

TAKIN' IT TO THE STREETS:  
THE POLITICS OF WILMINGTON'S BLACK WORKING CLASS WOMEN

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## ABSTRACT

### TAKIN' IT TO THE STREETS: THE POLITICS OF WILMINGTON'S BLACK WORKING CLASS WOMEN

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From 1880 to 1898 the working class black women of Wilmington, North Carolina forged a politics of recognition in the city streets by asserting their own terms of womanhood and demanding protection. However, during this period these women were labeled “disorderly” in The Wilmington Morning Star. Assessing the politics of the city’s working class black women required evaluating the hidden transcript of the “disorderly” reports. Additionally, also exploring the public transcript of the reports revealed the advantages a white press gained in portraying such an unruly image of the women. While these accounts lacked a direct perspective from the working class black women themselves, interpreting the hidden transcript offered the opportunity to find their political voice.

## INTRODUCTION

Following the Civil War the United States underwent dramatic political, social, and economic transformations. The South faced political and economic reconstruction in the face of the emancipation of four million former slaves, the reconfiguring of its labor force, and the political failure of the Confederate nation. In the aftermath of Reconstruction, southern boosters and businessmen began to promote the image of the “New South” as a place of industrialization and change in contrast to the slave-based plantation system of the past. Nevertheless, race relations remained tense with an increase in racial violence as the South struggled to find its place within America’s rising industrial economy.

In *The Mind of the South*, W. J. Cash stated that industrialization and commercialization “greatly modified” the South, “including its ideology.”<sup>1</sup> In *Industrialization and the Southern Society 1877-1894*, James C. Cobb argued that the “evolving economy for the New South reflected the persistent influence of the old, an influence that also helped to perpetuate many of the social and political relationships that had been forged by the antebellum period.”<sup>2</sup> For example, mills and mill villages provided the “context in which upper class whites could practice paternalism toward their lesser white brethren,” and shared more similarities with the characteristics of slave quarters than the shacks of sharecroppers.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, southerners from various backgrounds faced a world turned upside down with widening political and economic opportunities. The period from 1880 to 1900 represented a time of political and social upheaval and possibility in the American South as former slave owners, farmers, industrialists, Republicans and Democrats, former slaves,

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<sup>1</sup> W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), x.

<sup>2</sup> James C. Cobb, *Industrialization and Southern Society 1877-1894*, (The University of Kentucky), 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 70-71.

laborers, and elite and working class women attempted to sort out their place within the structure of the New South. Among these social groups, black working class women played central roles in the rise of the New South.

In *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina 1896-1920*, Glenda Gilmore exposed the benefits of adjusting our angle in evaluating the southern political narrative of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In studying elite, educated, black and white women, Gilmore found sources that voiced the opinions and views of these women. By placing elite black and white women at the center of her study, Gilmore revealed how the political activism and mutual cooperation by women of both races influenced southern progressivism. Gilmore remarked that her focus on educated female leaders slights the working class point of view, as other stories “remain to be told.”<sup>4</sup> Wilmington’s working class females served a critical place within the city. Wilmington’s working class black women worked as cooks, laundresses, washers, and domestic servants.<sup>5</sup> These women remained mainly confined to household labor positions throughout the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the occupational choices of these women expanded as the years progressed.<sup>6</sup> Also, these women moved to more independent positions by serving as dressmakers, nurses, and seamstresses.

Despite their vital part within the city’s socioeconomic structure, The Wilmington Morning Star reported on a series of unruly actions exhibited by the city’s working class black women on the streets. At times, such reports labeled the women “disorderly.” Since black working class women were not as apt to document and record their activities, the accessibility of periodicals, such as The Wilmington Morning Star and numerous reports of unruly behavior,

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<sup>4</sup> Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina 1896-1920* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), xix.

<sup>5</sup> *Wilmington City directory*, 1883, Wilmington, N.C. New Hanover Public Library.

<sup>6</sup> *Wilmington City Directory*, 1887, Wilmington, N.C. New Hanover Public Library.

provided the platform from which to begin evaluating the experiences of these women. These “disorderly” reports revealed black working class women shaping their own political power on the streets. However, the demeaning, unruly image presented within The Morning Star’s reports benefited a white press.

Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to evaluate the “realms of power and interest” within both the public and hidden transcripts of The Morning Star’s “disorderly reports.”<sup>7</sup> From 1880 to 1898, the paper reveals a politics of recognition forged on the streets and recorded in the hidden transcript. James C. Scott defines the hidden transcript as “discourse” taken “offstage beyond direct observation by powerholders.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, through this politics of recognition, one views these working class black women demanding protection both privately and publicly and asserting their idea of womanhood. Also, evaluating the public transcript depicts the advantages for a white press in using such public “disorderly” images as front page news.

The period from 1880 to the eve of the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot offered a prime point in history in which to study the impact of the Morning Star’s hidden and public transcript. By 1880 Reconstruction ran most of its course throughout the South, and industrialization became a staple in the southern structure, creating a vibrant and varied working class in places such as Wilmington. Also, industrialization in the 1880s and then Fusion politics in the 1890s created a “safe space” for Wilmington’s working class black females to enter the streets and exercise their politics of recognition by shaping an atmosphere that for a time attempted to welcome activism from both black and white participants. In the late 1890s, a white supremacy campaign began in North Carolina. Democrats, such as Charles Aycock and Josephus Daniels,

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<sup>7</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, 1990), 27.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 4-5.

struggled to find a way back to power. Hysteria regarding issues such as black rapists began to run rampant throughout the state. By 1898, the Democrat's white supremacy campaign reached the streets of Wilmington. By beginning in 1880 and ending upon the eve of the 1898 riot, this time period captured the opening and closing door of integrated politics in the South. With the 1898 race riot the enforcement of Jim Crow politics firmly took hold within the southern structure, and therefore perhaps politically silenced Wilmington's working class black women. Thus, it was not only white and black men who influenced and controlled class, gender, race relations, and politics in the late nineteenth century.

