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Black Delilahs: Black Female Sexuality and Resistance in Progressive Era

New York City

By

Kayla J. Smith

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for Honors in American Culture Studies

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I

Introduction

Dora Candela was born in Santo Domingo on April 7, 1902. She was described as a “small, slender female [...]. She is colored but no one would suspect it unless very keen at detection. Would pass for a white female. She has brown bobbed hair, brown eyes, fairly good teeth [...] she is friendly, calm, and composed.”¹ Her mother died when she was two years old and she lived in a “pleasant home” with her father who remarried and stayed in the Dominican Republic.² Candela attended school in the West Indies until she was sixteen years old, and she moved to New York City with her grandmother shortly afterwards.

Candela soon joined a burlesque troupe that traveled to Jacksonville, Florida, and she stayed with them for about four months.³ She continued to work as a “fancy dancer” in several theatres for \$35 to \$60 a week (around \$400 to \$700 in 2020 dollar value), and she truly enjoyed her job.⁴ She became friends with nightclub proprietors and owners of night cabarets. She got married in April 1920, but she soon separated from her husband. Shortly after, she cohabitated with another man. On June 12th, 1922, Candela was arrested for prostitution and was sent to the Bedford Hills reformatory.⁵ She denied the charge of prostitution and claimed she supported

¹ Inmate #3247, Admission Record: Physical Description, Box 3, Folder 24, Bedford Hills Correctional Facility Inmate Case Files, New York State Archives, Albany, New York (hereafter cited as BH).

² Inmate #3247, Verified history: Home Conditions and Education, June 21, 1922, Box 3, Folder 24, BH.

³ Inmate #3247, Preliminary Investigation: Biography, Box 3, Folder 24, BH.

⁴ Inmate #3247, Verified History: Work History & Institutional History, Box 3, Folder 24, BH.

⁵ Names have been changed for the sake of privacy and restriction guidelines.

herself solely by dancing. While paroled under Bedford, she struggled to stay at her assigned jobs in domestic service, such as chambermaid and laundress, and her employers frequently complained about her. One sent a letter to the Bedford superintendent saying, “I deeply regret the necessity of saying to you that [Candela] has shown that she is absolutely unfitted [*sic*] for housework. We can not make her out at all. Her mind seems to be far away. She bought paint and powder and the only time she shows any interest is when she is dolling up.”⁶ With a history of being paroled and violating parole, Candela was in and out of Bedford from 1922 until 1927.

Dora Candela’s story represents how black women who embrace their sexuality and eroticism are stigmatized, criminalized, and subjugated. This project studies black women’s sexuality in Progressive Era New York and how attitudes surrounding black women’s sexuality impacted black women’s criminalization, means of survival, and self-expression. It also focuses on the ways black women used intimacy and desire, representations of sexuality, and pleasure as acts of resistance against trauma, stigmatization, and criminalization. This project argues that black women in New York City embodied sexual subjectivities within public and private spheres in order to resist against debilitating and harmful stereotypes about rampant, uncontrollable, and/or invisible black female sexuality. It also contends that black women engaged with commercial, public, and private urban spaces normatively associated with vice and disreputability in ways that subverted expectations of respectability and empowered black women.

This project seeks to not only provide a historical context of how black female sexuality has been criminalized but it also seeks to bring forth narratives of black women as historical subjects who do other kinds of cultural work beyond representing injury, trauma, and abuse. It

⁶ Inmate #3247, Letter from “HM” to Dr. Baker, February 25, 1923, Box 3, Folder 24, BH.

demonstrates how historical displays and narratives of sexuality, eroticism, and pleasure can be acts of resistance against trauma, stigmatization, and silencing. Finally, it also disrupts the discourses about black female sexuality that defined it as absent from or harmful to the African-American experience and illustrates how these historical constructs can have material effects on the lives of black women today.

Contextualizing Black Women's Sexuality in History

Scholars have worked to paint black women not as victims but as survivors who persevered through this history of intergenerational trauma. I want to tell one of these narratives of perseverance and survival by paying special attention to a point of contention amongst African-American historians: sexuality. Throughout the essay, sexual subjectivities will refer specifically to how black women thought of themselves as sexual beings, including her feeling of entitlement to sexual pleasure, her ability to make active sexual choices, and her assessment and conception of their own erotic and sexual desires.⁷ In addition, sexuality will refer to a more inclusive concept to include more than sexual orientation or preference, but instead the everyday lived experience of the sexual(ized) body and the imagination, desires, and intentions of the sexual(ized) subject.⁸ My aim is to focus on the everyday lived experience, imaginations, desires, and intentions of black women as subjects who are sexual and sexualized. I define “sexual” as one who engages in sexual activity and sexualized as one who is endowed with sexual associations, characteristics, and behaviors.

⁷ See Muriel Dimen, “Sexual Subjectivity,” *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies* (April 21, 2016): 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118663219.wbegss360>.

⁸ See Jafari S. Allen, “Blackness, Sexuality, and Transnational Desire: Initial Notes toward a New Research Agenda,” in *Black Sexualities: Probing Powers, Passions, Practices, and Policies*, e.d. Juan Battle and Sandra L. Barnes (Rutgers University Press, 2009), 83.

Sexuality has been a point of contention in the field of black women's history because the restrictive, repressive, and dangerous aspects of black female sexuality have been emphasized, stereotyped, and stigmatized. For instance, the prevalence of the "Jezebel" stereotype, which ascribes to black women sexual lewdness and lasciviousness, has been so pervasive that it has lasting implications. The idea that black women were sexually promiscuous stemmed from Europeans' first encounter with African women, and Europeans' assumptions about the lewdness of black women manifested into harmful stereotypes like the "Jezebel", which persisted as the counter-image of the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of the Victorian lady. By the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in order to survive and maintain respect and gain more opportunities in society in spite of these stereotypes, black women had to adopt what historian Darlene Clark Hine calls, a "culture of dissemblance" where black women became the exact opposite of a stereotype that was used to characterize them.⁹ This included adopting "respectful" behaviors, being silent about their sexuality, and remaining moral and well-mannered. However, this culture of dissemblance had negative consequences that impacted black women's expression of sexuality. This culture advocated that sexuality was a gateway to ruin for the black woman's value, the black family's reputation, and the black community's portrayal to wider American society.¹⁰ This phenomenon proved to be rampant in urban cities, including New York City.

Early twentieth-century New York City is an ideal location and period for this study because of its historical reputation as a city of sexual experimentation, penal institutionalization,

⁹ See Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912–20, <https://doi.org/10.1086/494552>.

¹⁰ Evelyn M. Hammonds, "Toward A Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," *Feminist Theory and the Body* (2017): 93–104, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315094106-11>.

reform legislation and organizations, and black cultural expression. The increasing popularity of commercial leisure excited young black working-class women, and they rushed to the movies, amusement parks, clubs, saloons. Many not only played in these spaces, but they also worked in these spaces, including vaudeville shows and cabarets. Vaudeville shows were still popular during this time, and many shows embraced this new culture of sexuality by displaying more nudity and racy performance numbers. Thus, reformers and the police attempted to regulate working-class women's social lives and their sexuality. General concerns about working-class women's sexual behavior influenced the passing of numerous state laws that were shaped by reformers, approved by legislators, and enforced by police officers.¹¹ Race influenced the severity of charges, thus young black women were disproportionately targeted and imprisoned in penal institutions like the Bedford Hills Reformatory. Within these institutions, black women were reconditioned to follow the status-quo of respectable womanhood, thus taking away their autonomy and freedom. Although Darlene Clark Hine posits that black women willingly adopted this culture of dissemblance, I argue that the coercive power of institutional forces also played a bigger role in the silencing of black women's sexual subjectivities.

Explanation of Sources

Studies by Tera Hunter, LaShawn Harris, Kali Gross, Cheryl Hicks, Cynthia Blair, LaKisha Simmons, Michele Mitchell, and Saidiya Hartman have contributed to the field of black women's history by including sexuality as an integral part of black identity and black womanhood. The scholarship on black female sexuality in 20th-century U.S. history has focused primarily on archival sources, including criminal court documents, census documents, and

¹¹ Cheryl D. Hicks, "'Bright and Good Looking Colored Girl': Black Women's Sexuality and 'Harmful Intimacy' in Early-Twentieth-Century New York," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18, no. 3 (2009): 420, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sex.0.0064>.

newspapers. They argue that black women's sexuality was expressed through modes like sex work and also how black women's sexuality was ultimately policed and stigmatized by stereotypes of hypersexuality and asexuality, New Negro respectability, and the surveillance of women's sexual morality by reform committees and institutions. My intervention into this scholarship positions narratives of black women's sexuality and eroticism at the center, and each chapter uses interdisciplinary approaches and methods including performance studies, visual analysis, and archival analysis.

This project scrutinizes records from the Lily Yuen papers from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture which include programs of the Brownskin Models Revue, newspaper clippings, and joke books. I am also using the Committee of Fourteen records to examine how cultural spaces were engaged by black women, how their sexuality was policed there, and how they resisted against such policing. I am examining the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility Inmate Case Files to understand how black women's sexuality was criminalized once they were arrested for sex crimes such as prostitution. Finally, I am combining performance theory, sexuality theory, and visual theory throughout this project while maintaining a historical approach.

Chapter Breakdown

This project addresses these critical issues in three chapters that provide a more thematic focus rather than a chronological one. I have ordered the chapters to show how black women were able to publicly showcase their sexuality, engaged in sexual activities hidden away from the public eye, to finally having their sexuality be caged by the criminal justice system. Chapter 1 focuses on the Brownskin Models Revue, a popular black vaudeville show that contained comedic sketches, songs, and dances. Its purpose was to depict black women as models for

beauty, and the revue often featured scantily-clad black women who danced or sang with erotic undertones. This chapter explores how these women's sexuality was viewed by the public and how the performers' unique sexual(ized) acts contributed to the success of the revue. Ultimately, their contribution offers a new way for us to understand how black women created their own erotic and sexual subjectivities.

Chapter 2 then goes into how working-class black women indulged in the New York nightlife as patrons and as workers. This chapter explores how the Committee of Fourteen implemented restrictions and rules to eradicate lascivious and immoral behavior within certain spaces. The chapter is a rereading of their files, and from these files, we can gain a comprehension of how black women patrons resisted against these regulations and proceeded to find ways to enjoy their nightlife lifestyles and/or make a living by participating in sex work.

Finally, Chapter 3 explores the cases of three women who were imprisoned at the Bedford Hills Reformatory, where their sexuality is ultimately caged, regulated, and suppressed. It goes into further detail about the social and cultural norms that influenced how the reformatory staff "reformed" these women's sexuality. It also explores how the women struggled against these tactics, and, eventually, conformed to escape the constant surveillance, confinement, and subjugation.

This project is a delineation of how black women have used creative ways to express their sexuality within the public sphere, such as vaudeville stages, as well as the private sphere within their nightlife lifestyles. It is a narrative of resistance, vitality, and ultimately subjugation that introduces a lineage for how the suppression of those stories impacted how black women regard their sexuality today.

II

“Glorifying Our Brown Skin Beauties”: Blackness, Performance, and Eroticism in the
Brownskin Models Revue

A young brown-skin woman walks into a room coated in Turkish rug patterns on the walls and floor. Her body is bare and smooth with a patterned sheet of lace draping over her breasts and torso. She sits upon a chair that blends into the background, highlighting her softly painted face, thin arms, and velvety legs. She is told to be still as she raises her arms on top of her head, crosses her ankles, and lifts the heels of her feet off of the floor. Her face is calm, her eyes are guarded, her mouth is straight. No trace of emotion breaking out at the corners of her mouth or eyes. Like a bronze statue, she waits for the flash of the camera, until her body is immortalized as an emblem of brown beauty for the world to see (see Figure 1).

