American club women in positive terms, as possessing "good sense and judgment," exhibiting "essential dignity, evident refinement of manner," and being "practical . . . and helpful" (1–3). This publication also included a long piece from an unidentified (white) newspaper, narrating the elimination of prejudice from two Milwaukee women who observed the culture, education, and eloquence of NACW members at the convention and affirming feelings of "respect and admiration" for the NACW (16). In a milieu where black women were more likely to be described as "without character" than as possessing "dignity" and "refinement," these comments took on particular importance for club women associated with the convention, as signified by their (re)presentation with the authority of print. A piece titled "Talks with Club Women" from the *Chicago Sunday Times-Herald* recounts positive comments about the proceedings, giving special attention to President Mary Church Terrell and Mrs. Booker T. Washington. A description of Jane Addams's luncheon for several of the delegates observes that "it is an exceedingly rare occurrence in Chicago for a colored woman to be received in a purely social way" and goes on to say, "As to Miss Addams' little 'social departure' it may be characterized as the 'whitest' thing she ever did" (9). Underscoring Terrell's and Washington's leadership capacities while at the same time acknowledging their relative powerlessness in the face of the racism Addams dared to challenge, this excerpt reflects the complicated and often contradictory position these club women occupied.[41] The complex interplay of purportedly straightforward praise and indirect critique evident in the reprinting of these remarks may seem striking today for its roundabout approach to resistance against then-"normal" patterns of racial exclusion in American society. However, as Lauren Berlant (1988) has argued in her recent discussions of historically situated discourses of female complaint, women's direct textual assertions of authority, especially in earlier eras but even

[40] "Press Comments," Mary Church Terrell Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

[41] The effect of being welcomed on this occasion by such a social leader as Addams is clearly noted in Ida B. Wells Barnett's autobiography. Looking back several decades later on her own involvement in the episode, Wells explained that her originally firm determination not to attend the NACW meeting in Chicago in 1899 because of infighting within the organization was overcome when Addams, knowing of Wells's past work in the club movement but not knowing of her estrangement from the group at that time, asked for assistance in arranging the visit by members of the national convention visitors to Hull House. Says Wells, "I was too proud of the opportunity that had come unsolicited from one whom I regarded as the greatest woman in the United States to allow my personal feeling to prevent them from accepting the honor" (1970, 259). Accordingly, Wells went to Quinn Chapel, where the national meeting had already begun, and delivered Addams's message, then accompanied the delegates to Hull House, where, she notes, "Miss Addams awaited them with a number of representative white women whom she had invited to be present" (260).

today, have run the risk of alienating the empowered audience, whereas a more complicated blending of seeming acceptance of the status quo with embedded commentary on its deficiencies may be of limited effectiveness in immediate practical terms but useful for raising awareness about personal/social issues of concern to women.[42]

The last page in the printed "Press Comments" pamphlet lists the NACW officers for 1899–1901. Here again, though for different reasons, the text's layers of meaning are deeper than they may appear at first glance. The reelection of Terrell had actually aroused considerable controversy within the NACW, with members of the New Era Club and others who supported Terrell's rival, Josephine Ruffin, citing "the highhanded unparliamentary rulings of the presiding officer, and the unconstitutional elections" (NACW 1900, 10). These critics called the legitimacy of Terrell's presidency into question by claiming that, according to the NACW constitution, Terrell could not succeed herself. "Press Comments," then, can be read as a celebration and affirmation of Terrell's presidency that recirculates the language of the (white) press to affirm the status and value of the NACW, reaffirm Terrell's position and qualifications for office, and erase unseemly conflict from this official printed report of the convention. In so doing, "Press Comments" resonated with multiple force for the audience of its day, (re)presenting printed praise of African-American club women now indisputably refined in large part through the literacy acquisition and practice long denied to their race.