Wilmington offered a particularly rich place to examine the politics of working class black women as it entertained a culturally rich and varied working class. Wilmington stood as a key port city and railroad hub with major lines such as the Wilmington and Weldon RR.<sup>9</sup> After the Civil War, and even into Reconstruction, "the gradual addition of railroad and shipping interests in the city bolstered the growth of the business class."<sup>10</sup> With the post-war economic boom, the city also witnessed the construction of other rail lines ending at Wilmington's port, such as the Seaboard Air Line, the Atlantic Coast Line, and the Carolina Central Railroad.<sup>11</sup>

Also, during the late nineteenth century residents within Wilmington experienced growth in manufacturing that included the appearance of factories and lumber and naval stores, to process "the surrounding region's abundant natural resources of rice, cotton, grains, and wood products."<sup>12</sup> Wilmington also witnessed the early rise of mills such as Hugh McRae and Company

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<sup>9</sup> "History of Wilmington," New Hanover County, [www.nhcgov.com/Library/Documents/History%20of%20Wilmington.pdf](http://www.nhcgov.com/Library/Documents/History%20of%20Wilmington.pdf) (Accessed May 18, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *A Day of Blood: The 1898 Wilmington Race Riot* (North Carolina Office of Archives and History, 2009), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



and the Wilmington Cotton Mill. During Reconstruction, many former slaves and freed persons of color made their way to Wilmington looking for employment. Bill Reaves found that *Smaw's Wilmington Directory 1866-1867* “was the first directory to list black residents and their occupations.”<sup>13</sup> As these individuals sought work in lumber mills and naval stores, “a large black middle class producing new community leaders” emerged alongside a growing black working class.<sup>14</sup>

### **Historiography:**

This thesis drew upon two strands of historiography that of southern black women and perspectives on nontraditional political activism. C. Vann Woodward claimed “redemption was not a return of an old system, not the restoration of an old ruling class. It was rather a new phase of the revolutionary process begun in 1865.”<sup>15</sup> While this thesis has aligned with Woodward’s argument that the structure of the New South represented a complete break from that of the old, evaluating antebellum historiography provided a better understanding of traditions forged under slavery. Aspects of the strategies used by Wilmington’s working class women were rooted in older traditions started under slavery.

In *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Deborah Gray White explored the reality of black womanhood by examining aspects of female slave culture that forced black women into racial and sexual stereotypes. She stated, that “black in a white society, slave in a free society, woman in a society ruled by men,” these women were not granted the

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<sup>13</sup> William M. Reaves, “*Strength Through Struggle:*” *The Chronological and Historical Record of the African American Community in Wilmington, North Carolina 1865-1950* (New Hanover Public Library, 1998), 288.

<sup>14</sup> “History of Wilmington,” New Hanover County.

<sup>15</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South 1877-1913* (Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 21.

traditional roles of a woman.<sup>16</sup> The mythology surrounding female slaves made the emergence of an independent black womanhood difficult. The “jezebel” characterizations set black women up as sensual beings and excused sexual exploitation. However, to counter images of moral corruption, the white men created the “mammy” image as the ideal woman and slave dedicated to her charges and the southern household. To explain a newly emancipated and hence “aggressive” and “threatening” black female of the post-Civil War society, the tough, assertive, emasculating image of “Sapphire” emerged, “anchored in a man’s world.”<sup>17</sup> White also explored the distinct experiences of female slavery and networking. She claimed that their identity and character grew amid the interaction between enslaved women, as these emotional bonds led to a sense of womanhood arising from their own female culture. Therefore, denied traditional womanhood, female slaves created their own feminine identity and overcame the stereotypes forced upon them.

Similar to the women discussed in White’s research, in the late nineteenth century Wilmington’s working class black women found themselves still denied traditional womanhood. With conventional womanhood centered around femininity, protection, and the domestic sphere, Wilmington’s working class black women found that “life challenged them to a different kind of womanhood, nothing like that of white women.”<sup>18</sup> White argued that in the years following the Civil War “white women, especially those of the middle and upper classes, retreated to the race-grounded gender ideology that required them to hide their personal strength under a veil of femininity.”<sup>19</sup> However, black women “etched out a womanhood that demanded respect for their

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<sup>16</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (W.W. Norton and Company, Revised Edition, 1999), 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 176.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 186.

abilities, recognition of their roles as survivors, and defenders of black rights.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, this thesis applied cultural markers of class when defining lines between the middle and working classes, such as those that aspired to Victorian ideals and those that did not. Wilmington’s working class black women may have associated levels of education, social standing, the feminine domestic sphere, and involvement in social and literary societies as cultural traits that differentiated of class. Drawing upon the traditions formed by black women under slavery, Wilmington’s working class black women shaped their own womanhood, despite the dubious “gifts” society bestowed upon them, but grounded this womanhood in the politics of recognition that they found on the streets.

The working class black women of Wilmington came from a long tradition of women who had a powerful impact on the world around them, stemming from efforts that at times came in “disorderly” behavior. In *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York 1789-1860*, Christine Stansell, focused upon the plight of working class women in New York. She argued that working class women “played a part in the thoroughgoing changes in work, family, and politics in nineteenth century New York.”<sup>21</sup> Victoria Bynum and Stephanie McCurry revealed how black and white working class women during the Civil War shaped the world around them through their own political initiative and concern for the welfare of their families. In “War within a War: Women’s Participation in the Revolt of the North Carolina Piedmont 1863-1865,” Bynum studied the inner war that erupted within the Carolina piedmont in the midst of the Civil War from the tension between yeoman farmers and the planter society. The poor farmers felt

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<sup>20</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 186.

<sup>21</sup> Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York 1789-1860* (University of Illinois Press, 1982), xiii.

resentment in fighting a larger war that benefitted the wealthier class.<sup>22</sup> As these yeoman farmers began to voice their anti-Confederate sentiment, many wives and mothers of the piedmont displayed their own “striking level of untraditional disorderliness joining the struggle that divided community and state.”<sup>23</sup> Bynum argued that it appears that both the men and women of the North Carolina piedmont shared a “rough equality” for a brief time as they attempted to resist the Confederacy.<sup>24</sup> These women wrote petitions to the governor requesting their sons and husbands be sent home not to fight the planter’s class war. They also protested the lack of goods in their communities, as well as hid and cared for Confederate deserters throughout the war. Bynum stated that this active involvement of wives and mothers demanded a new behavior of women that went beyond their traditional roles prior to the war.<sup>25</sup> She concluded that this defiance by the women of the North Carolina piedmont demonstrated the unpopularity of the war and that Confederate goals did not serve the majority of the people. Bynum’s study brought the political initiative and the ability of poor women to influence their own societies to the forefront of scholarship, allowing readers to understand that the working class women of the late nineteenth century emerged from a heritage of political activism.