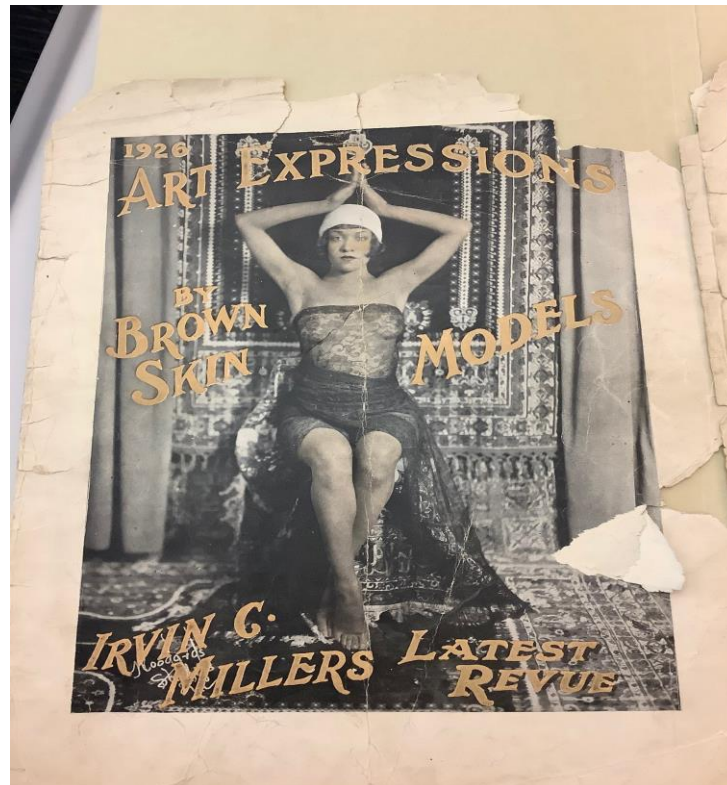


Fig 1. Poster for Brownskin Models. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.¹²

Introduction

This unknown African-American woman was featured on a poster for the Brownskin Models Revue, a “beauty vaudeville revue” founded by African-American actor, playwright, and vaudeville show writer and producer, Irvin C. Miller. Vaudeville is a type of entertainment that was popular in the early 1880s until the early 1930s, featuring a mixture of specialty acts such as comedians, singers, dancers, ventriloquists, musicians, and acrobats.¹³ However, in the Jim Crow Era, it was extremely challenging for black performers to be accepted into the white vaudeville circuit, so black vaudeville circuits were created to give black performers more opportunities for work and also for black audiences to enjoy entertainment from their own culture and heritage. Thus, the Brownskin Models Revue came to be one of the most groundbreaking black vaudeville revues in America.

Brownskin Models Revue ran from 1925 to 1955 and toured the country with great success, playing the big theatre chains for forty weeks a year, and it used the figure of the model to center a show of chorus line dancing, dress promenades, striptease, comedic sketches, and original music. Miller was inspired by the Ziegfeld Follies (featuring Josephine Baker), but the

¹² Poster for Brownskin Models, “Art Expressions by Brownskin Models Irvin C. Miller’s Latest Revue”, 1926, Sc MG 643, Box 1, Folder 5, Lily Yuen Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, New York, New York, figure 1(hereafter cited as Lily Yuen Papers).

¹³ “Vaudeville,” *Wikipedia*, last modified February 8, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaudeville>.

show aimed to “glorify the brown body” at center stage for solely black audiences.¹⁴

Specifically:

The idea for the show came to Miller one day when he was standing in front of a Broadway theatre where the blazing lights announced that Flo Ziegfeld was ‘Glorifying the American Girl.’ As he viewed the pictures displayed in the lobby, his attention was attracted to a beautiful, well-shaped black lady walking down the street. The idea popped into his head, “Why not glorify the brown-skin girl?”¹⁵

The significance behind the word “glorify” is that it has idolatrous connotations of worship and reverence of something or someone as godly. The purpose of this revue was to put it in opposition to white bodies and white beauty ideals because black women were not seen as beautiful in mainstream, dominant culture.

Vaudeville gave this unknown performer from the advertisement a platform to express sexuality and eroticism that refuted yet also perpetuated stereotypes that were circulating about black women during early twentieth-century New York. This unknown woman was purposefully positioned and meticulously configured in order to present a certain representation of black female sexuality. Her personal motivations for posing for this photograph are ultimately unknown. However, her participation within this revue contributed to the rewriting of notions of black female sexual modernity within this realm of New Negro respectability and racial politics.

Within this realm, a politics of silence was adopted by African-American women reformers. Historian Evelyn M. Hammonds goes into more detail about this phenomenon in her pivotal essay, “Toward A Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality”:

¹⁴ Elspeth H. Brown, “The Commodification of Aesthetic Feeling: Race, Sexuality, and the 1920s Stage Model,” *Feminist Studies* 40, no. 1 (2014): 69, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15767/feministstudies.40.1.65>.

¹⁵ Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows*, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2014), 71.

This ‘politics of silence’, as described by historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, emerged as a political strategy by black women reformers who hoped by their silence and by the promotion of proper Victorian morality to demonstrate the lie of the image of the sexually immoral black woman. Historian Darlene Clark Hine argues that the ‘culture of dissemblance’ which this politics engendered was seen as a way for black women to ‘protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives.’¹⁶

By advocating a “politics of respectability”, which scholar Patricia Hill Collins says was characterized by “cleanliness of person and property, temperance, thrift, polite manners, and sexual purity,” black middle class women ostracized those who went against their values.¹⁷

Despite this cultural difference between black middle class women and vaudeville performers, “[...] Miller created a middlebrow cultural production that used female display to negotiate a synthesis between the aesthetic poles of racial uplift and (to quote another [Langston] Hughes’s title) ‘red silk stockings,’”¹⁸ Simply, the result of this synthesis created a sort of genteel eroticism that black vaudeville audiences could appreciate and enjoy. Ultimately, this chapter asks what role did black women play in the show’s success and how did black audiences and critics perceive this concept? How did they feel about black women performing sexuality, sensuality, and eroticism in the public sphere? How can one read the women’s autonomy and mobility when their voices are not recorded and how can one critically foreground their subjectivity/positionality in spite of their silence?

One of the Nation’s Foremost Flesh Revues

¹⁶ Hammonds, “Toward A Genealogy,” 97.

¹⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 71.

¹⁸ Brown, “The Commodification of Aesthetic Feeling,” 83.

Miller's purpose was to "glorify the brown skin girl" which implies that there previously was no space for black beauty to be performed.¹⁹ It can also be argued that this public display of bodily flesh reduces these women to commodities for the sake of performance and revenue. For instance, one critic marveled at a Brownskin Models production, saying:

Just as I had begun to be terribly bored with the weekly dish of stale vaudeville, came Irving Miller's Brown Skin Models. It is the most beautiful spectacle I have ever seen in a theatre. For the first time I saw the human form glorified not vulgarized. I asked a man if the poses of the models appealed to his baser or his higher senses, and he said that the girls impressed him as beautiful pictures, nothing more. With the real artist's attention to detail, with a love for gorgeous and unusual color effects, with a sense of color and arrangement closely related to genius, Mr. Miller staged a splendid show. [...] Every girl is a worthy model. There are no ugly girls in the entire production [...].²⁰

In this instance, the women are only portrayed as nameless, superficial models whose only talent was to exude beauty and not be "ugly". In essence, they were "beautiful pictures, nothing more" with praise thrown at the man who owned the production and not the performers themselves.²¹

On the other hand, this critic regarded the Brownskin Models as "the most beautiful spectacle I have ever seen in a theater", appreciating the way that these women's bodies are not "vulgarized" but instead "glorified", as Miller intended. I assert that these black female performers found something appealing about this revue and their roles as "models" which contributed to the show's success, changing the game for representations of black female sexuality. This review was glued into a scrapbook of one of the most successful women of the Brownskin Models, dancer Lily Yuen. This suggests that Yuen found some type of pride in being seen as a "beautiful picture" and a "worthy model", and, perhaps, she thought of herself

¹⁹ Poster for Brownskin Models, "Irvin C. Miller", Sc MG 643, Box 1, Folder 5, Lily Yuen Papers.

²⁰ "Royal" newspaper clippings, Sc MG 643, Box 1, Folder 6, Lily Yuen Papers.

²¹ "Royal" newspaper clippings, Lily Yuen Papers.

more highly than that as demonstrated by the glowing reviews of her and other Models' performances in other newspapers.

The Brown Skin Models performances could best be described as R-rated variety shows, blending satire with musical numbers and a bit of raciness. While singing was hailed as a marvel to see, the women's dance numbers and costumes were the talk of each town they visited. There were conflicting efforts at work in the American vaudeville theater where managers and owners would publicly declaim its moral purity and freedom from sexual, suggestive, or smutty material, but they would provide just enough suggestive material to provoke certain reformers and critics.²² Thus, in actual practice, big vaudeville revues would feature scantily clad women, comics who would tell jokes laced with double entendre, singers whose songs included suggestive lyrics, and provocative "cooch" dancers. These acts proved to be especially appealing to African-American vaudeville critics, but they would minimize the sexual nature in their reviews in popular African-American newspapers.

Among the many reviews about the Brownskin Models, critics would attribute the show's success mainly to the visual aesthetics of the shows, including the sets, the costumes, and the women's performances. Critics would say, "The stage backgrounds, novelty effects, and costuming is a piece of work [...] this cast in models just won't quit, as there is plenty of beauty, dancing, comedy, and novelty presentations to please."²³ This was particularly evident within their program advertisements. Souvenir programs of the Brownskin Models included stylized photographs of the models in glamorous, aesthetically pleasing poses and costumes. The most

²² Andrew L. Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915* (Jefferson NC: McFarland & Co Inc Publishers, 2007), 4.

²³ "Royal" newspaper clippings, Lily Yuen Papers.

favorite type of costume that these women are wearing is a piece or a couple pieces of lace, sheer, or sparkly fabric. The fabric would either be draped around their body, covering everything except one piece of skin, whether that be a shoulder, a breast, or leg. In other photos, the fabric would only cover one part, like their pelvis or buttocks. They would be standing or sitting, extending their arms like Greccian statues, putting their hands on their hips or head, or holding something like a cigarette, a mask, or the fabric to keep it from exposing themselves completely. Many of the women smiled with their pearly teeth, some have stern, seductive visages, and others are looked off into the distance (See Figures 2 and 3).²⁴

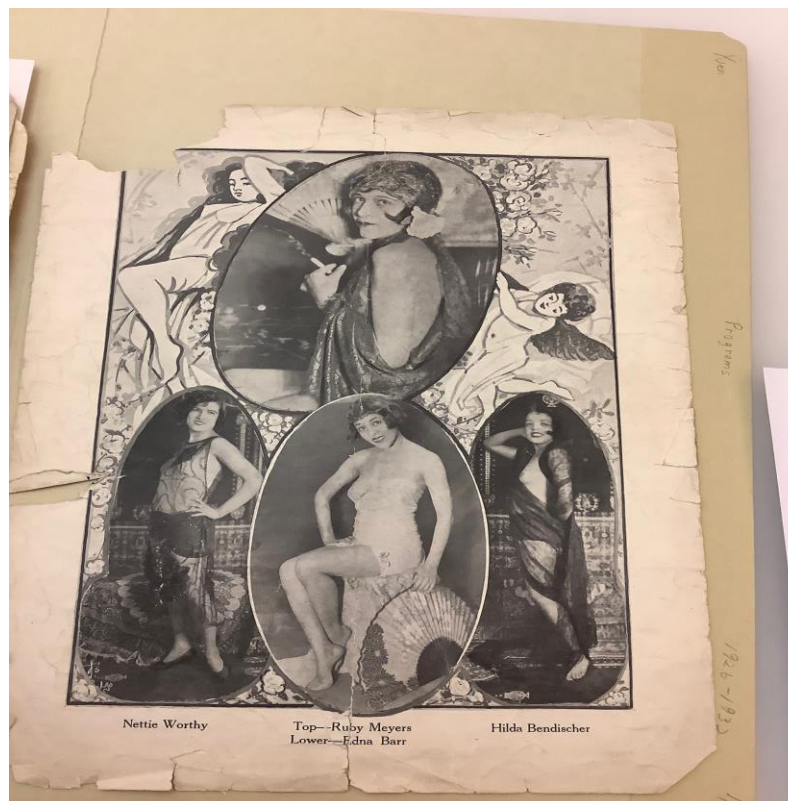


Figure 2. Program for Brown Skin Models.
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

²⁴ Programs for Brownskin Models, Sc MG 643, Box 1, Folder 5, Lily Yuen Papers.