On some occasions African-American club women used print to confront more directly attempts to deny literacy to members of their race. One such occasion occurred when the city of Atlanta failed to provide adequate education for black children, and the Neighborhood Union responded with a printed petition. Founded in 1908, the Neighborhood Union comprised educated middle-class African-American women who, distressed that there were no social service agencies for their race in all of Atlanta, organized "for the moral, economic and social advancement of Negroes."[43] Like many other women's clubs, the Neighborhood Union charged a committee with printing its documents, and the record books recount numerous discussions of issues surrounding how the union would represent itself in print. From their earliest meetings, members of the union expressed concern about the education of African-American chil-

[42] Berlant's point about the effectiveness of embedding complaints in a seeming acceptance of the status quo complements similar arguments made by Ross Chambers (1991) and Homi Bhabba (1986). Chambers, drawing on Michel de Certeau's concept of oppositionality, argues that oppositional discourse does not challenge dominant structures but uses power against itself. Similarly, Bhabba describes how resistance to (colonial) power can take the form of mimicking or imitating the colonizer.

[43] This statement of purpose appears in papers of the Neighborhood Union, Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center.

dren in Atlanta, and this concern was heightened as (segregated) schools became more crowded and instituted double sessions. After considerable discussion, members of the Neighborhood Union decided to present the Atlanta Board of Education with a printed petition. The petition introduced the authors as residents and taxpayers of Atlanta and then listed concerns (based on careful research) about sanitary conditions, the lack of a school in South Atlanta, inadequate provisions for "feeble minded children," and double sessions. The text concluded, "We earnestly trust that your honorable body will grant our petition the ultimate aim of which is to reduce crime, and to make of our children good citizens."[44] By encoding this supplication in print, the union sought to give it authority. They also made what Jürgen Habermas (1989) calls "public use of their reason." Habermas argues that reading and print foster increased autonomy and citizenship among people in general. While we do not see these as universal attributes of print, it does seem that the historical contingencies under which members of the Neighborhood Union operated led them to call on print in this way. Living in a culture that countenanced publications characterizing black women as "lascivious and without character," these women employed print to make their reasoning about Atlanta schools public. The effectiveness of their strategy is demonstrated by the fact that teachers' salaries were raised and a school was established in South Atlanta, but the more important point for our argument is that Neighborhood Union members appropriated the cultural authority of print to persuade the Atlanta Board of Education (Neverdon-Morton 1978). The urgency of this situation, like that which prompted Josephine Ruffin to summon club women to Boston, as well as the politics of respectability deployed by "Press Comments," points to the difference race often made in how club women used print. Faced with insults and indignities based entirely on race, African-American club women deployed print in actively reformist ways to counter racism and its effects.

European-American club women's uses of print

White club women did not share the race-related concerns that preoccupied their African-American peers, but they also looked to print to redress their misrepresentation or lack of representation in newspapers published by men. For instance, an entry in the minutes of the white Indianapolis Women's Club observed, "The President read a letter from Mrs. Howe for the club to take action upon in regard to publication. It was moved that the letter of Mrs. Howe be taken to the editors of the leading city paper and they be solicited to publish it and that upon refusal to do

[44] Neighborhood Union Papers, Atlanta University Center.

so that the club pay for its insertion and bear testimony against the freedom of the press with individual character."[45] This letter from Julia Ward Howe, a founding member of the New England Women's Club, no doubt dealt with women's suffrage, and members of the club correctly anticipated resistance on the part of the newspaper because subsequent minutes report that Mrs. Thompson "failed in her efforts to see the city editors. The motion of the last meeting in regard to Mrs. Howe's letter was revoked and reconsidered. Miss Nicholson then moved that the city editors be requested to publish it but if they refuse that no further action be taken."[46] Rather than adopt a confrontational stance toward the male-dominated press, European-American club women, like their African-American peers, simply developed their own systems for producing and disseminating print.

One such outlet appeared in newspapers controlled by women. The New England Women's Club, for example, published reports of its meetings in the *Woman's Journal*, a newspaper edited by Lucy Stone, H. B. Blackwell, and Alice Stone Blackwell and advertised as "devoted to the interests of woman—to her education, industrial, legal and political equality and especially to her right of suffrage" (1893, 10). Like African-American groups, white women's clubs also instituted their own newspapers and magazines, where they fully controlled the terms of their own representation. Newspapers such as San Francisco's *Club Life*, New York's *Club Woman's Weekly*, and Lowell, Massachusetts's the *Clubwoman* provided a mixture of local and national information and enabled members of many clubs to share ideas and experiences.