Bynum widened the scholarship with her focus upon working class black and white women. In *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South*, Bynum examined the “unruly” women of the Antebellum and Civil War period in North Carolina, and what behaviors marked them as disorderly. She addressed three types of women: those who publicly complained about abusive husbands and male abuse of power, those who defied societal

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<sup>22</sup> Victoria Bynum, “War Within a War: Women’s Participation in the Revolt of the North Carolina Piedmont 1863-1865,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women studies* vol 9, no. 3 (1987), 43-49.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 46.

rules by “engaging in forbidden sexual behavior,” and those who challenged the authority of the Confederacy.<sup>26</sup> Bynum argued that by looking at these three types of women, we can better understand the impact of race and class on southern women’s behavior and the connections between private and public life. She stated that the “notions of race and gender in nineteenth century America that had advantages of being free were relative for African American women.”<sup>27</sup> In focusing upon three central piedmont counties in North Carolina, (Granville, Orange, and Montgomery), Bynum described how unruly women threatened their southern social structure, but were dependent upon the cooperation of all women.<sup>28</sup> She concluded that in the years following the Civil War, women who found themselves “outside the circle of southern wealth and power,” mainly poor white women and freed African American women, shared the same goal of sustaining themselves and their families “in a society in which their gender and class and race limited their resources in crucial ways.”<sup>29</sup> Bynum’s work revealed the complicated relationship between race, class, and gender for black and white women of the nineteenth century. However, she also uncovered the dependence of southern society upon the cooperation of all women, including poor white and black females, and how these women used that dependency to negotiate and shape their roles and identities.

Like Bynum, Stephanie McCurry in *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South*, focused part of her own work upon the influence of “unruly” poor yeoman women and slave women. McCurry discussed how these women participated in food riots to call

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<sup>26</sup> Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 1.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

their desolate conditions to the attention of the state.<sup>30</sup> Also, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall studied the unmanageable behavior of southern women in “Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South.” Hall explored the working class women of Elizabethton, Tennessee behind the face of the New South’s textile industry of the early twentieth century. The tension between workers, farmers, and a new middle class pushed these women “to the margins of labor history” until they “dropped [them] out of sight.”<sup>31</sup> This overshadowing of key historical subjects in the shaping of the New South created “a thin description: a one dimensional view of labor conflict that [failed] to take culture and community into account.”<sup>32</sup> Through strike efforts, protests, and pickets, the working class women within Hall’s study demanded their place as political beings in the developing New South. Bynum, McCurry, and Hall revealed working class, southern women who defied societal expectations of feminine behavior and found themselves deemed “unruly” in efforts to make their needs and grievances known. These women manipulated their race, class, and gender to reconfigure economic opportunities for political protest. Along with the historiography of unruly women, nontraditional perspectives on political action became crucial to understanding Wilmington’s working class black women’s politics of recognition.

In *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction*, Laura Edwards studied how gender, race, and class shaped not only the political terrain of the South during Reconstruction but also its private and public foundations. Edwards viewed the Southern

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<sup>30</sup> Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Harvard University Press, 2004), 178,

<sup>31</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol 73, no. 2 (September 1896), 355-356.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 355.

household during this period as a “highly contested political issue.”<sup>33</sup> Following the war, changes swept southern society regarding the structure of households, who were the heads of those homes, and what rights these heads and their dependents held. She argued that African American and common white women became a very loud and “vigorous public presence both during and after the Civil War.”<sup>34</sup> Being poor, black, or both, these women demanded that concerns for their family’s welfare and safety, such as issues of rape and physical violence, be heard. Therefore, these women “moved private issues onto the public stage.”<sup>35</sup> Within her work, Edwards extended Reconstruction to the end of the nineteenth century. She stated that “racial and class hierarchies appeared as ‘natural’ as gender hierarchy, and the political power of poor white and African-American men appeared as pointless as that of women.”<sup>36</sup> She discussed that the end of Reconstruction concluded at different times in different places throughout North Carolina, ultimately ending with the 1898 white supremacy campaign leading to disenfranchisement.<sup>37</sup> Before 1898, many African Americans and “dissenting whites retained their grip on local power,” which undermined the Democrat’s position within the state.<sup>38</sup> Edwards studied how poor black and white women manipulated their sexual, gender, and racial identities in a time of change to make their economic, social, and physical issues and concerns heard. Her study also made 1898 a prime point in which to end this thesis, as it represented a significant turning point in the relations between race, class, and gender within North Carolina.

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<sup>33</sup> Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (University of Illinois, 1997), 8.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

While Laura Edwards made clear that women manipulated, negotiated, and shaped the political culture of the late nineteenth century, approaching the actions of Wilmington's working class black women required a different perspective on what constituted politics. Historians Robin Kelley, James C. Scott, and Steven Hahn viewed politics through everyday acts of resistance. Robin Kelley argued that political significance can be found in "everyday forms of resistance at work and in public," and in areas and places "that are usually not defined as 'working class' organizations."<sup>39</sup> In *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, Kelley examined the black working class's resistance outside established organizations. For example, he assessed the impact of the black working class in Birmingham, Alabama, during the Civil Rights movement. During the 1960s, Birmingham's black poor engaged in political dissent through a growing militancy against police brutality. Kelley argued that "many working poor and jobless residents waged battles that remained hidden or appeared as spontaneous rebellions."<sup>40</sup> Just as the "Birmingham untouchables" in Kelley's study, Wilmington's peripheral black women displayed their own "daily acts of resistance and survival" that shaped race relations throughout their city.<sup>41</sup>

Evaluating the limited available sources on the street politics of Wilmington's poor black women, required the application of James C. Scott's argument of public and hidden transcripts. In *Domination and the Art of Resistance* James C. Scott coined the term "infrapolitics" for such actions.<sup>42</sup> Scott stated that infrapolitics captured the struggles waged daily by subordinate groups, and have remained largely "beyond the visible end of the spectrum" of traditional politics as a

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<sup>39</sup> Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (The Free Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, 1990), 183.



“tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power.”<sup>43</sup> Scott defined the public transcript as “the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate.”<sup>44</sup> However, he stated that the public transcript, controlled by those in domination or power, did not likely tell the whole story. The hidden transcript according to Scott contained the “offstage” behaviors that contradicted the public transcript.<sup>45</sup> The public transcript represented a “self-portrait” of what the dominant elites wanted to have seen and understood.<sup>46</sup> The dominants used the public transcript to create an appearance that they desired everyone, including the subordinates, to see. On the other hand, when applied to Wilmington, the hidden transcript revealed marginalized African-American women who found a realm of power.<sup>47</sup>

In alignment with the notions of peripheral actions and infrapolitics of Kelley and Scott, in *A Nation under Our Feet*, Steven Hahn studied the impact of the politics of the oppressed. Beginning in the antebellum period, Hahn traced the development of African American politics and its impact upon the nation into the early twentieth century. Hahn discussed how African Americans forged their own political culture under slavery that revolutionized the world in which they lived as they “conducted politics and engaged in political struggles.”<sup>48</sup> Therefore, rural black southerners were political actors at the grassroots level, and “contributed to the making of a new political nation while they made themselves into a new people, a veritable nation as many of them came to understand it.”<sup>49</sup> Akin to the historiography on nontraditional

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<sup>43</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, 1990), 183.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

<sup>48</sup> Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

political activism, Wilmington's working class black women carved out a political place for themselves outside traditional organizations and movements, interpreted through the hidden transcript of The Morning Star.