Figure 3. Program for Brownskin Models.
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

These programs give us a glimpse of how these women would be dressed in their productions, but it was not intended for pornographic purposes. In fact, they had more artistic touches, synthesizing dramatic and theatrical tastes with details of coyness and seduction that was pleasurable to the eye. These worked to their advantage as, “Many acts which provided [sexually suggestive material] were some of [vaudeville’s] biggest hits, and went a long way towards liberalizing attitudes and limits of acceptability with regard to the female body in popular entertainment.”²⁵ In order to create a huge vaudeville hit and awaken a new racial and social consciousness for black audiences, these female performers employed Nicole R, Fleetwood’s concept of “excess flesh” within their program advertisements and performances. By analyzing their performances as such, we can gain insight into what their motives might be.

²⁵ Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville*, 36.

Nicole R. Fleetwood grapples with visibility and black women's bodies in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*. Fleetwood explains that excess flesh occurs when a woman radically embodies the problematically gendered, racialized, and sexualized dominant representations to remake new ways of being, doing, thinking, and visualizing black female subjectivity. Yet, excess flesh, "while not necessarily resistant, can be productive in conceiving of an identificatory possibility" for black female cultural producers.²⁶ It is useful because it contextualizes how sexuality can be used as a conscious strategy to resist against harmful and debilitating depictions in dominant culture. Essentially, the Models used visual aesthetics to not only advertise a new image of black talent and entertainment, but also to demonstrate an elegant picture of erotic beauty previously denied to black women.

One blatant characteristic that these women have is incredibly light, white-appearing skin. By the beginning of the twentieth century, it was clear in black America that the lighter one's skin, the greater the societal and communal benefits that were bestowed upon them. This colorist practice of hiring lighter skinned women within the 1920s entertainment industry represented the cultural beauty norms in America. African-American men and women privileged light brown complexions as representative of the modern "New Negro woman."²⁷ The brown-skin beauty ideal was limited and limiting. According to the Brownskin Model posters, their skin was close to whiteness which shows how proximity to whiteness is something to "glorify". Thus, this poses some problematic issues about the lack of representation in this revue, yet it is still

²⁶ Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 122.

²⁷ Laila Haidarali, *Brown Beauty: Color, Sex, and Race from the Harlem Renaissance to World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 3.

worth exploring how these women changed the sexual script despite buying into the light-skin beauty craze.

The Models

Each Model had their own special talent that expressed a type of sexuality and eroticism, whether that was through the satire in the jokes they told, the kinds of dances they excelled in, or the way they dressed their bodies to captivate their audiences. Except for one case, all of the women used their bodies as the main attraction in their acts. In fact, “the vaudeville stage was one important locale for the ‘spectacularization’ of the female body-- that is, its presentation as a viewable commodity gravid with visual erotic content,”²⁸ In particular, one Model’s body became the acclaimed attraction of the Brown Skin Models revue.

Blanche Thompson: The Bronze Venus

One of the leading ladies of the Brownskin Models was Blanche Thompson, who married Irvin C/ Miller in 1919. Thompson was a dancer and chorus girl with the Brownskin Models, and she was often praised for her dance skills and “Million Dollar Figure” (See Figure 4). She was dubbed the “brown venus” and did a “Spanish number” that impressed even the harshest of critics. According to one critic from the African-American newspaper, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, “[...] Blanche Thompson, [is] slimmer and more desirable than ever. With those flashing eyes and pearly teeth of hers, she is a model worthy of any artist’s pen. She manages the show, made the props and the costumes and trained the company,”²⁹ Thompson played a large role in the success of the production, just as much, if not more so than Miller. Yet, critics would attribute

²⁸ Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville*, 84.

²⁹ William G. Nunn, “‘Brown Skin Models’ A Sensation At The Lando: Blanche Thompson and Her Gang Show Beauty Comedy And Talent Huge Crowds Witness Greatest Edition of Irvin C. Miller’s Troupe--George Bias,... De Gaston And Others Click--And--The Trend Is Toward Sun-Tan,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Nov 15, 1930.

most of the production's success to Miller. Thompson was close to the other girls in the group, including Lily Yuen, as her pictures are frequently glued within her scrapbooks and Yuen also possessed song books that belonged to Thompson.

There is not much information on her as a dancer. However, the way critics have described her as a model, as a "brown venus", and as a woman possessing a "Million Dollar Figure" indicates that the African-American critics regarded her in a positive light. Her essentially priceless figure and beauty earned her a prestige as an emblem of a goddess of sex and beauty, yet critics also overlooked her hard work and influence in flipping the script of black female sexuality on the vaudeville stage. This is an instance of the male gaze at play. In her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey explains how women in classical Hollywood films do not have autonomy to create and emulate their own meanings as actors. She posits that, "Woman [...] stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning,"³⁰ This holds true within the newspaper articles, as they did not acknowledge Thompson's large role in the cultural production of this show. This is one downside that came with this kind of performance; the scopophilic gaze of these reviewers overlooked Thompson and viewed her solely as an object of pleasure.

³⁰ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Feminisms* (1991): 58, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-22098-4_25.

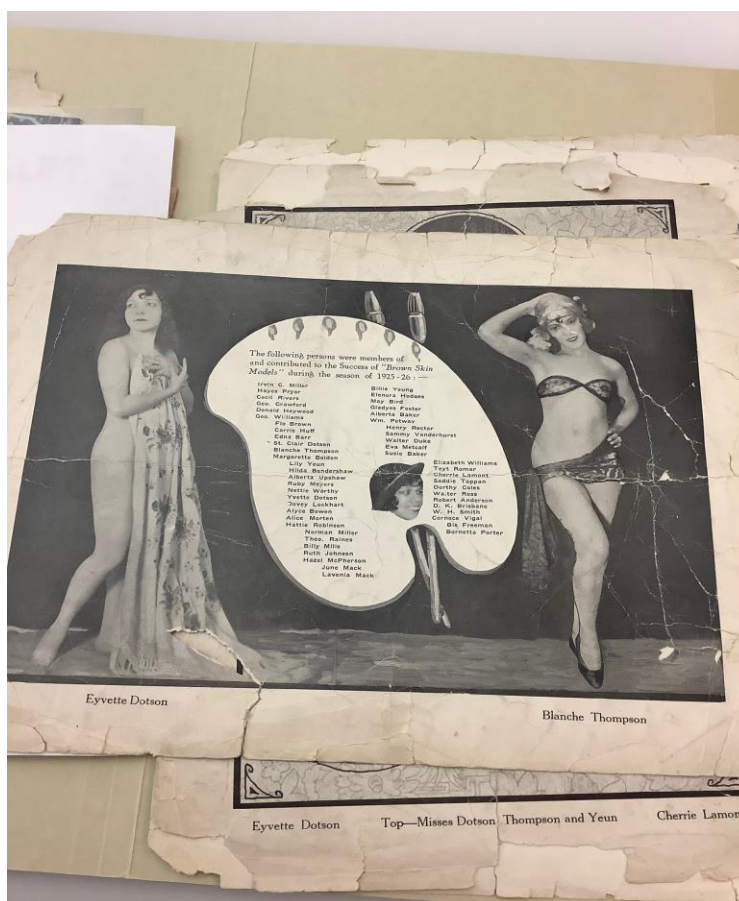


Figure 4. Poster for Brownskin Models with Blanche Thompson. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. ©Kayla Smith.³¹

Lily Yuen: Black Bottom Beauty

Lily Yuen was another famed leading lady. She and her sister Olivia, born in Savannah, GA, went to Harlem to start their careers, and they found employment with the Brownskin Models. Lily Yuen became a sensational “Black Bottom” dancer (See Figure 5); the Black Bottom was a jazz dance originally danced by African Americans in the South, but it became a national craze. The black bottom exhibited a number of features derived from the aesthetics of African dance, most notably syncopated rhythms, bent knees, crouched torsos, and hip and

³¹ Programs for Brownskin Models, Lily Yuen Papers.

pelvic movements.³² Not only was Yuen successful at dancing, but she was also an MC who had a knack for dirty jokes. She had a couple of joke books that she wrote in, with pages filled with jokes about sex, marriage, and promiscuous women. For example, she wrote a joke about a wife who got a visit from a painter:

A woman had just had her apartment painted, so the painter finished the bedroom just that night when her husband came home, he put his hand on the wall and it stuck, so the next morning when the doorbell rang, the woman said Who's there, so a voice came and said, I'm the painter, the woman said, Come right in, I want to show you where my Husband had his hand last night. The painter said, no lady, I just came here to paint.³³

Yuen's way of expressing sexuality was through a humorous and raunchy way that departed from the elegant and glamorous nature of the Models. Although her jokes were not revered within the critics sections of newspapers, her contribution was nonetheless important to the remaking of the capabilities of black female sexuality. In order to break the dominant discursive societal narrative, Yuen challenged norms of what jokes a woman should say, even if that made her deviant or inappropriate.

³² "Black Bottom," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed October 6, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/art/black-bottom>.

³³ Joke Books, Sc MG 643, Box 1, Folder 6, Lily Yuen Papers.



Figure 5. Poster for Brown Skin Models with Lily Yeun. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. ³⁴

Alto Oates: Sepia Mae West

Alto Oates is another name that appeared numerous times in different newspapers involving the Brownskin Models. She was the “personality girl” of the stage and was a hokum blues singer. The *Afro-American* newspaper wrote, “Miss Oates wears several nice looking gowns and sings her songs in a way which makes the audience fall in with her. Her singing of ‘Take Your Fingers Off It’ was a real hit, being both humorous and melodious.”³⁵ “Take Your

³⁴ Programs for Brownskin Models, Lily Yuen Papers.

³⁵ “AMONG THEATRES: CONNIE'S INN REVUE REAL ENTERTAINMENT,” *Afro-American*, Jan 15, 1927.

Fingers Off It” has many different versions since it was recorded by the Memphis Jug Band in 1928. One version’s lyrics says:

You know it's sad to see a woman, an extra good 'un'
 Holdin' back on her sugar puddin',
 Take your fingers off it, and don't you dare touch it,
 You know it don't belong to you.
 Two old maids a-laying in bed,
 One turned over toward the other and said,
 Take your fingers off it, don't you dare touch it,
 You know it don't belong to you.³⁶

This song could be read as a way to express how women are taking ownership of their sexuality and saying “sugar puddin’” and “it” (as allusions to female genitalia) doesn’t belong to just anybody but themselves. In addition to the mentioning of same-sex desire between the two “old maids”, the song presents a radical message of sexual nonconformity and womanly independence. “Take Your Fingers Off It” is one example of a hokum blues song. Hokum blues include humorous songs which use extended analogies or euphemistic terms to make sexual innuendos. Singing hokum blues was a way that black female performers could express wanting pleasure in a “naughty”, comedic, and clever way.

Oates’ fame was also attributed to her comparison with a famous sex icon: Mae West. In one description of Oates, the *Pittsburgh Courier* described her as, “The sepia edition of Mae West, with her curves and her ‘you go to’ air. Alto is better than ever, and the applause she

³⁶ “Take Your Fingers Off It Lyrics by Unknown,” Lyrics On Demand, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://www.lyricsondemand.com/u/unknownlyrics/takeyourfingersoffitlyrics.html>.

receives is an indication of how people hereabouts admire her artistry.”³⁷ Mae West was an actress, singer, playwright, screenwriter, and comedian, and she was considered a sex symbol and a bad role model simultaneously. Her frank sensuality, languid postures, and blasé wisecracking became her trademarks, and she usually portrayed women who accepted their lives of dubious virtue with flippant good humour.³⁸ West’s controversial sexuality challenged society’s norms, so by comparing a black female performer to an actress who was a pioneer in sexual liberation in white America, black critics are attributing her in a similar vein as a pathfinder towards black sexual liberation on black vaudeville stages.