When the General Federation of Women's Clubs was organized in 1890, it designated the *Woman's Cycle*, as "the organ of official communication with the clubs" (Croly 1898, 105). Edited by Jennie June Croly, a founding member of both New York City's Sorosis and the General Federation, this magazine changed names several times, eventually becoming the *Federation Bulletin* in 1903 and *Federation Topics* in 1921. Economic differences between white and African-American club women help explain the General Federation's decision to select a magazine rather than a (less expensive) newspaper as its official organ of communication. In the 1909–10 club year, for example, the white Indianapolis Women's Club reported a budget of $828.22, and the African-American Women's Improvement Club (WIC) of Indianapolis listed a budget of $288 for the same year. This difference in economic resources characterized white and African-American clubs across the country, and the careful noting in minute books of five- and ten-cent weekly dues paid by members of African-

[45] Minutes, February 16, 1877, Indianapolis Women's Club, W. H. Smith Memorial Library, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

[46] Minutes, March 3, 1877, Indianapolis Women's Club.

American clubs (such records rarely appear for white women's clubs) suggests how black women painstakingly established the financial support for their printed texts.

With more available funding to support their printing, white club women were also able to consider the aesthetics of the magazine versus the newspaper form in opting for the former as the official organ of communication for the General Federation. For white club women, self-representation in print could often be carried out as an enterprise paralleling their other involvements in the Aesthetic Movement, which reached its height at the close of the nineteenth century. Just as effective home decoration exemplified the white middle-class woman's sense of personal and social style and (potentially, at least) made visitors to the parlor more cultured, so the arrangement of printed text in these women's publications could display and spread their sense of good taste. If this brand of taste uplift seems trivial when compared with African-American club women's more pressing responsibilities of heavily politicized moral uplift, we should neither underestimate the importance of such efforts in the lives of the white club women themselves at the time nor fail to note the constricting and replicating nature of this "decorative" role, which would often continue to be played out in the living rooms and magazines of twentieth-century white suburbia. Thus, possible connections between the ideals of the Aesthetic Movement and particular aesthetic choices white women made in their turn-of-the-century printed texts merit examination.

Directed largely toward (white) women, who served as major consumers of nineteenth-century American arts and crafts, the Aesthetic Movement also encouraged middle-class women's artistic self-expression. Along these lines, club magazines used decorative detail and layout to capitalize on the technological capabilities of print while simultaneously distancing themselves from the uniformity generally associated with it.[47] For instance, white club women typically employed decorative emblems and insignia on the covers of their yearbooks, they bound yearbooks with brightly colored threads—often coordinated with the color of the cover or print—or attached a decorative tassel, and they gave considerable attention to the layout of information on the page. In one sense, these decorative covers provided a specific, immediately visible way of resisting some of the aspects of print (e.g., mechanized mass production) that, though conveying a desirable authority, could undermine club women's individuality and refinement.

Once again, the work of the Oak Park club seems an especially apt

[47] The 1901 yearbook of the Nineteenth Century Club includes the topic "William Morris: The Man and His Work," indicating an explicit awareness among these club women of Morris's aesthetic views.

case in point, with the contents of their programs and the covers of their yearbooks providing numerous texts for fruitful analysis. Papers listed in the 1894–95 yearbook as having been presented by club members often indicate a high level of interest in linking the arts, American middle-class women, and the home. (Two, for instance, were titled "How to secure the greatest amount of Comfort in the Home with the least expenditure," by Phoebe M. Butler, and "The Art of Entertaining," by Elizabeth C. Young, and several other members gave papers on "Modern American Artists.") Similarly, the art department's programs for 1896 included such topics as "Art Conditions in America" (with emphasis on both landscape and portraiture), sculpture, mural decoration, and "Art in Our Public Buildings," as well as others on the "Relation of Art to the Craft" (with the subtitle "How to furnish a Home") and "The American Woman as Painter, Designer, Illustrator, Etc." The combined and complementary influences of the Arts and Crafts enterprise and the Aesthetic Movement, in fact, may well have been further enhanced by Frank Lloyd Wright, who lived in Oak Park from 1889 to 1909, and whose wife, Catherine, was a member of the Nineteenth Century Club.[48]