### **Takin' it to the streets:**

Through "unruly actions" described in the Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington's black working class women shaped a politics of recognition in the streets. This political activism contained multiple layers of assertion and protection. Wilmington's working class black females asserted their concept of womanhood and also redefined the lines of marriage. These women also demanded protection through their unruly actions in the streets; perhaps protection from physical abuses at home and political and economic mistreatment in the public sphere. Besides bringing issues of private and public abuse to the streets, these women also demanded social recognition through their behavior; made apparent through their vocal resistance, including foul language, as well as their resistance to arrest. Like the individuals within the works of Kelley and Scott, these women were political in the sense of the everyday activism and resistance they demonstrated. Their actions were not tied to established organizations or movements within the traditional spectrum. These women demanded recognition not just as women, but also as citizens, and they commanded it through their unruly actions. For these working class black women, citizenship meant more than just claiming womanhood. Citizenship meant the right to protection both privately and publicly, and the right to be recognized as members of the New South and as women on their own terms.

Wilmington's working class black women lived within a transforming society. When referring to the New South, this thesis followed the argument of C. Vann Woodward who stated that the identities of the Old and New South were separate. The southern perspectives of Steven Hahn and Michael Wayne aligned with Woodward's argument that a complete break occurred

between the old and New South after the Civil War. Hahn argued that the Civil War provided the opportunity for a slave rebellion, shaping the national landscape, and inspiring “the most sweeping revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>50</sup> Wayne “saw a ‘profound break’ between the old order and a new one.”<sup>51</sup> However, historians such as Jonathan Weiner and Dwight Billings Jr. contradicted Woodward’s argument.<sup>52</sup> W.J. Cash stated that the change was “vastly exaggerated.”<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, Woodward found that the “redeemers” ushered in a New South creed similar to the industrialization of the north rather than the planter ideology of the antebellum South. Thus, Wilmington’s working class black women faced a world completely different from the black women who had come before them and shaped their political identity within the new southern world. From 1880 to 1898 The Morning Star’s “disorderly” reports unveiled Wilmington’s black female working class asserting their womanhood and demanding protection. However, a white culture found advantages in portraying the unruly images.

Finding and understanding these politics of recognition required rethinking not only the concept of political activism but also the approach to available sources. This group of women did not leave behind clearly laid out and defined documents that described their goals, politics, desires, and grievances. While this limitation created an obstacle, it also served as a great possibility—a possibility to reveal the political voice of Wilmington’s black working class women through the interpretation of The Morning Star’s hidden transcript.

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<sup>50</sup> Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 1.

<sup>51</sup> James C. Cobb, “Beyond Planters and Industrialists: A New Perspective on the New South,” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol 54, no. 1 (Feb 1988), 49.

<sup>52</sup> Cash, *Mind of the South*.

James C. Cobb, “Beyond Planters and Industrialists: A New Perspective on the New South,” 45-68.

<sup>53</sup> Cash, *Mind of the South*, X.

Documented discussion of the “disorderly” behavior, and therefore, politics of Wilmington’s black working class women remained confined to white run newspapers of the city, such as the Wilmington Morning Star and the Daily Review. The two notable African American newspapers available during this period, the Africo American Presbyterian and the Daily Record, failed to mention or record the actions of the city’s working class black women. When referring to women, these newspapers focused upon the middle class and their social engagements. For example, the Africo American Presbyterian discussed Mrs. John Henderson’s visit to Georgia, while the Daily Review mentioned the business surrounding Mrs. Burnett’s admirers.<sup>54</sup> It is within the city’s white newspapers that working class black women became a known and mentioned presence.

At first glance when assessing the news reports from the Wilmington Morning Star, what one encountered were accounts of working class black women acting boisterous and unruly, participating in street fights, demonstrating drunkenness, using foul language, and committing larceny. These types of reports represented a class of black working class heathens plaguing Wilmington society. This portrait simply represented the public transcript, but the hidden transcript must also be evaluated to uncover the political voice of the black working class women. Thus, evaluating Wilmington’s working class black women’s politics of recognition required a dual perspective when looking at news articles of the period; understanding what constituted “disorderly” behavior” by the dominant white culture of Wilmington, but also considering the political activism of the working class black women revealed through the hidden transcript. This unruly behavior may have simultaneously satisfied the political aims of white supremacist Democrats and reflected the politics of recognition of working class black women.

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<sup>54</sup> Africo Presbyterian, Vol xiii, no 3 Wilmington NC, August 20, 1891. The Daily Record, Wilmington, NC, September 28, 1889.

This thesis consists of three chapters and a conclusion. Chapter one explores the world of Wilmington's working class black women. It discusses the multiple political and economic landscapes within the city from 1880 to 1898, and the place of Wilmington's working class black women within those overlapping terrains. It evaluates key elements of late nineteenth century Wilmington society: Fusion politics, the black middle class, Wilmington's economy, and, most importantly, the black working class women themselves. Chapters two and three assess the varying reports of unruly behavior within The Morning Star, and consider the public and hidden transcript meanings behind such reports. Most importantly, these chapters explore the black working class women's politics of recognition with layers of assertion and protection. Chapter two focuses upon the women striving to bring attention to their need for protection in the public and private spheres, and considers what a white press gains through the "disorderly" description of the women and sentencing of outrageous fines. Chapter three turns to look at the verbal assertion of the black working class women's politics of recognition through their foul language, drunken behavior, resistance to arrest, and other miscellaneous unruly actions. Finally, the conclusion of this thesis evaluates the impact of the black working class women's politics of recognition upon "home protection" and the Wilmington Race Riot, and, in turn, the potential silencing of these women.

## CHAPTER ONE THE WORLD FROM WHICH THEY CAME

During the late nineteenth century, the southern landscape and society teemed with change and energy. Social, political, and economic transformations spread across the region in the decades following the Civil War. The city of Wilmington, situated on the eastern coastline of North Carolina, exemplified the growing industrial South, integrated politics, and a thriving social life with a color line that wavered as black and white citizens interacted.<sup>1</sup> For example, “in the station waiting room, the post office, and the revenue department,” and even in politics, work areas, circuses, and church services racial boundaries faded at times.<sup>2</sup> By 1880, Wilmington held 10, 462 African Americans and 6, 888 whites.<sup>3</sup> When the city’s black population increased to 11, 324 in 1890, it outnumbered the white population by 2, 593.<sup>4</sup> In the years following the Civil War, Roberta Sue Alexander argued that both races within North Carolina “were confronted by a series of new and difficult situations.”<sup>5</sup> For example, southern citizens faced the entry of newly freed slaves into southern society, and tension as members of both races attempted to sort out the dynamic of the New South structure. During the late nineteenth century, the city of Wilmington embodied the social, political, and economic tension as well as the promises of the burgeoning New South.