The “Exotic” Tanya

Tanya was another “sensational dancer” in the Brownskin Models who exuded an exoticism that beguiled her audience with her Scorpion dance. *The New Journal and Guide* detailed Tanya’s titillating performance:

Al Stewart and his orchestra were playing these torrid, jungle-like strains that rose from almost inaudible tom-tom vibrations to a crescendo as the curtain gradually rose and multi-colored lights revealed the shapely body of the exotic Tanya in a most daring pose. She cast a hypnotic spell over the audience with her creative dancing, and held them spellbound during her performance. So completely had she enveloped them that they remained motionless and silent for fully 30 seconds after she left the stage, and then suddenly they burst into a thunderous applause and cries of ‘We want Tanya’ could be heard above the roar. Her act is billed as the featured attraction and she holds her spot down like the true artist she is. She is so very different from any other performer, that you really have to appreciate the perfection she has attained in her art. She is more than a contortionist or a dancer, she is ‘terrific’.³⁹

³⁷ “Miller’s Brown Skin Models Give Real show at Roosevelt, Held Over for Rest of Week: Pioneer Producer Gives Local Theatergoers Best show City has seen in several Seasons, with Pretty Girls, Plenty of Comedy and High-Class Singing,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 21, 1934.

³⁸ “Mae West,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed March 4, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mae-West>.

³⁹ “Tanya Steals Spotlight in Memphis: Creative Dancing Still Top Number in Models Revue,” *New Journal and Guide*, Jul 09, 1938.

In her performance, Tanya combined sexual allure with elements of pure visual spectacle. She was a visual novelty who used sexual titillation combined with visual effects who made her body the center of the act. Her unique act as a contortionist is intrinsically sensual in that it crosses the boundaries of what a body can physically do. Tanya's act became popular because she surpassed the normal physicalities of the female body.

Contortionism constructs a “complex, contradictory image of the body as a site of extreme pliancy, extreme strength (or boldness), and extreme vulnerability,” and it is this image that makes it so viscerally exciting for the spectator.⁴⁰ Essentially, “contortionism appeals to erotic feeling because it exposes the power of a body part to dominate the attractiveness of a body, and this attractiveness emerges most intensely when the body part is self-consciously ‘out of place’ and the performer treats this displacement as a pleasure in a spectacle.”⁴¹ Thus, Tanya was rebelliously making her body disrupt the traditional way of how a body should be, similar to how the other women disrupted the male gaze their own way. As a contortionist, Tanya took pleasure in moving her body parts in ways that present an eroticism and shock factor that disrupted the audiences' expectations of what a black woman's body could do. Tanya's performance, in particular, is a unique presentation of the female form and can be coded as an art form that appeals to an erotic sensibility.

Conclusion

Although their performances did not end the negative stereotyping of black women, it did offer a new image for black audiences that was antithetical to these negative stereotypes. Thus, the women who participated in the Brownskin Models not only flipped the creative script of

⁴⁰ Karl Toepfer, “Twisted Bodies: Aspects of Female Contortionism in the Letters of a Connoisseur,” *TDR* (1988-) 43, no. 1 (1999): 104 & 115, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146738>.

⁴¹ Karl Toepfer, “Twisted Bodies”, 104 & 115.

what is known as black vaudeville, but they also chose to shift the stereotypical perceptions of black women's bodies to emulate a more glamorous and sophisticated image through sensual and erotic lenses.

III

Sites of Black Working-Class Women's Erotic Sovereignty in New York City, 1912-1931

Introduction

Black women expressed various forms of erotic and sexual subjectivities in the private and semi-public spheres in order to resist against debilitating and harmful stereotypes about rampant, uncontrollable, and/or invisible black female sexuality. The private sphere is “a certain sector of societal life in which an individual enjoys a degree of authority, unhampered by interventions from governmental or other institutions,” or “a smaller, typically enclosed realm (like a home) that is only open to those who have permission to enter it.”⁴² Semi-public spheres, including saloons, clubs, cafes, brothels, and “prostitution joints” are spaces with a public sphere critical function but could also maintain private autonomy.

In New York City, sexuality was criminalized within black women's own private and semi-public spheres as a result of reformer groups that infiltrated private spaces to rectify the sexual deviancy that may have been present. I argue that the private and semi-public spheres are crucial sites of sexual revolution and counterrevolution, and these were spaces where black women could express their sexuality in ways that would be away from the scrutiny of the public eye and the government. These women experimented with courting, treating, and the sex trade within these spaces. I will be analyzing the files of the Committee of Fourteen, an anti-vice committee who documented the conditions of places of business that were fostering what they deemed deviant behavior. I will do a rereading of these files to analyze the white perspective of black women and their sexuality, the culture inside of saloons, how the Committee viewed black

⁴² “Private Sphere,” Wikipedia, last modified February 11, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Private_sphere; Ashley Crossman, “What's the Difference Between Private and Public Spheres in Sociology?” ThoughtCo, last modified August 31, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/private-and-public-spheres-3026464>.

women's behavior in saloons and brothels, and the perspective of black women and how they expressed their sexuality within saloons and brothels.

Private and Semi-Public Spaces

Employing a spatial analysis towards a cultural understanding of the criminalization of black women's sexuality allows us to contextualize how space impacted black women's social practices, activities, and expression. I have focused on the public sphere in the previous chapter, yet it is different from the private sphere because of their disparate "degrees of authority." The amount of autonomy individuals have in the private and public spheres is determined by each sphere's spatial, political, and cultural purpose. For instance:

The private [...] has traditionally been associated and conflated with: the domestic, the embodied, the natural, the family, property, the 'shadowy interior of the household', personal life, intimacy, passion, sexuality, 'the good life', care, a haven, unwaged labour, reproduction and immanence. The public [...] has traditionally been the domain of the disembodied, the abstract, the cultural, rationality, critical public discourse, citizenship, civil society, justice, the market place, waged labour, production, the polis, the state, action, militarism, heroism and transcendence.⁴³

Certain public spaces have been constructed to control and perpetuate appropriate notions of sexual comportment, and private spaces are culturally considered sites of protection from public scrutiny of how one conducts their sexual lives (although research has been done to prove this is always not the case). However, the nightlife spaces that black women inhabited in early twentieth century New York were not traditionally public nor private; instead they were semi-public. Specifically, within semi-public spaces, private characteristics including personal life, intimacy, passions, and sexuality intermingled with public characteristics like the state, critical public discourse, and the marketplace. These spaces were an escape for some black women, a

⁴³ Nancy Duncan, "Renegotiating Gender and Sexuality in Public and Private Spaces," *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality* (1996): 128.

distraction against the minimally and back-breaking waged labour, and a site for resistance against the norms that shackled their ability and autonomy. The spaces I want to focus on are “semi-public” as their purpose straddled between the public and the private.

Committee of Fourteen

The Committee of Fourteen was founded in 1905 as a citizens' association and was one of the organizations that were created to conduct investigations into deviant behavior. By 1911, the Committee's focus turned to the suppression of commercialized vice in New York City, with an emphasis on prostitution. Its investigators visited restaurants, dance halls, massage parlors, tenement houses, and other types of establishments where immoral conditions might have prevailed. The hundreds of records they accumulated included descriptions of black women's activities, which were extremely racially biased; however, they provide insight into black women's behaviors and how they navigated spaces to achieve autonomy and freedom in their own ways. Although these records are from the perspective of the investigators, I will be analyzing with a different perspective, one that views black women as ingenious in how they used creative ways to escape public scrutiny and policing.

New York City's reformers hired investigators based on who or what they wanted investigated or where they needed investigations to be conducted. The untrained investigators came from various class backgrounds, but were mostly white as they could infiltrate multiple spaces with their privilege. This committee defied the public-private dichotomy and this constant and invasive practice perpetuated a norm of outside surveillance disproportionately infiltrating black spaces. These undercover tactics generated a range of consequences such as new forms of de facto segregation in public accommodations (such as restaurants, hotels, and theaters), unexpected complicity of undercover agents in planning and participating in criminal activities,

and eventual normalization of government surveillance in the lives of ordinary Americans.⁴⁴ The Committee of Fourteen had thus set itself up as an extra-governmental and extralegal organization to police the conditions and relationships that they believed contributed to the “moral decay” of New York City.⁴⁵ However, their investigative approaches and perspectives were flawed as their own personal perceptions of what morality should look like influenced who they targeted. For instance, public space is typically regulated by erasing expressions of sexuality that are not socially accepted or condoned.⁴⁶ As a result of this, their reports are concerned with outlawing the ways that marginalized populations, including black people, could express passion or sexuality.

The focus of this project is to understand black intimate histories of sexuality and not about the organizations that attempted to stunt black expression and freedom. Therefore, my aim is to dismantle the bias and reimagine how black women viewed themselves in their nightlife lifestyles.

Norms and Expectations

In order to track the immoral conditions of a space, the Committee of Fourteen had investigation reports that would include details about the locations including the name, address, owner name, and brewer name. The investigators noted how long they stayed, the “Conditions observed in the Bar Room” and the “Conditions in Rear Room.” Underneath the section of the “Conditions in Rear Room,” it noted unescorted women and unaccompanied men as well as couples. It also had questions like, “Any soliciting observed?”, “Is there changing tables by

⁴⁴ Jennifer Fronc, *New York Undercover Private Surveillance in the Progressive Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 7.

⁴⁵ Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 39.

⁴⁶ Duncan, “Renegotiating Gender and Sexuality,” 141.

persons of opposite sex?”, “Any entertainment; if yes, what kind?”, “Who served you?”, and “State other actions observed or conversations overhead in rear room.”⁴⁷ This document is one of many and it demonstrates what kinds of expectations the Committee had for saloons in particular. Opposite gender intermingling, soliciting, entertainment, and alcohol seem to be concerns that needed to be noted. If conditions were seen as nonconforming to the Committee’s rules, the Committee sent warnings to the saloon owners that they would shut their establishments down.

The owner of one establishment wrote a letter to the Committee further explaining the multitude of restrictions that the Committee put onto business owners:

Gentlemen: In consideration of your withdrawing your objection to the writing of an excise bond for the premises of 2177 Fifth Ave., I agree to conduct the cafe of which I am the owner as follows:

First: I agree that I will absolutely close my cafe to all patrons at 1 o’clock A.M. and will immediately clear the premises of all persons, it being understood that all persons will be out of the premises at 1:15 A.M.

Second: I agree that no women who are unaccompanied by escorts will be admitted or served in my premises after 9 o’clock.

Third: I do not intend to have any cabaret or entertainers of any kind in my place.

Fourth: I will not admit colored men accompanied by white women or colored women accompanied by white men with white women or colored women with white men to be in the same party, or parties, or at the same tables, or to mingle in any way in the premises.

Fifth: I will not allow any women known or reported to me to be prostitutes to be served at any time in the premises.

⁴⁷ Investigation Report on Morris Cafe, November 26, 1918, Box 17, Folder Eldridge St-Fifth Ave, Committee of Fourteen Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library (hereafter cited as COF).

It is distinctly understood and agreed that the first violation of this agreement will result in a warning to me by the Committee and that further violations will result in my place being removed from any further consideration by your Committee.⁴⁸

This letter is indicative of the kinds of regulations that the Committee enforced to control people's behaviors and socialization. These rules came from legal and societal expectations of urban leisure. Drinking alcohol was seen as a social evil, thus reformers aimed to criminalize the popular pastime through legal means. The Raines Law was passed by the New York State Legislature in 1896, and it was a liquor tax that intended to curb the consumption of alcohol. It impacted saloons drastically as most men worked a six-day week, and Sunday was the only full day for drinking at saloons. The law closed saloons on Sundays and prohibited any businesses with the exception of hotels from selling alcohol on the Sabbath.⁴⁹ In addition, Raines Law increased the presence of sex workers in commercial leisure businesses like saloons and thus produced new venues for prostitution.⁵⁰ Prostitution was, thus, another main concern of the Committee. In addition to prostitutes, commercial leisure businesses served as new sites for racially charged sexual exchanges and interactions. For instance, within these environments, black women found new ways to assert control over their leisure by going to saloons unescorted, mixing and intermingling with white patrons, and participating in entertainment within the saloons.

Unaccompanied women were seen as dangerous in saloons. Signs in saloon rooms displayed messages such as, "No women allowed in the rear room or served drinks on the ground

⁴⁸ Letter to Committee of Fourteen, September 28, 1916, Box 17, Folder Eldridge St-Fifth Ave, COF.

⁴⁹ LaShawn Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City's Underground Economy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 148.