The Oak Park club women seem to have devoted a great deal of attention to the covers of their yearbooks. As figure 2 demonstrates, image and print could work together to convey a message about the club. The Browning quotation about growth is echoed and specified by the image of the book and lantern. The width of the book pictured portrays it as serious, and, by including an image of an "important" book on the cover of their yearbook, members of the Nineteenth Century Club signal, like nineteenth-century individuals who sat for portraits surrounded by their books, that their growth will center on the mind and spirit (Heininger 1986, 17). The lantern, with its bright flame, reinforces a message of intelligence and culture, and the oil-pouring hand emerging from a richly decorated sleeve suggests a dynamic relationship between reader and text at the same time that it introduces a human touch to the image. Positioning a book as the foundation of the image reinforces the idea of books as objects to be consumed by the privileged and educated. The fact that this image appears on a book the club women have made themselves indicates its significance. Taken together, the blending of pictorial images with mechanically produced type extended the meaning of the printed words beyond their informational content into the realm of aesthetics, so that

[48] The membership list of the 1896 yearbook, e.g., includes her name as Mrs. F. L. Wright. Wright's work, which combined formal, symmetrical components with informal and asymmetrical ones, must surely have had some influence on the club's printed designs of space and text. At the very least, the members had direct knowledge of his work because the club's 1902 yearbook indicates that Wright spoke in October on "Art as Related to Life."

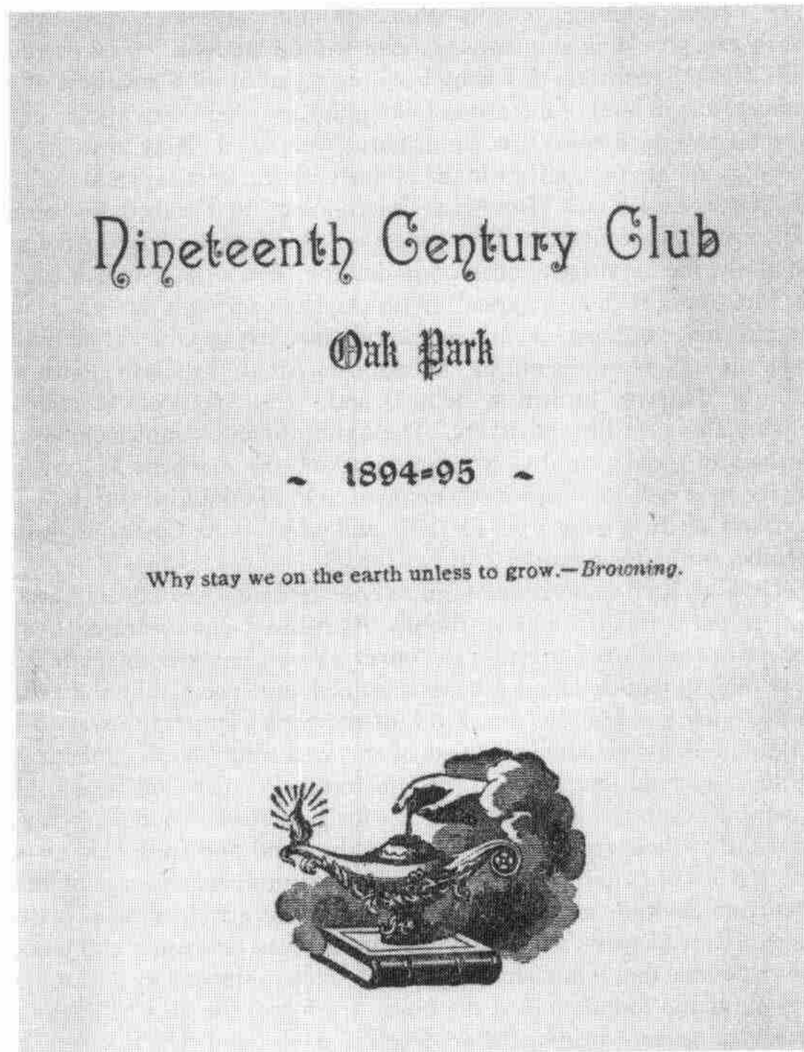

FIG. 2 Yearbook, 1894–95, Nineteenth Century Club. Courtesy of the Nineteenth Century Club, Oak Park, Ill.

the ideal audience response, like that depicted in the cover's image itself, could be an enlightened merging of thought and feeling.