From 1880 to 1898 Wilmington contained a vibrant setting that allowed the city’s working class black women to play a part. During this period, Wilmington contained overlapping

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<sup>1</sup> Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina 1896-1920* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 73.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “Wilmington, New Hanover County, North Carolina,” *U.S. Census Bureau*, 1880 <http://www.census.gov/prod/www.decennial.html>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Roberta Sue Alexander, *North Carolina Faces the Freedmen: Race Relations During Presidential Reconstruction 1865-67* (Duke University Press, 1985), xiv.

identities between a vibrant and growing economy, integrated politics, and expanding socio-economic classes. Several key elements shaped Wilmington's complex society: economic diversity, industrialization, Fusion politics, and growing middle and working classes.

Understanding the black middle class, Fusion politics, and economic diversity of Wilmington during the late nineteenth century proved crucial in fully evaluating the politics of the city's black working class women.

Economic and social changes in the 1880s along with the entrance of Fusion politics in the 1890s created the window for African Americans to participate in society and politics. In the 1890s, many of North Carolina's farmers were hit hard by falling agricultural prices and the economic practices of the Democratic Party, and looked to the Populist Party to serve their best interests.<sup>6</sup> Timothy Tyson stated that "to break the Democratic stronghold on the political system, the Populists placed class interests above racial solidarity and formed a working alliance with the Republicans, the preponderance of whom were African Americans."<sup>7</sup> Thus, Fusion politics created by the joining of the Populist and Republican Parties not only took political power out of the hands of the Democratic Party but shaped a political safe space for African Americans to run for office and become politically active. Wilmington's expanding economy, with a growth in mills and railroads, allowed not only for class differences within the city's white society but also among the black population.

This thesis applied cultural markers of class when exploring the differences between the middle and working classes of Wilmington. The thriving black middle class within the city of Wilmington strived to obtain Victorian ideals and traditions. Beside the Fusion politics and

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<sup>6</sup> Timothy Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and its Legacy* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 18.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

middle class life jobs and streets became home to Wilmington's working class black women from 1880 to 1898.

After the Civil War every member of the south sought to work out their place within the new southern structure. Before the success of North Carolina's white supremacy campaign and the state's formal embrace of Jim Crow with the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot, the citizens living within Wilmington realigned with the newly integrated political and industrial settings, while also attempting to break the chains of poverty and discrimination that had limited them. For example, as Wilmington's economy boomed through areas such as the railroad and mill industries, several black Republican militia units were "charged with enforcing Republican agendas and maintaining peace."<sup>8</sup> Following the Civil War, many white elites feared the changes that accompanied emancipation. Nevertheless, "former slaves worked to acquire what they considered true freedom."<sup>9</sup> Roberta Sue Alexander stated that the meaning of freedom varied among ex-slaves. While some African Americans "merely wanted economic opportunities; others demanded full equality. But despite these differences, most agreed that they wanted independence, opportunities, and respect."<sup>10</sup> In this new freedom some African Americans embraced Victorian middle class values as a political strategy to "wear away prejudice," creating a growing black middle class.<sup>11</sup> For instance, with values such as temperance, thrift, hard work, piety, and learning, "African Americans believed that they could carve out space for dignified

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<sup>8</sup> LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *A Day of Blood: The 1898 Wilmington Race Riot* (North Carolina Office of Archives and History, 2009), 17.

<sup>9</sup> Roberta Sue Alexander, *North Carolina Faces the Freedman*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 3.



and successful lives.”<sup>12</sup> Through this view class status became determined by values more so than economics.

Following the Civil War, many African Americans in North Carolina moved to claim their freedom. In freedom, African Americans began to legalize their marriages and to form the confines of a free community.<sup>13</sup> Steven Hahn discussed how the networks of the African American political activism began under slavery. During the antebellum period, slaves created networks of kinship, communication, and work relations that created the nature of African American politics.<sup>14</sup> Congregations within black churches grew, and the church emerged as the cornerstone of the black community. Denominations, such as the A.M.E. Zion Church of North Carolina “tried to advance black interests through its educational efforts, directed at training young black men and women to ‘fill important stations’ in the church.”<sup>15</sup> Black communities also began to publish their own newspapers. The *Journal of Freedom*, published in Raleigh only during the fall of 1865, “was devoted to the interests of the Freedmen of the South.”<sup>16</sup> Finally, as political windows opened for African Americans across the South, a statewide convention of the North Carolina Equal Rights League of Freedmen convened in Raleigh in 1866.<sup>17</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, part of the new world that North Carolina African Americans faced was a changed economy. As the South moved to industrialize “crop lien, fence laws, and higher taxes” “eroded” the south’s “agriculture self-sufficiency.”<sup>18</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd

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<sup>12</sup> Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Roberta Sue Alexander, *North Carolina Faces the Freedman*, 66.

<sup>14</sup> Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Roberta Sue Alexander, *North Carolina Faces the Freedman*, 76.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 81.

<sup>18</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Like A Family: The Making of the Southern Cotton Mill World* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 6.

Hall, stated that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “thousands of farmers traded fields for factories,” and began to work within the new confines of a textile minded South.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout the 1880s, as Wilmington changed socially and economically so did the political opportunities for both black and white citizens. Political life during the 1880s and 1890s remained tense, as it had through most of the nineteenth century. For instance, while African Americans participated in politics and won offices, the Ku Klux Klan emerged striking fear into black members of southern communities.<sup>20</sup> The politics of the New South stood in sharp contrast to the South of the antebellum and Reconstruction periods.<sup>21</sup> Democrats and Republicans battled for majorities within the state legislatures and the federal government. Within the Republican Party, African Americans held offices and gained local power that heightened the Democrats’ awareness of their weakness. For example, George H. White, an African American politician, started his political career through the Republican Party in the 1880s, rising to a position within the North Carolina House of Representatives and eventually becoming a Congressional representative.<sup>22</sup> As the late nineteenth century progressed, more black elected officials served throughout the state. Rob Christensen stated that “in no other state were there so many black officeholders. Suddenly there were hundreds of black county commissioners, justices of the peace, magistrates, county coroners, surveyors, constables, and policemen.”<sup>23</sup> Anxieties for Democrats remained high as African Americans, in the Republican Party, took part in

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<sup>19</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Like a Family*, 43.

<sup>20</sup> LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *Day of Blood*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South 1877-1913* (Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 481.

<sup>22</sup> Rob Christensen, *The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics: The Personalities, Elections, and Events that Shaped Modern North Carolina* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 14.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

Wilmington politics, thus fueling the Democrats' battle to regain political control through the white supremacy campaign under the leadership of Charles Aycock and Furnifold Simmons.