⁵⁰ Harris, *Sex Workers*, 148.

floor,” “No women allowed upstairs without male escort, no men allowed upstairs without a lady.”⁵¹ This was an issue because “Saloons served as sites of contestation in terms of gender as well as race. Like their white counterparts, African American men frequently approved of the participation of women for entertainment, companionship, and sometimes paid sexual pleasure. However, they often bristled or reacted violently when wives, daughters, and significant others breached the boundaries of their versions of respectability by drinking, carousing, and joining in late-night revelries.”⁵² These women defied the hegemonic gender norms by entering a masculine space, especially without being escorted or claimed by a man, thus resisting against the predetermined spaces intended for their leisure such as the home.

Interracial mixing proved to be a problem as well. For the Committee of Fourteen, “race mixing” in leisure places emerged as the most easily identifiable marker of disorderliness. The Committee’s campaigns that aimed to divide the races exposed their implicit bias against integration, and these campaigns were examples of de facto segregation. This attempt to eliminate interracial mixing was a result of public fear of interracial contact. Nonetheless, it can be argued that socializing within these mixed-sex and mixed-race groups excited young black women because of its forbidden charge.

Providing entertainment for saloon patrons proved to be an exciting venture for black women as well. Entertainment in saloons were seen as disorderly to the Committee. It is unclear through the records why they wanted to keep track of the kinds of entertainment in businesses,

⁵¹ Report on Bolivar Street, Neighborhood of Clermont and Atlantic Ave, and Martin’s, October 13, 1912, Box 29, Folder Brooklyn, Staten Island, Manhattan- Investigation Reports & Relevant Material 1914-1915, COF.

⁵² Douglas J. Flowe, “‘Fighting and Cutting and Shooting, and Carrying On’: Saloons, Dives, and the Black ‘Tough’ in Manhattan’s Tenderloin, 1890-1917,” *Journal of Urban History* 45, no. 5 (August 2018): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144218779368>.

but it can be inferred that certain kinds of lascivious entertainment like cabaret, “indecent” dancing, and vulgar singing were troublesome and needed to be eradicated. Overall, the Committee investigated these conditions, and their rules for getting rid of these conditions demonstrate what black women were up against in these spaces. Nonetheless, black women resisted these regulations, and they aimed to take control of their own lives, survival, ways of leisure, even if that meant being constantly surveillanced by the Committee.

Erotic Sovereignty

I will be using Dr. Mireille Miller-Young’s theoretical framework of “erotic sovereignty” she employs in her book *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* to make sense of these women’s search for pleasure and aim for complex personhood. Miller-Young uses the framework of “erotic sovereignty” towards her work on the historical trajectory of black women in the porn industry. She explains:

Erotic sovereignty is a process, rather than a completely achieved state of being, wherein sexual subjects aspire and move toward self--rule and collective affiliation and intimacy, and against the territorializing power of the disciplining state and social corpus. It is part of an ongoing ontological process that uses racialized sexuality to assert complex subjecthood, inside of the overwhelming constraints of social stigma, stereotype, structural inequality, policing, divestment, segregation, and exploitation under the neoliberal state.⁵³

Essentially, sexual subjects, or people who seek sexual pleasure and express sexual desire, hope for opportunities to be autonomous and self-serving while also engaging with others who have mutual interests in this same objective. They aim to resist against the tyrannizing forces that control their bodies and behaviors by embracing sexual subjectivities that have been used to stigmatize them. Thus, black women used erotic sovereignty within their nightlife lifestyles to disrupt the norms that have been implemented into their lives as black, working-class women. In

⁵³ Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 16.

the cases of prostitution and soliciting in saloons, these women imagined sexual labor as a potential domain for their erotic sovereignty. Each had their own motivations for entering into prostitution and entering into the saloons, but they all shared a desire to be free of the social and racial responsibilities and burdens of early twentieth century womanhood.

Resistive Acts

Prostitution

As the primarily white Committee of Fourteen investigators made their rounds in these nightlife establishments, they frequently encountered black women, whether it was through just hanging out in saloons with them, arresting them for prostitution, or interviewing them. In addition to the Committee investigators, residents would send curt complaints to the Committee demanding that they handle black female prostitutes especially. It was unclear whether the complainants were white or black, however, these complaints were mainly from neighbors or at least people who are familiar with neighborhoods and people who lived there as they would name the women. The letters mostly dealt with black women conducting “disorderly houses” within residential neighborhoods. Some letters were short and others included lengthy descriptions of how these women conducted their business. Regardless of length or how “colorful” the descriptions were, these letters are valuable as they recorded the lifestyles of working-class black women.

For instance, some letters would talk about “colored prostitutes” “making a special nuisance of themselves.”⁵⁴ Though this was not explicitly explained, it implies that black women prostituting themselves was such a great issue that it needed to be reported and investigated to

⁵⁴ Letter from General Secretary to Inspector Dennis Sweaney, June 15, 1912, Box 13, Folder 1904 Police, COF.

the “Honorable Committee of Fourteen” as addressed by the same complainant.⁵⁵ It may be because “disorderly houses” were hidden in plain sight and bothered people especially when disorderly houses were run by black women and housed white women as well. In one case, “a neighbor” wrote that Adie Chase, who the complainant described as “colored,” “harbors white girls who are used for immoral purposes by colored men who are frequent visitors at the house. She also sells liquor without a license. [...] it is a house of ill repute and a disgrace to any neighborhood. [...] P.S. She also has two minor children at this place.”⁵⁶ Chase was not only breaking laws but also committing mortal sins in the eyes of this neighbor by harboring white prostitutes and having children around this environment.

White prostitutes involving themselves with black prostitutes seem to be silently forbidden. This demonstrates that black women were seen as dangerously impressionable on white women and children in this way. Chase was selling liquor in her household as a means of servicing her clients with refreshments in her home, but the neighbor wrote in a language to suggest Chase was conducting an illegal business. Therefore, neighbors could have seen “disorderly houses” as more than just a house; it was a business where black women made a living. Why Chase decided to include white women and children in this business is unknown. However, African American prostitutes did create a hierarchy among black sex businesses that was based on ethnicity and skin complexion. Black sex houses placed a higher economic value on “mulattoes,” “high yellow complexion,” and white prostitutes, which attributed to the social and financial advantages of possessing lighter skin.⁵⁷ Their skin’s proximity to whiteness was

⁵⁵ Letter from “A Neighbor” to “The Honorable Committee of Fourteen,” Box 22, Folder Citizens Complaints, COF.

⁵⁶ Letter from “A Neighbor” to “The Honorable Committee of Fourteen,” COF.

⁵⁷ Harris, *Sex Workers*, 151.

appealing to white and black male clients, therefore, this tactic could prove profitable for black madams who received clients of all kinds.

Organizations with religious leaders would complain about these houses as well. For example, another complaint was sent to the Committee from an organization “of which Bishop Greer is the head” about Mrs. Gardiner, “a colored woman, almost white,” who conducted a disorderly house and sold liquor there and housed “girls” who are “almost white and could be mistaken for white women.”⁵⁸ There could be a layered complaint where the Bishop was concerned about the deviancy of a woman who was a wife that participated in prostitution. However, this woman could have been working with her husband knowing about her profession or she could have worked to provide for herself and her household without her husband knowing. Nonetheless, this case demonstrates how the home was a space for black women to express their sexuality and to also earn a living in sex work. Specifically, the home can be an important site of resistance, as it contains a radical political dimension where black women could restore to themselves the dignity denied to them in the public world.⁵⁹ Essentially, the home for black women was a site for organizing subversive activity, including prostitution. Having “disorderly houses” or “prostitution joints” in private homes intervened in the public-private dichotomy, especially as it took over as an alternative to brothels.

The shift from brothels to independent sex entrepreneurship in private homes/buildings was caused by the diffusion of sex workers’ “entrepreneurial spirit” and desire to protect themselves from potentially violent clients and arrest.⁶⁰ They yearned to gain occupation control,

⁵⁸ Letter from Executive Secretary to Inspector Thomas T. Ryan, Esq., March 25, 1916, Box 23, Folder 125th-134th, COF.

⁵⁹ Duncan, “Renegotiating Gender and Sexuality,” 136.

⁶⁰ Harris, *Sex Workers*, 141.

financial freedom, and the ability to select their own clients in relatively safe and semi-private working and living conditions.⁶¹ A letter from a neighbor's complaint exemplifies this:

This joint is run by a young woman who formerly had places on West 68th St; West 95th St and on 7th Ave near 51st St.

She usually patrols [...] and gives out cards to men she recognizes along the street as she changes addresses frequently and sometimes has two and three places operating at same time but does not have more than three girls and usually two in any one place but changes them every week and they are pretty good lookers.

There are a large number of steerers some of them taxi drivers near all the htoels [hotels] in the white light district who button hole and solicit men for speakeasys and women and they have been getting more bolder during the past month or so.

The police now license the taxi's and control them how is it that they do not stop such practices and are totally indifferent.⁶²

Women who worked outside of their own homes determined their working conditions, chose what clients to service, and kept all of their earnings. In addition to bolstering their own self-sustainment, "By using their own homes as creative spaces for pay, play, and pleasure," black sex workers were bolstering New York's and African American's blossoming and diverse leisure culture."⁶³ "Residential prostitution" allowed women who were working in the privacy of their homes or in furnished rooms to conceal their labor. Thus, these women blurred the line between being regarded as respectable and disreputable because they limited the social cost that usually

⁶¹ Harris, *Sex Workers*, 141.

⁶² Letter to Geo. E. Worthington, Secretary of Committee of Fourteen, July 26th, 1931, Box 13, Folder Police 1930-1931, COF.

⁶³ Harris, *Sex Workers*, 143.

accompanied the choice to sell sex.⁶⁴ They avoided the social stigma that came with being a sex worker in their community, and ultimately supplemented their wages.

Creeping Joints

Essentially, creeping joints “served as an additional way for some economically struggling prostitutes to augment the low wages they earned from sex work.”⁶⁵ The Committee would have lists of addresses where women would own these joints and have the other prostitutes who are working with them steal from the customers. These women would usually charge twenty-five cents for a room and would have unique practices to decoy men or “bulls” and steal from them. Either the woman herself would steal or she would have an accomplice help her steal. One description notes, “149 West 33rd Street. Third floor. Cooley’s ‘Creeping Joint.’ Vilest practices allowed here. Cooley brown skinned-- West Indian Woman does the ‘creeping’ and instructs women how to decoy men and steal. Place does business in the day. Charges twenty-five cents for room, and half of what is stolen. Bad, fearless woman, and has been pulled repeatedly.”⁶⁶ This indicates that “creeping” effectively was something prostitutes learned from each other, because stealing from these grown men didn’t come easily. Black women had to be creative and appeal to their clients. Creep joint women “cleverly used their knowledge of urban white men’s amusement habits and fantasies and their assumptions about black female sexuality for their own economic advantage.”⁶⁷ These fantasies include seeing the black woman as

⁶⁴ Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2006), 77.

⁶⁵ Clement, *Love for Sale*, 157.

⁶⁶ Investigation Report on “Creeping Joints,” Box 28, COF.

⁶⁷ Harris, *Sex Workers*, 152.

hypersexual and only exist to please a man. These women played into that, possibly so well that they were able to steal from the clients without being found out.

Soliciting in Leisure Spaces

Prostitutes would “offend the aesthetic sensibilities of the upholders of the public/private dichotomy. [...] Many (but certainly not all) adult prostitutes and other sex workers freely choose marginal or eccentric locations from which to claim their rights as sexual minorities and challenge the very structures which elite women employ to get ahead.”⁶⁸ Prostitutes were, and still are, spatially and socially marginalized according to the law and societal expectations. In order to escape both, prostitutes would play within the semi-public sphere and inhabit spaces like saloons to conduct business. As a result, “Popular leisure establishments served as new sites for sexual transactions and performances and ethnic and racial interactions. In turn, sex workers became major participants in the city’s burgeoning nightlife, forging new partnerships with urban business owners and devising new ways of earning a living and asserting control over their professional lives.”⁶⁹ The Committee of Fourteen recognized this, and thus wrote hundreds of pages detailing this burgeoning nightlife.

Some investigators would write reports about prostitutes soliciting inside saloons. For example, a Committee investigator reported that, “[...] the back room of this saloon [is] a hang-out for colored prostitutes, saying that they permit unaccompanied men to join unescorted women and to drink with them. The women patrons of this place seem to be colored prostitutes,

⁶⁸ Duncan, *Love for Sale*, 139-140.