In producing printed texts to represent themselves, these club women simultaneously deployed the technological aspects of print to enhance the cultural authority of their messages and resisted its most mechanical features. Reshaping the technology of print to display text in distinctive and

attractive rather than uniform page-filling ways and to create pictorial designs reinforcing the content of their words, club women could reclaim an aspect of handmade literacy that might otherwise have been lost through their appropriation of print technology.

Although the Nineteenth Century Club enjoyed access to especially rich resources, their attention to aesthetics typified white middle-class groups across the country.[49] While the efforts groups like the Oak Park club devoted to making a new kind of women's printed rhetoric may be undervalued, they may also be seen as refiguring print for new purposes. As Mary Jacobus (1989) has reminded us in her analysis of women writers ranging from Mary Wollstonecraft to George Eliot and Virginia Woolf, the problem of defining and creating a type of writing that can fully represent women's "difference of view" remains with us today.[50] In seeking to appreciate both Wollstonecraft's attempt to appropriate male, "sense"-centered discourse patterns free of excessive (female) sensibility in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and her reassertion of an intensely, self-consciously, sensibility-driven rhetoric in *The Wrongs of Woman,* Jacobus seems to wonder rather wistfully whether some kind of synthesis of the two voices would ever be fully achievable for a woman writer. Describing what she sees as Eliot's and Woolf's efforts to craft some kind of bridge or link between the two nearly opposite approaches Wollstonecraft used, Jacobus suggests to us a useful lens through which to reread and appreciate the "decorative" printed texts of organizations like the Oak Park women's club. The lists of readings and lectures, the bibliographies and course outlines as well as the names of participating members engaged in shared reading and writing depict the serious intellectual endeavors of club members. Stressing both mental work and aesthetic pleasure, these attractively arranged printed presentations of their club's activities and members help women writers bridge the gap between intellect and taste, thought and feeling—between what has so often, in reading and writing but also in other social practices, been gendered male and what has been gendered female.

[49] White women's clubs from Seattle to Boston produced yearbooks and other occasional pieces in which aesthetic *arrangement* of print received as much attention as the *content* of the text. For example, the printed program for the Boston Saturday Morning Club's 1904 production of "Scenes from *Pride and Prejudice*" features a cover on which typefaces of several types and sizes are carefully arranged around an idealized representation of three young women standing in a semicircle. Like yearbooks, the artistic cover opens to a carefully rationalized program listing players and scenes.

[50] Jacobus herself suggests that "the question" can be posed both by asking "what is the nature (the difference) of women's writing?" and by questioning "the extent to which patriarchal representation, by contrast, 'silences' women—the extent to which *woman* or *womanhood,* considered not as an image but as a sign, becomes the site of both contradiction and repression" (1989, 52).

Both European-American and African-American club women used literacy to create gendered spaces of collaborative agency, particularly through the printed texts they published for each other and for larger audiences. Although they used print for many similar purposes, white and black club women also expressed their differing social locations through the texts they printed. By focusing on the aesthetic dimensions of print, European-American club women displayed and extended their refinement and good taste, while simultaneously calling on the authority of print to affirm the power of their intellect. Preoccupied as they were by issues of race, by the mandate of the NACW's "lifting we climb" motto, and by the constraints of limited economic resources, African-American club women could not afford (in either the literal or the figurative sense) to pay as much attention to aesthetic details of their printed documents as did their white counterparts. Accordingly, they deployed the politics of respectability to claim affiliation with, even as they asserted their differences from, white club women. Nonetheless, despite these differences in emphasis, in appropriating print technology, both black and white club women achieved the kinds of opportunities for activism Nancy Fraser describes—an effort that acknowledges the power of the larger culture to shape identity yet also recognizes the ability of individuals and groups to make change in that culture. Viewing the complex social work of club women's printed texts within this framework allows us to share, with Fraser, "a view of collective identities as at once discursively constructed and complex," capable of "collective action and amenable to mystification" (1995, 72). Interpreting the particular kinds of cultural work attempted in printed texts of turn-of-the-century club women, in other words, suggests how, as Fraser says, "subjects are *both* culturally constructed *and* capable of critique" (67), because those texts reflect both ways in which club women were shaped by their social interactions and ways in which they worked together through adept use of literacy practices to redesign themselves and the larger society.[51]

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[51] Fraser suggests, in addition, that "we might view critique as simultaneously situated and amenable to self-reflection, as potentially radical and subject to warrants" (1995, 71).

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