The city of Wilmington characterized the complicated and opportunistic nature of life during the 1880s and 1890s. In the late nineteenth century, Wilmington faced a different social structure than in the years before the Civil War. A new merchant class joined the planters as the ruling elite within the city.<sup>24</sup> Wilmington African Americans held "considerable political power."<sup>25</sup> For instance, Abraham H. Galloway served in local and state politics; Charles W. Norwood served as Register of Deeds; David J. Jacobs as Coroner, and Buck C. Wright as constable of Wilmington Township.<sup>26</sup> LeRae Sikes Umfleet argued that "members of the various groups that formed Wilmington's social structure after the Civil War-upper class whites, working class whites, free blacks, and freed slaves-resided and worked in Wilmington in a radically changed environment."<sup>27</sup> He claimed that "for the most part, these men, women, and children, sought to respond to the challenges presented by the sudden social upheaval and to create a new city."<sup>28</sup> The Republican Party became the "vehicle" in which black men shared their voices in the government of Wilmington. African Americans served in offices such as justices of the peace, deputy clerks of the court, and superintendents of the streets.<sup>29</sup> As the black citizens of Wilmington gained political power, "race relations in the city tended to be relatively harmonious for many years after the Civil War."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *A Day of Blood*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Timothy Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed*, 74.

<sup>26</sup> William M. Reaves, "Strength Through Struggle:" *The Chronological and Historical Record of the African American Community in Wilmington, North Carolina 1865-1950* (The New Hanover County Public Library, 1998), 243-244.

<sup>27</sup> LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *Day of Blood*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Timothy Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed*, 16.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

In the 1890s, the political landscape in Wilmington underwent a transformation with Fusion politics. Near the end of the 1880s and into the 1890s, farmers in North Carolina began to split from the Democratic Party which they believed only favored big business.<sup>31</sup> In 1892, these farmers, struggling against the white elites, formed the Populist Party. They held that the Democratic Party failed to address their concerns, and the affairs of the state needed to be “removed from the hands of bankers, big business, and the attorneys.”<sup>32</sup> Eric Anderson stated that these “fusion legislators made possible a revival of black political power by revising election laws and reestablishing directly elected local government.”<sup>33</sup> In the 1894 election, the Populist and Republican parties worked together in what became known as “Fusion” to ensure the pursuit and success of common goals and decided to set aside racial differences.

The 1894 election within North Carolina overthrew Democratic control. Rob Christensen argued that “the Fusionists crafted one of the most daring and radical experiments in southern political history.”<sup>34</sup> The Fusion dominated state government issued progressive reforms throughout 1895.<sup>35</sup> These reforms included raising taxes on railroads and increasing education spending.<sup>36</sup> However, most importantly, the fusion of the Populist and Republican parties set aside racial differences and allowed room for African Americans to take part in political affairs such as the rise of George H. White to congress. In 1894, this fusionist victory at the state level also reached the city of Wilmington.

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<sup>31</sup> LeRae Sikes *Umfleet, Day of Blood*, 21.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Eric Anderson, *The Black Second: Race and Politics in North Carolina 1872-1901* (Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 145).

<sup>34</sup> Rob Christensen, *The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics*, 10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*.

The 1894 election in New Hanover County demonstrated the well-organized success of Fusion politics as Republicans were elected in every position in which they held candidates.<sup>37</sup> Such success “proved that it was possible to defeat the Democrats.”<sup>38</sup> New laws enacted by the Fusionist government focused upon African American and Populist concerns, in protecting their suffrage rights.<sup>39</sup> For example, “some of the new rules forbade employers from firing or threatening employees over political issues, mandated the use of different-colored candidates of different parties, and discouraged all types of coercion before and during election days.”<sup>40</sup> African Americans served in offices such as on the city’s board of aldermen, county and city commissioners, coroners, and as constables.<sup>41</sup> “Wilmington, with its large urban black population, became a battleground between Democrats and Fusionists,” as more African Americans gained political power, and that of the Democrats diminished.<sup>42</sup>

The election of 1896 welcomed another successful fusion victory defeating Democrats across the state and in Wilmington. Changes were made to Wilmington’s charter that municipal elections be held every two years, in an effort to break up democratic power within the city.<sup>43</sup> The Democrats had attempted to maintain power within Wilmington by not holding elections regularly.<sup>44</sup> Thus, in 1897 these changes were enacted, and two black Republicans, Elijah Green and Andrew J. Walker, were elected to the board of alderman, the most important representative

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<sup>37</sup> LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *Day of Blood*, 23.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>41</sup> LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *Day of Blood*, 24-25.  
William Reaves, “Strength Through Struggle,” 244.

<sup>42</sup> Timothy Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed*, 75.

<sup>43</sup> LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *Day of Blood*, 28.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*.

body in the city.<sup>45</sup> This new board of alderman was composed of six Republicans, three Democrats, and one member of the Silver Party.<sup>46</sup> With growing prosperity and political participation of African Americans, Wilmington Democrats turned to the 1898 election to regain their power.

In the late 1890s, Democrats strategized to retake political control and succeeded with the white supremacy campaign. Democratic leaders within the state looked to 1898 as the time to win back their power. These leaders called for “the restoration of good government and white supremacy in North Carolina.”<sup>47</sup> They campaigned that the fusionist government represented scandal, whereas the Democrats offered “reform and good government.”<sup>48</sup> However, their main focus was black officeholders and voters. Their campaign proclaimed the notion of the “black beast” raping white women, violating white homes, and destroying North Carolina, and thus Wilmington, society.<sup>49</sup> In the fall of 1898 the state’s White Supremacy campaign moved to the streets of Wilmington. Wilmington’s white Democrats organized and armed themselves to fight the threat of the black man to their home and businesses and Fusion politics.<sup>50</sup> White women entered the streets to support white supremacist’s rallies. They participated in parades, prepared banners, and sent letters to editors that “decried Negro Rule.”<sup>51</sup> These women at times punched and shoved black women whom they met on the street.<sup>52</sup> Until the Wilmington Race Riot, racial segregation had not taken full effect within Wilmington. By the late 1890s, the once

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<sup>45</sup> Timothy Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed*, 16.

<sup>46</sup> Umfleet, *Day of Blood*, 29.

<sup>47</sup> H. Leon Prather Sr., *We Have Taken a City: Wilmington Racial Massacre and Coup of 1898* (Associated University Presses, 1984), 55.