⁶⁹ Harris, *Sex Workers*, 148.

despite which fact unaccompanied white men are served in the rear room.”⁷⁰ In some businesses, owners would place beds in their backrooms, permitting sex workers to rent out beds.⁷¹

One document noted that, “The rear room with the entrance on the side street used as a hang out for some of the most disreputable type of colored solicitors. A crowd of colored loafers hung around by the side door whistling to these women when they came out.”⁷² Thus, rear rooms served to be important spaces for black women to earn money.

Racial Mixing

Despite the encouragement of de facto segregation by the Committee, saloons still allowed it. For some black women, mingling with white men was a fun pastime, and they did many activities ranging from courting, to treating, to prostitution. Courting is the development of an intimate relationship where a couple decides if there will be an engagement and then marriage, whereas treating occurs where “young working-class women forged a new category of sexual identity that allowed them to profit from sex without completely abandoning their particular culture’s perception of female respectability.”⁷³ In one case, a Committee investigator observed in a saloon “four colored women in the back room. They were singing indecent songs, the piano being played by one of them. White men were sitting with these women and being hugged and kissed by them.”⁷⁴ Engaging with white men was an exciting venture since it was not

⁷⁰ Letter from General Secretary to George Khret, May 20, 1918, Box 17, Folder Eighth Ave #22-989, COF.

⁷¹ Harris, *Sex Workers*, 148

⁷² Investigation Report 8:45-11:30PM, Box 29, COF.

⁷³ Clement, *Love for Sale*, 3

⁷⁴ Letter from General Secretary to V. Loewer’s Gambrinus Brewing Co., Box 19, Folder Location Correspondence-Queens, COF.

typically accepted for black women and white men to show affection towards each other. Their motivations varied between attempting to solicit white men for a bigger payoff to just wanting to have a good time. Another instance occurred at a “colored joint and hang out for gangsters” where “one colored man and 16 white boys were giving exhibitions of objectionable dances. [A]fter the dance one of the colored women, purpos[e]ly fell down on the floor and crying with all might ‘Is there no one here to pick me up’; She was surrounded by a ho[a]rd of white men, who were having some fun, by placing her skirt over her h[e]ad, putting some beer over her back etc.”⁷⁵ These saloons encouraged sexually charged activity that allowed black women to indulge in without public scrutiny. New dynamics of social relationships emerged in saloons where black women could pair up with men other than black men, and they could be treated by multiple groups of men. It could be possible that black women viewed white men as better “treating” partners, affirming white supremacy for their own personal purposes.

Clement explains that, “[White men] had more money, and like older men, they understood that a relationship with [a black woman] would not lead to something more. [A black woman] may have also used this activity to protect herself, either from falling in love or from spoiling her reputation in her own community.”⁷⁶ Thus, black women may have used this opportunity to exploit white men who were potentially out to exploit them by having them spend money on them for things like drinks. For instance, one report said that, “a couple of white fellows came in and were soon joined by two colored girls, drinks were ordered and they had a very big and loud time, one fellow finally went out with one of the colored girls.”⁷⁷ It’s possible

⁷⁵ Notes from Investigator Samuel L. Auerbach, July 19, 1913, Box 29, Folder Brooklyn, Staten Island, Manhattan- Investigation Reports & Relevant Material 1914-1915, COF.

⁷⁶ Clement, *Love for Sale*, 65.

⁷⁷ Investigation Report 8:45-11:30PM, Box 29, COF.

that black women would find white lovers in these spaces, but it appears that, overall, black women interacted with white men in these spaces solely for the purpose of leisure and money.

Entertainment

Indecent dancing and singing proved to be a popular topic that Committee investigators were concerned about as well. This represents society's concerns about dancing that were prevalent during this time. Specifically, "This anxiety about the unrestrained black female body epitomized the black community's concerns about individual women's welfare, in addition to their belief that respectability was essential for a stable family life and a viable strategy for racial advancement."⁷⁸ Despite this, dance helped African Americans overall escape from the harsh economic realities that they faced every day. Social dancing was an integral part of black life and was a way to break the standards of conformity that many cultural groups embraced. Alongside dancing, singing was also an art form of expression and black people definitely used song to express themselves while also resisting against social norms.

Investigators would note in their reports phrases like "songs vulgar and improper," "obscene scenes and dances," and "songs vulgar and actions suggestive."⁷⁹ However, they would not be specific about what constitutes as a "vulgar song" or a "suggestive action." It could be discerned that black women could have been singing hokum blues music where suggestive lyrics about sex are hidden through double entendres. In addition to hokum blues, certain popular dances were seen as vulgar included "the shimmy," "the black bottom," "the Charleston," and

⁷⁸ Cheryl D. Hicks, *Talk with You like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 214.

⁷⁹ Investigation Report, pg. 2, June 27, 1913, Box 29, Folder Brooklyn, Staten Island, Manhattan- Investigation Reports & Relevant Material 1914-1915; Investigation Report. "Clubs, Hotels, Saloons, etc., Box 31, COF.

“the breakaway” to name a few. Essentially, there were few dances of the last hundred years which proved to be both popular with the young crowd and exempt from charges of indecency. One description said, “[...] the dancing covered up any open soliciting. One of the colored girls sang during the intermission. The dancing was not particularly bad, the negroes did not seem to know how to dance & satisfied themselves by holding very close & very tight & getting around [the] best they could.”⁸⁰ The Committee assumed that these dances were used to cover up soliciting, implying that dancing was seen as akin to prostituting one’s body. It could be true that black women would solicit during a dance. However, it is also possible that the dancing is simply just that. Young black women’s enthusiasm for letting go of society’s expectations and hard work was evident within the movements of their bodies and the tones of their voices in these spaces.

Conclusion

Black women used different spaces in order to express self-authorship, sexual autonomy, self-sufficiency, and self-expression. Their private spaces, namely their homes, allowed them to make their own rules and make a living, while semi-public spaces like saloons allowed them to engage in leisure activities unafforded to them in the public gaze. Black women were able to earn money, gain companions, get treated, and express themselves through dance and song that proved to be fulfilling and pleasurable. Although there were restrictions that resulted in their actions being constantly surveillanced by the Committee of Fourteen, these women continued to indulge in their nightlife lifestyles audaciously.

⁸⁰ Investigation Report on The Road Side, Box 29, COF.

IV

“A Perfect Beast”: Suppressing Black Sexual Delinquency at Bedford Hills Reformatory for Women⁸¹

Introduction

In *Black Sexual Politics*, Patricia Hill Collins identified three fears of early twentieth century society that were associated with African-American women: 1) rampant and uncontrolled female sexuality, 2) fear of miscegenation, and 3) independent female desire. She goes on to say how black female sexuality became an important measure of African American progress in Northern cities to challenge the prevailing ideology of black women’s sexual immorality.⁸² This was important because middle-class whites “viewed the lifestyles of black people [...] in urban centers as undermining the moral values of the country.”⁸³ Nonetheless, some working-class women rejected these standards. Those who did not adhere to these standards were not only stigmatized by the black community, but they were also arrested because of wayward minor laws aimed at black women’s deviancy and many women were sent to the New York Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills.

I will be focusing on the records of three Bedford inmates--Drea Hammonds, Dora Candela, and Wilma Jameson-- who were all arrested for prostitution. Their records demonstrate how young black women resisted against the politics of respectability that policed black female sexuality and how sexual delinquency was used to discredit and criminalize young black women. At Bedford Hills, “sexually delinquent” women were accused of not only having acted

⁸¹ Inmate #2798, Verified History: Sex History, Health, Recreation, Supplementary Facts and Explanations, Box 3, Folder 4, BH.

⁸² Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 71.

⁸³ Hammonds, “Toward A Genealogy,” 96.

immorally but also of having both diseased and criminal bodies, linking black women's sexuality to criminality. Although they contended with the expectation of purity as well as racist expectations of black womanhood by the Bedford staff as well as the black community, these black women were in search of pleasure and attempting to "find some balm to protect them from the harshness of life."⁸⁴ Many of these "incorrigible" young women had faced the difficulties of growing up in poverty and trauma, and as emerging adults, they found their bodies regulated by the state and by their families because their pleasure and desire for independence were stigmatized and deemed as illicit.

Social/Cultural Norms

Drea Hammonds, Dora Candela, and Wilma Jameson had unique backgrounds, but collectively, they dealt with similar circumstances before being sent to Bedford and during their time at Bedford. They had to live through restrictive households run by either their family or husbands, they had to live in a society where they were constantly scrutinized, surveilled, and unprotected, and they had to live through social institutions that were placed on their bodies and behaviors that restricted and stigmatized them. It is imperative to understand these circumstances to get a better understanding of what these women were faced with as they encountered the criminal justice system.

I will go into how the dominating patriarchal and New Negro values were integral to how ideal black womanhood was perceived. Moreover, I will be exploring how the institution of marriage and patriarchy was encoded into it and why respectable black womanhood was considered to be a sought-out institution within the black community. What were these forces trying to disprove/prove about Black sexuality and black womanhood? How were the black

⁸⁴ LaKisha Michelle Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (The University of North Carolina Press: 2015), 173.

community's goals different in intent/impact than the criminalizing powers of the state? How did these forces contribute to the social, economic, and religious pressures that black women faced?

Respectability Politics

In the context of black American history, respectability politics was practiced as a way of attempting to consciously set aside and undermine cultural and moral practices thought to be disrespected by wider society, especially in the context of the family and good manners. In her book *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham coined the term 'the politics of respectability' to describe the middle-class women's movement in the black Baptist church. Higginbotham explains:

The black Baptist women's opposition to the social structures and symbolic representations of white supremacy may be characterized by the concept of the "politics of respectability." [...] While adherence to respectability enabled black women to counter racist images and structures, their discursive contestation was not directed solely at white Americans; the black Baptist women condemned what they perceived to be negative practices and attitudes among their own people. Their assimilationist leanings led to their insistence upon blacks' conformity to the dominant society's norms of manners and morals.⁸⁵

Their reasoning for adopting this politics was because of the plethora of racist images and stereotypes of black people that were prevalent in American culture. Specifically, they encouraged temperance, cleanliness of person and property, thrift, polite manners, and sexual purity.⁸⁶ Thus, by claiming respectability, they were attempting to assert their agency and define themselves outside of these degrading images. However, this politics had subversive effects. Specifically, "By linking worthiness for respect to sexual propriety, behavioral decorum, and

⁸⁵ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 187.

⁸⁶ Paisley Jane Harris, "Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women's History and Black Feminism," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 1 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2003.0025>.

neatness, respectability served a gatekeeping function, establishing a behavioral ‘entrance fee,’ to the right to respect and the right to full citizenship.”⁸⁷ Thus, black women who did not conform to these practices were ostracized and shunned, especially those who openly expressed their sexuality. This respectability difference correlated with class difference as well. Some middle-class black women engaged in policing the behavior of poor and working-class women and others who deviated from a Victorian norm in the name of “protecting the ‘race’.”⁸⁸ This practice of shunning deemed black women as “deviant” and therefore “invisible” within their own community. “Invisibility often disadvantages marginalized group members by denying them recognition, legitimacy, authority, and voice. [...] For dominant group members, invisibility reinforces these norms, leaves their privilege unquestioned and unchallenged, and allows them to maintain their power and authority.”⁸⁹ By conforming to the dominant norms, black middle-class women were in fact denying working-class black women recognition, legitimacy, authority, and voice in collective issues about black womanhood and survival.

Familial/Community/Church Protection

In addition to the politics of respectability and silencing, others in the black community believed that there was a need to protect black women and this stemmed from post-Civil War sentiments. Black people’s postemancipation struggles “entailed seeking the enforcement of their new rights as well as redefining themselves in relation to the gendered language and behavior of

⁸⁷ Harris “Gatekeeping and Remaking”, 213.

⁸⁸ Hammonds, “Toward A Genealogy,” 97.

⁸⁹ Isis H. Settles, Nicole T. Buchanan, and Kristie Dotson, “Scrutinized but Not Recognized: (In)Visibility and Hypervisibility Experiences of Faculty of Color,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 113 (2018): 2, DOI: 10.1016/j.jvb.2018.06.003.

the dominant society.”⁹⁰ Black people were physically and sexually violated during slavery, and they continuously struggled against the sexual stereotypes like the “black brute” and “jezebel” which defined black men as sexual predators and black women as promiscuous and “prone to prostitution.”⁹¹ In order to combat these stereotypes and gain a sense of control over their constitution, community members felt the need to focus their efforts on protecting urban working-class women . Consequently, “[...] reforming working women’s behavior became one of the central ways to enforce these gendered mandates and pursue racial advancement. [...] urban working black women posed a social problem because their surplus numbers, especially of single, southern migrants, suggested to some observers an increased susceptibility to immorality.”⁹²

The church subsequently played the single most important role in influencing normative values and distinguishing respectable from non-respectable behavior among working-class black people.⁹³ Wilma Jameson’s story provides a clear example of how the family, community, and church inserted themselves into her womanhood. In 1923, Jameson met two white male acquaintances, and one gave her money to get a drink. The police saw this transaction and arrested her. She was committed to Bedford Hills on February 13, 1923 for offering to commit prostitution. Jameson was not a stranger to the criminal justice system, as she also had previous charges for incorrigibility and associating with dissolute and vicious persons. This may be

⁹⁰ Hicks, *Talk with You*, 8.

⁹¹ Hicks, *Talk With You*, 8.

⁹² Hicks, *Talk With You*, 8.

⁹³ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 193.

because she frequented cabarets, as she was once a singer, and she associated with prostitutes.⁹⁴ Jameson also admitted that she had practiced prostitution since she was nineteen, but was only paid by her friends in the neighborhood. How Jameson became involved in prostitution is unknown, but it can be inferred from her records that her parents, especially her father, greatly restricted her which could have contributed to her deviancy. She was born in the British West Indies on January 6, 1903, and she had been in the States for thirteen years at the time of her arrest. Her parents were devout Christians, and she attended church regularly. In her interview, Jameson said she lived in a “comfortable home” with her parents, although her records also said that her parents had many disagreements, creating a “dissatisfactory environment.”⁹⁵ Jameson’s father was especially strict with her, while her mother was more lenient, which may have contributed to some dissent within her home and may have led to Jameson’s “rogueness.” It can be argued that her father may have felt responsible for being strict with his daughter because of his responsibility as a parent and black community member to protect young black women.

In the community’s eyes, because black urban working-class women were mostly single and were away from familial influence, they had more freedom to stumble upon bad influences and live a life of deviancy. In particular, black working-class families, in particular patriarchal figures, were concerned with protecting the reputations of their young women family members. Largely in American history, black women’s protection was ignored as white women’s purity was seen as more in need of protection. This emerged during slavery as, “Women’s subordination and circumscription by domesticity compelled men to defend their honor and

⁹⁴ Inmate # 3377, Recommendation for Parole, February 1923, 186-7187 Box 4, Folder 31, BH.

⁹⁵ Inmate # 3377, Recommendation for Parole, February 1923, 186-7187 Box 4, Folder 31, BH.

bodies from physical threat and sexual abuse. [...] In the eyes of white men, especially but not exclusively southerners, black women never possessed the innate virtue and moral purity that ladyhood required.⁹⁶ Thus, black women were violated and assaulted.

African American men attempted to assert their own masculinity and power over black women, and they attempted to do so with good intentions. Specifically, “Protecting black women was the most significant measure of black manhood and the central aspect of black male patriarchy. Black men felt outrage and shame at their frequent inability to protect black women, not merely from whippings and hard work, but also from the master/lover’s touch.”⁹⁷ However, their tactics became very patriarchal and restrictive; they emphasized the need for black women to be escorted, surveilled, and coddled out of harm’s way. Thus, Jameson’s father felt compelled to protect his daughter, so much so that he may have contributed to her wanting to gain control of her own autonomy and sovereignty. Another institution that encouraged this sort of patriarchal protection and smothering was marriage.

Marriage

Black women and men of every socioeconomic level valued committed, legal relationships like marriage. There were various social and economic benefits for getting married. For instance, “Working-class black women explained that they had wed for reasons ranging from romantic love or in order to escape their parents to a desire for financial stability.”⁹⁸ However, some couples suffered from financial difficulties and “also suffered from their inability to

⁹⁶ Hicks, *Talk With You*, 57.

⁹⁷ Barbara Omolade, *The Rising Song of African American Women* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 13.

⁹⁸ Hicks, *Talk With You*, 142.

achieve the prevailing norms regarding males as breadwinners and the protectors of women. [...] In most families, black women labored along with their husbands in low-paying personal-service positions. Yet many working-class and poor women still envisioned a married life in which the husband would be the primary breadwinner and they could be housewives.”⁹⁹ For some, this idealized version of marriage did not manifest, which led some young black women to endeavor for their own independence. Drea Hammonds and Dora Candela both married for various reasons, but they ultimately wanted to gain independence from some force that was stifling them.

In 1922, Hammonds went into a hallway with a white man who was going to give her \$5, and the police arrested her and charged her with prostitution. She was committed to Bedford Hills on November 6, 1922. In her interview, Hammonds said she entered prostitution at nineteen years old for money and had been “in the life” for one year. At a young age, Hammonds was exposed to unstable relationships and abandonment in her family. She was born on June 1st, 1902 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and moved to New York City with her parents when she was 4. Since Hammonds was 5, her father used to leave the home and go out with other women and ultimately abandoned the family, and her mother had to earn money for herself and her family. Hammonds left school at 14 years old, because she was “making slow progress and playing truant often,” and started working as an elevator girl.¹⁰⁰ Hammonds got married at seventeen in order to get more freedom from her mother, as she was very strict and never let her have any companions or boys in the home.¹⁰¹ This is one example besides economic security that black women chose to get married, i.e. personal freedom. However, she left her husband because she

⁹⁹ Hicks, *Talk With You*, 142.

¹⁰⁰ Inmate #3325, Parole Recommendation, November 1922, Box 3, Folder 30, BH.

¹⁰¹ Inmate #3325, Personal History, February 2, 1923, Box 3, Folder 30, BH.

said he worked too much.¹⁰² It is possible that Drea felt that because of her experiences with her father not being in her life and seeing her mother struggling to support her family, she felt her husband was not fulfilling the role of a good husband, which included being present within the family and not working.

In her interview, Candela said she got married at around eighteen years old hoping to have a home and babies, but the marriage was short-lived. According to her husband, Manuel, she was “venereal” and she would never go to the doctor, and she had multiple “men callers”. Candela said that her husband actually gave her this disease, was abusive, never “supported” her, and “brought in other girls” (i.e. cheated).¹⁰³ The husband probably accused her of giving him the sexually transmitted disease because he discovered Dora was living with another man at the time of her arrest. Cohabitation was not seen as socially acceptable because of its inherent belief that sex before marriage was occurring in these situations. However, it seems like men who cohabitated with women were not as negatively regarded versus women who cohabitated with men. The end of Dora’s marriage and failure to adhere to the social doctrine of marriage started the chain of events that made her into a “criminal” under the eyes of the law and society. Intimate acts shared between unmarried persons fueled the social panic about wandering, dissolute young women. Therefore, living with another man while still married, or a “serial relationship”, was an offense punishable with a prison sentence. Candela’s estranged husband’s testimony tightened the cuffs on her claiming that she was with multiple men and got venereal disease from one of them, which may or may not be true. Nonetheless, both Candela and Hammonds failed marriages were seen as proof of incorrigibility, and they subsequently were

¹⁰² Inmate #3325, Personal History, February 2, 1923, Box 3, Folder 30, BH.

¹⁰³ Inmate #3247, Sex History, Health, Recreation, Supplementary Facts, Box 3, Folder 24, BH.

criminalized as a result of them participating in activities that were deemed acceptable for men to do, including cohabitation and having multiple partners. All three of these women were arrested for prostitution, but they were not only criminalized for their decision to sell sex, but they were also criminalized because of their neglect to adhere to the norms that were implemented by their own community and society at large.

Background on Bedford Hills

In the late 19th century, the women's reformatory movement and the flurry of concern over prostitution and "white slavery" led to a focus on the moral uplift of fallen women. "During this time period, many young working-class women grappled with the relentless surveillance of concerned relatives, community members, police officers, and urban reformers as they pursued personal autonomy and sexual expression."¹⁰⁴In this context, reformers successfully persuaded New York state officials to establish a female reformatory at Bedford Hills in 1892. The State Reformatory for Women at Bedford was the third such facility in New York when it finally opened in 1901 to receive women between ages 16 and 30 convicted of misdemeanors who were considered reformable.¹⁰⁵ It housed both black and white women, but they were segregated after a failed attempt at integration by the first female Superintendent.

Women's reformatories such as Bedford tended to house small groups of inmates in cottages in rural pastoral settings. It was believed that in a familial setting under the guidance of morally exemplary matrons, fallen women could be redeemed. Moreover, it was believed that exposure to the outdoors and fresh air was healthy for these women. As such, Bedford was

¹⁰⁴ Hicks, *Talk With You*, 206.

¹⁰⁵ Logan M. McBride, "Bedford Hills Correctional Facility," in *The Social History of Crime and Punishment in America: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Wilbur R. Miller, 112 (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2012) doi: 10.4135/9781452218427.n45.

constructed on 200 acres of rural land and included, in addition to administrative buildings, four cottages among which women were classified by age and behavior. Named for the reformatory's founders, the cottages each had a kitchen, flower garden, china and linens, and 28 individual rooms.¹⁰⁶

Girls and young women would be committed to Bedford under the Code of Criminal

Procedure as wayward minors; a wayward minor was:

Any person between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one who 1) 'habitually associates with dissolute persons,' or 2) 'is found of his or her free will and knowledge in a house of prostitutionm assignation, or ill-fame, or habitually associates with thieves, prostitutes, pimps, or procurers, or disorderly persons,' or 3) 'is willfully disobedient to the reasonable and lawful commands of parent, guardian, or other custodian and is morally depraved or in danger of becoming morally depraved,' or 5) '[...] so departs himself or herself as to willfully injure or endanger the morals of herself and others.'¹⁰⁷

After being charged, the inmates would be interviewed by the Bedford employees. Scholar Cheryl Hicks explains, "During admission interviews and throughout their association with Bedford, black women revealed personal experiences that were far more complex than public perceptions of their sexual behavior suggested. Most importantly, their varying responses provide a lens through which we can understand how working-class black women dealt with sex in the city."¹⁰⁸ Staff at Bedford would do preliminary investigations on the incoming inmates about previous charges and their background which they would put into the "verified histories", "admission records", "history blanks", and/or "info sheets" which would contain background information about the inmates. These forms would reiterate the same information. The verified histories, history blanks, and admission records had relatively the same format and were filled

¹⁰⁶ McBride, "Bedford Hills", 112.

¹⁰⁷ Willoughby Cyrus Waterman, *Prostitution and Its Repression in New York City, 1900-1931* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 39.

¹⁰⁸ Hicks, *Talk With You*, 206.

out by interviewers, while the info sheet would be more informal, having a paragraph or two about the inmate.

Doctors would also conduct medical histories where they would do examinations on the inmates and ask about their families' health, mental health, and personal history of past illnesses/diagnoses. Also included in the case files were parole recommendation papers which also included basic information about the inmate such as their name, age, "color", and religion, their present offense, previous arrests, an abstract of personal history, family history, work record, and "mental test" that measured their intelligence. Numerous letters to the Bedford staff usually come from an inmate's family, the inmate herself checking in with the superintendent, or "parole officers" who would give updates on the inmate's work.

These files serve as a window into how the inmates were sent to Bedford, how they got involved in "sexual deviancy", and how they fared inside and outside of Bedford. Their narratives provide an insight into how young black women acted against the social norms in order to establish autonomy and control over their own lives.

Results of Bedford Institutionalization

By analyzing these records, we understand what these women went through as a result of expressing their sexuality, and resisting against the social norms, and getting arrested for doing so. Three main instances that occur across the board are experiences of debilitating work, loss of relationships and isolation, and imposing parole surveillance. All three of these experiences were foundational to Bedford's goal: to break down these women, make them change their ways, and become better citizens. These tactics inspired some women to change and others took longer to be "persuaded" to conform. Whether or not the desire to truly change their ways was sincere or not is up for interpretation. Nonetheless, these following experiences impacted these women in

ways that showed conformity was the only way to escape the misery they were forced to live through.