<sup>48</sup> Rob Christensen, *The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics*, 17.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Timothy Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed*, 77.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

democratically integrated politics of Wilmington cracked. The city transformed once again as Democrats regained control with the 1898 election, but the election was not enough and Democrats responded with a reaction that escalated with the Wilmington Race Riot. H. Leon Prather, Sr. argued that the 1898 riot “had an irreversible political, economic, and social impact upon the city’s blacks.”<sup>53</sup> Despite political gains, race remained a distinguishing mark of political power within Wilmington, as African American politicians were still mostly viewed as inferior to their white peers. The article “Opinion of Negro Superiority,” ran in The Morning Star and stated that, while there are African Americans who are distinguished with superior minds, “it is ridiculous for an able man to be so carried away with what he has seen of the negro as to believe that in the future he will be intellectually superior to the white man.”<sup>54</sup>

As politics shifted in the 1890s, black women in Wilmington did not remain idle. These women moved their campaign to the streets by demanding that “white street car conductors extend their arms to help them on and off cars.”<sup>55</sup> The cars remained integrated at this point, but in 1898, some African Americans protested against the streetcars conductors “because they did not help black women on and off the conveyance as they did white women.”<sup>56</sup> White newspapers reported on the confrontations between black and white women on the streets. For example, one report described how several white women encountered a black woman on the street, and as one of the white women shoved her out of the way the black woman began to strike back with her umbrella.<sup>57</sup> The fusionist political structure of Wilmington not only opened a window for participation by the city’s black men but also by its black women. Nestled within the battle

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<sup>53</sup> H. Leon Prather Sr, *We Have Taken a City*, 183.

<sup>54</sup> William Bernard, “Opinion of Negro Superiority,” Wilmington Morning Star, January 1, 1880, Microfilm.

<sup>55</sup> Timothy Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed*, 82.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

between fusion and white supremacy politics was an economically diverse setting available to the middle and working classes of the city.

This period from 1880 to 1898 also marked an economic “golden time” for Wilmington’s black and white community.<sup>58</sup> The last two decades of the nineteenth century brought changes for Wilmington’s residents, as the city stood “on the threshold of a new era” of economic improvements.<sup>59</sup> Wilmington began to keep up with the pace of progress and made economic changes with the rest of the New South. A report in Wilmington’s New South stated that “to regain her wealth, her importance, and influence, the South must certainly adapt itself to the spirit of progress and while fondly look back on her old customs and habits she must yet remember that they are not of this age.”<sup>60</sup> Existing outside the rural plantation South, Wilmington was and had been a key port city. An increase in cotton, compresses, naval store businesses, railroads, and lumber mills following the Civil War, such as the Wilmington Stable Company, Wilmington, Wrightsville, and Onslow Railroad, beckoned former field hands both black and white to join the thriving metropolis. Community newspapers, stores, private schools, commercial associations, and churches sprang up throughout the city.<sup>61</sup> Wilmington’s railroad industry became the center of industrial life within the city during this period. The city contained two mainline operations; the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad and the Wilmington and Manchester Railroad.<sup>62</sup> Railroads offered prime opportunities for employment and segregation.

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<sup>58</sup> William M. Reaves, “*Strength Through Struggle*,” xiv.

<sup>59</sup> John Pinner, The New South, Vol 1, no4, Wilmington North Carolina, May 22, 1882. Microfilm.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> William M. Reaves, “*Strength Through Struggle*,” xiv.

<sup>62</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Vol XXX no 1 September 23, 1882. Microfilm  
William M. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 293.



In the later decades of the nineteenth century the consolidation of several railroad companies, and the beginning of new ones, such as the Atlantic Coastline, Wilmington, Wrightsville, and Onslow Railroad, and the Carolina Central Railroad, further expanded the Wilmington rail center.<sup>63</sup> In an 1884 Morning Star, George Price wrote about the benefits of Wilmington railroad companies; “with all these advantages which will accrue to Wilmington by the construction of this road, and in view of the fact that combinations outside of the city are conspiring against her interests, we appeal to the true and devoted citizens of Wilmington, regardless of race, color, or previous condition, to subscribe to stock in this road.”<sup>64</sup> Wilmington became a center for commercial interests, as entrepreneurs and those in search of a better life flocked to the city. Among the population, businessmen, such as shoemakers, carpenters, painters, masons, barbers, blacksmiths, and grocers proliferated throughout the city.<sup>65</sup> Some workers formed labor unions and successfully influenced “employers to limit, their employees work periods and increase compensation.”<sup>66</sup> Thus, Wilmington was home to an economically diverse landscape offering an array of opportunities.

In Wilmington, men especially found vast options available to them in which to earn a living. Men sought work as carpenters, brick masons, railroad workers, grocers, blacksmiths, painters, and builders.<sup>67</sup> For instance, J.E. Gordon, white, and M.G. Granger, black, worked, as carpenters. W.J. Kellogg, a black man worked as a butcher, Samuel King, black, worked as a blacksmith, and A.H. Homes, white, as a grocer.<sup>68</sup> Some African American men found work with

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<sup>63</sup> William Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 293.

<sup>64</sup> “Wilmington, Wrightsville, and Onslow RR,” Wilmington Morning Star, May 25, 1884. Wilmington, North Carolina.

<sup>65</sup> LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *Day of Blood*, 18.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>67</sup> William M. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 292.

<sup>68</sup> *Wilmington City Directory*, 1889, New Hanover Public Library, Wilmington, N.C.

the railroad companies as baggage men, box packers, car cleaners, cooks, drivers, oilers, Pullman Porters, repair helpers, sleeping car porters, waiters, watchmen, brakemen, and pump operators.<sup>69</sup> Both working class and middle class African Americans found Wilmington a “relatively attractive business environment.”<sup>70</sup> According to the Wilmington City directories by 1889 there were 14 carpenters, 8 stevedores, 8 brick masons, 6 coopers, 4 grocers, 4 draymen, 4 shoemakers, 3 barbers, 3 butchers, 3 ministers, 2 blacksmiths, 2 builders, 2 painters, 2 butlers, and 2 transfer wagon owners.<sup>71</sup> By 1899 there were 2 millers, 2 railroad firemen, one insurance agent, café cook, engineer, watchmen, candy maker, wood sawyer, tub maker, flat man, tailor, cauler, wheelwright, lighterman, undertaker, cotton tier, physician, porter, auctioneer, upholster, chair repair, livery stable owner, wood yard owner, shoe store owner, coachmen, book agent, and turpetine distiller.<sup>72</sup>

By 1895, Wilmington entertained a variety of black businesses.<sup>73</sup> Black businesses, such as The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, Shaw’s Funeral Service, and the African American Presbyterian newspaper, grew in direct competition with their white counterparts.<sup>74</sup> Wealthier and more educated black men entered more white-collar positions as professionals, and in managerial levels. Common, unskilled laborers benefited from the city’s growing economy by working as mill hands and with the railroads. While men faced growing job

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<sup>69</sup> William M. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 293.