Tough Work

During Candela's incarceration, she had issues as a domestic, laundress, and chambermaid during her time at Bedford. One of her employers accused her of only caring about "dolling up", not listening to instructions, stealing money meant for supplies, and chewing too much gum.¹⁰⁹ In one instance, her employer reported to Bedford that Candela was sullen, unwilling to work, and "unhappy without any cause", saying "I think her mind is gone now."¹¹⁰ Candela was very unhappy with domestic labor, so much so that she might have developed depression. However, when inmates violated their paroles by committing more crimes, their causes were plain to see through their parole letters and they mostly involved their jobs. Some inmates did not like their jobs, did not care for their employers, wanted more money, and/or only cared about nice clothes and jewelry. In some parole letters, inmates would say their work was too hard, their employers were rude, or they were not being paid enough which explains why some stole money. Some girls did not like the jobs they were assigned to because of the hard work and loneliness. Not many inmates were able to live with their family members and had to be live-in maids or housekeepers which could have consequently made them depressed and lonely.

Loss of Relationships

¹⁰⁹ Inmate #3247, Letter from "H.M" to Dr. Baker, February 25, 1925, Box 3, Folder 24, BH.

¹¹⁰ Inmate #3247, Letter from Grace Baker to Dr. Baker, Box 3, Folder 24, BH.

According to a preliminary investigation, Hammond's mother, "a respectable woman who has tried to advise the defendant" was not surprised that Hammonds was arrested because "the defendant has always associated with prostitutes and would keep no other company [...] Her associates are of lowest type and she is thoroughly bad."¹¹¹ Thus, Hammonds was criminalized based off of her interactions with others, those who were deemed dissolute or disorderly persons and abandoning her position as "dutiful wife". Against her mother's and society's wishes, she instead set out to experience pleasure that was previously inaccessible to her when she was with her mother. She believed that marriage was her key to freedom, but she refused to be governed by a marriage that did not make her happy.

As an arbiter of erotic sovereignty, she hoped for opportunities and activities to be autonomous and self-serving while also engaging with others who have mutual interests in this same objective. This urban youth lifestyle and the "vulgar pleasures" of gambling, smoking, drinking, dancing, etc. inspired young black women. Specifically, "The arousal of the senses unrestrained by the faculty of judgment created an 'aesthetic insensibility' which yielded a destructive sensuality and encouraged the appetite for greater and more intense sensory experiences."¹¹² Essentially, Hammonds was searching for these experiences that were previously unafforded to her by associating with other women who appealed to her within the same profession. However, once she was in Bedford, she certainly could not partake in these activities anymore and would be re-committed if caught doing so. Alternatively, Bedford women interacted with each other at Bedford and developed friendships. However, once these women were paroled to live elsewhere, they were separated once again.

¹¹¹ Inmate #3325, Preliminary Investigation, November 1922, Box 3, Folder 30, BH.

¹¹² Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 117.

Parole Surveillance

Many of the inmates were clamped by their parents and parole boards and did their best to conform to their wishes. Some struggled against the constant supervision of the superintendent and the parole officers because of the constant working, relinquishment of choice and autonomy, reclaiming their old life, and loneliness. The superintendents often acted like paternal figures because the inmates wrote like they would appeal to a parent when they got in trouble. The inmates asked for multiple chances and forgiveness for violating the rules, and reduced their womanhood to a childlike status to be controlled by everyone but themselves. They asked for money, and they asked for permission to go out or leave the state. The superintendents would scold them for not writing their monthly parole letters, would reassure the inmates that they want what's best for them, and say they were proud of them for doing well while on parole. Whether or not the staff cared about the women is questionable and unclear.

In almost every single inmate's case, they always spoke of doing better in their parole letters, but there were seldom any instances where these women had any aspirations in life. In their parole letters, the women would say they are trying to be a "good girl" or a "better girl" but they would seldom talk about how they would do it or what their dreams or aspirations would be. It seems to me that they would say they are doing good or being a "good girl" in order to get favor from the Superintendent at Bedford Hills. There were plenty of cases where girls would say they were doing well at their job and earning an income, but none of them talked about what they wanted to do, achieve, or aspire to do when they get discharged. However, usually these women did not have many aspirations about education, hobbies, travel, etc. besides just getting work, steady pay, freedom, and, in some cases, getting married to somebody they met outside of Bedford Hills while on parole. Some women wanted to get married and did so without the Board

of Managers approval. Simply, there were no aspirations about self-improvement or any dreams the inmates wanted to fulfill except one case.

For example, Hammonds was paroled in 1923, and she was sick with tuberculosis for a few months. She talked about wanting to be out of the city, saying it's "bad" for her to be there. Her father reached out and wanted to get her paroled to him in Newark, New Jersey.¹¹³ She reached out to the Superintendent of Bedford and implored, "[...] I would like to do any thing that will please you. This is the first time I have been in trouble so I hope that you please give me a chance."¹¹⁴ They kept in touch, and once she felt better in 1924, she was able to "go home," possibly to her mother, got a part-time job, and received her release papers from Bedford.¹¹⁵

Candela violated her parole three times from 1925 to 1926. In 1925, Candela's friend and wife of her brother-in-law Alice Allsing was trying to send her pocket money and clothes and paroled to her.¹¹⁶ Candela's parole officer's main objective was to make sure Candela was paroled to a good-natured, moral person saying, "She comes from a prosperous family and is engaged in restaurant work".¹¹⁷ However, the parole officer found out that Allsing "conducts a low-grade cabaret in a basement."¹¹⁸ Candela's family from the Dominican Republic pleaded

¹¹³ Inmate #3325, Letter from Agnes Bell to Dr. Baker, September 21, 1923, Box 3, Folder 30, BH.

¹¹⁴ Inmate #3325, Letter from Drea to Dr. Baker, October 10, 1923, Box 3, Folder 30, BH.

¹¹⁵ Inmate #3325, Letter from Drea to Dr. Baker, January 24, 1924, Box 3, Folder 30, BH.

¹¹⁶ Inmate #3247, Letter from Amy M. Prevost to Dr. Amos T. Baker, June 25, 1925, Box 3, Folder 24, BH.

¹¹⁷ Inmate #3247, Letter from Amy M. Prevost, BH.

¹¹⁸ Inmate #3247, Letter from Amy M. Prevost to Dr. Amos T. Baker, July 11, 1925, Box 3, Folder 24, BH.

their cases for why she should be released to them, and the program broke her down. Candela even wrote to her father that, “[...] my full intentions are in going good and leading a straight and narrow path. I realize that it doesn’t pay to go wrong, as I have learned my lesson.”¹¹⁹ Candela was still under parole at Bedford in 1927, after a parole officer inquired whether she would want a job in domestic service to do “customary housework” and washing “small articles” for \$50 a month.¹²⁰ There is no more information on her after this time.

After being at Bedford for a few months, Jameson was paroled and released to the custody of her mother and worked as a waitress at a hotel. She lost her job after missing work and she didn’t seem “anxious to keep her job.”¹²¹ She continued to struggle finding work and would stay out for late hours. Jameson also violated her parole by getting married without permission from the Superintendent at Bedford (who wanted to ensure that the girls marry suitable men, “of good character and reputation”) when a parole officer encountered “a burly young colored man” who said he was Wilma’s husband at a parole visit.¹²² She explains in a letter to her parole officer that, “I know I haven’t done what was right by getting married as I did, but why I did it was because I mean it would keep me from going out [...] I am trying my [...] best to live a straightforward and honest life in the sight of God and [...] only if I would be

¹¹⁹ Inmate #3247, Letter from Dora to her father, October 31, 1926, Box 3, Folder 24, BH.

¹²⁰ Inmate #3247, Letter from Amy M. Prevost to Dr. Amos T. Baker, January 6, 1927, Box 3, Folder 24, BH.

¹²¹ Inmate #3377, Information Sheet, August 14- March 31, 1925. Box 4, Folder 31, BH.

¹²² Inmate #3377, Letter from Amy M. Prevost to Dr. Amos Baker, November 17, 1923, 7204, Box 4, Folder 31; Letter from Superintendent to Wilma, January 10, 1924, Box 4, Folder 31, BH.

obedient.”¹²³ Jameson called her husband a “man of quality” and made a case for him, saying he worked and had known him for three years. However, she and her husband separated in 1924 but reconciled soon after. She would be on parole until 1926, and she had struggled not giving into unspecified temptations saying “temptations surround me by every hand” and “I have been tempted many times”.¹²⁴ She credited God for leading her to a right path and keeping her out of trouble and danger.

Parole was usually an incredibly long process of proving to the Bedford parole board that the inmates have officially conformed to their demands. It consisted of finding a suitable job and a suitable place to live, away from temptations or anything that could steer the women off the right path. In order to keep it that way, drastic measures were taken to ensure the women would stay on the “straight and narrow path.” Isolation, monotonous and hard work, constant reporting of one’s location, and requests to make life decisions were integral to regaining their freedom.

Conclusion

Black women who were sent to Bedford disrupted deep--seated discourses of sexual responsibility, gendered propriety, and racial loyalty. This dissent prioritized, or at least aimed toward, an autonomous, independent, and self-- defining sexuality, while also acknowledging the forms of affiliation, relation, and responsibility that sexual subjects have to one another.¹²⁵ These women imagined sexual labor, companions, and spaces as potential domains for their erotic sovereignty. One thing that remains true throughout their narratives is that, “There was nothing

¹²³ Inmate #3377, Letter from Wilma to Dr. Baker, January 9, 1924, Box 4, Folder 31, BH.

¹²⁴ Inmate #3377, Letter from Wilma to Dr. Baker, January 6, 1925, Box 4, Folder 31, BH; Letter from Mrs. A.S. Bailey to Dr. Baker, December 2, 1925, Box 4, Folder 31, BH.

¹²⁵ Haidarali, *Brown Beauty*, 203.

precious or unusual about seeking, venturing, testing, trying, speculating, discovering, exploring new avenues, breaking with traditions, defying law, and making it, except that hardly anyone imagined that young black women might be involved in this project too.”¹²⁶ These women revolted against the norms that were placed on them, and ultimately were institutionalized and taught that their lives were detrimental to the larger American project of satiating black female desire and sexuality.

¹²⁶ Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 60.

V

Conclusion

This project was intended to show how embracing sexuality is powerful and vital to a black woman's identity. The women in this project embraced their sexual subjectivities unapologetically and their lived experience, desires, and intentions were varying. Yet, they all served one purpose: to take control of their own self-making. The Brownskin Models Revue offered a unique portrayal of how black women could perform sexual subjectivities in front of large audiences and be praised and celebrated for it. Although it was truly unique and not all-encompassing of every black woman's experience at the time, the revue challenged social attitudes around sexuality and beauty ideals.

Working-class black women, whose nightlife lifestyles were more hidden from the public eye, used creative ways to not only make a living but to also enjoy themselves in ways that were not socially accepted by embracing certain sexual subjectivities. Whether through treating, soliciting, or entertaining by singing and dancing, these women were shamelessly taking up space and making a statement. That statement was that they had a right to inhabit spaces that were intended for male patrons and to own spaces to make a living and control how they received their income through sex work.

Despite these stories of self-making, autonomy, and erotic sovereignty, there were forces, social and institutional, that aimed to subdue these acts. Reform committees like the Committee of Fourteen and institutions like the Bedford Reformatory were in a way successful. Although they did not suppress all acts they considered "immoral," they were able to restrain a lot of black women and forced them to conform and accommodate themselves to fit into the dominant social

and cultural norms. Unfortunately, this project is not a story of triumph, however, it is an important one to tell.

This project does not only unveil the complexity and humanity of black women in early 20th century New York City. This history of silencing and criminalization has trickled into the present day, and it has been internalized by black girls and women. They are still discouraged and shamed from embracing their sexuality as a result of expectations set by family, community, schools, and media. For instance, sex workers are still regarded as illegitimate, immoral laborers, and black female sex workers are still disproportionately targeted and criminalized. In addition, black girls and women are still shamed for their sexual choices by their own community and society at-large. Ultimately, black female sexuality is still regarded as dangerous. Sexual liberation movements and strategies have emerged in recent years and they have offered spaces for community building and support, yet there is still work to be done to include black voices in these movements. These are the same instances in a different time, and learning how these instances are connected is crucial to eradicate them.

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