<sup>70</sup> LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *Day of Blood*, 30.

<sup>71</sup> William Reaves in “*Strength Through Struggle*” states that these numbers “should not be considered statistically complete or correct, many people who worked in mills, warehouses, and other industries were listed as laborers, without identifying their particular occupation. Many black citizens were missed or omitted from city directories.” 292-293.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 302-309.

opportunities, the women of Wilmington also took part in the diverse economic setting of the city.

Unlike their male peers, women never served as railroad hands or butchers, but black and white women worked in a variety of jobs that also expanded over the last two decades of the nineteenth century. In the early 1880s, black and white women mainly worked as cooks, laundresses, nurses, washers, domestic servants, and seamstresses.<sup>75</sup> A handful of women also served as spinners, operatives, clerks, dressmakers, milliners, teachers, and ran boarding houses, and saloons.<sup>76</sup> For examples, Polly Moore, a black woman, worked as a cook Maria Nixon, a white woman, worked as a washer. And Fannie Potter, white, and Julia Batson, black, worked as seamstresses.<sup>77</sup> During this early part of the 1880s, black women within the city worked mainly as laundresses, servants, and occasionally as seamstresses. Melvina Lovic, an African American woman, who lived on the corner of Harnett Street and worked as a laundress, whereas Mary Toomer, also African American, from Chesnut Street, earned wages as a servant.<sup>78</sup> During the early 1880s white working women mainly filled the roles of seamstresses, while white middle class women worked as teachers, like Alice Ayers who worked as a teacher and Martha George as a seamstress.<sup>79</sup> In these economic roles, these women found avenues in which to act as leaders. For instance, Miss M.A. Bradley worked as the principal of Tileston Normal School.<sup>80</sup>

By the mid-1880s, the type of occupations held by black and white working class women expanded further. Jobs as distillers, bartenders, tailors, and eating houses became open to the

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<sup>75</sup> *Wilmington City Directory*, 1883, New Hanover Public Library, Wilmington, N.C.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Wilmington City Directory*, 1877-1880, New Hanover Public Library, Wilmington, N.C.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Wilmington City Directory*, 1883, New Hanover Public Library, Wilmington, N.C.

women of Wilmington.<sup>81</sup> The 1885 city directory listed one woman working each position, with two listings for tailoresses.<sup>82</sup> For example, Eliza Burton, white, worked as a bartender and Anna Greg, also white, within an “eating house.”<sup>83</sup> White women took on these new roles while black women largely remained washerwomen, seamstresses, cooks, and domestic servants.<sup>84</sup> A few black women, such as Sarah Mallet, Ida Alexander, and Sarah Brown, did move out of positions as servants, cooks, and laundresses, to work as teachers, seamstresses, and nurses.<sup>85</sup> In the late 1880s, documented information revealed a change within positions held by Wilmington’s working class women. Working black women are hardly mentioned with the 1889 City Directory, only briefly appearing as laundresses and seamstresses, like Mary Harmon and Mrs. Mary E. Cleapor.<sup>86</sup> Fifty-five white women, such as Mrs. M.E. Frost and Miss Julia Hill appear listed as dressmakers, missionaries, governesses, teachers, midwives, seamstresses, and running boarding houses.<sup>87</sup> The reduced number of black women recorded in the directories of the late 1880s may be attributed to who was compiling and documenting the information. As Bill Reaves found in his own research of African Americans in Wilmington that they were often omitted in the directories.<sup>88</sup>

Nevertheless, as Wilmington changed politically, so did the occupational choices of black and white working class women. By 1897, the number of job categories held by women grew to include a variety of roles. The 1897 *Wilmington City Directory* listed new jobs like weavers (3), chair fixers (1), maids (3), helpers (1), florists (1), ironers (1), housemaids (2), snack houses (1),

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<sup>81</sup> *Wilmington City Directory*, 1885, New Hanover Public Library, Wilmington, N.C.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Wilmington City Directory*, 1889, Wilmington, N.C.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> William M. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 292-293.

and salesladies (9) for both black and white women.<sup>89</sup> Individuals, like Sarah Gardner, worked as a saleslady and Bertha Barlow as a weaver.<sup>90</sup> Despite the expansion of these jobs, black women still largely held positions as washers, seamstresses, and cooks, like Elizabeth Ash, Maggie Barnes, and Sarah Lane.<sup>91</sup> However, the number of black teachers and nurses did increase by the end of the period, with women like Bessie Boyd, Alice Jackson, and Mary Malett entering the profession of education while Josephine McKoy and Annie Mosely earned their wages as nurses.<sup>92</sup>

The increase in jobs for women from the beginning of the 1880s until the end of the nineteenth century represented a push for economic independence. As women entered the last two decades of the century, they began to move into more economically independent positions. In 1880, Mattie Stokes, white, worked as a domestic servant, but by 1883 began working as a washer.<sup>93</sup> Maria Nixon, black, was listed as keeping house in 1880, but also by 1883 she moved to washing, just as Stokes.<sup>94</sup> These changes may be similar to trends across the South during the same period. The washerwoman of Atlanta, as explored by Tera Hunter in *To Joy my Freedom*, set a precedent for independence as part of the industrializing economy of the southern landscape. These Atlanta women organized seeking higher pay and respect by holding a mass meeting and going out on strike. The working women of Wilmington may have seen the occupation of washerwoman after 1881 now as a position of independence and an occupation in which to demonstrate their economic, political, and social strengths as that demonstrated by the

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<sup>89</sup> *Wilmington City Directory*, 1897, New Hanover Public Library, Wilmington, N.C.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Wilmington City Directory*, 1883. New Hanover Public Library, Wilmington, N.C.  
*U.S. Census Bureau*, 1880 Census, Wilmington, North Carolina.

<sup>94</sup> *Wilmington City Directory*, 1883, New Hanover Public Library, Wilmington, N.C.

women in Atlanta. The Atlanta washer-women stood as prime examples of the independence available to black women in the late nineteenth century, and the occupation of washing allowed Wilmington's working class black women to move out from under the thumb of a white household; thus, explaining the noticeable move of Wilmington's working women into roles as washers.

This overall transformation in the variety of positions open to black and white men and women during the 1880s and 1890s revealed that as industry increased within Wilmington, so did opportunities and the willingness of the city's men and women to fill those positions. More importantly, black and white women both actively participated in Wilmington's diverse economic landscape. However, working class black women remained largely within household labor positions. Tera Hunter argued that "racial castes and the demands of the southern political economy dictated that black women work, and in southern cities their options were confined to household labor."<sup>95</sup> Just as in Atlanta, Wilmington's black women found that the range of opportunities remained narrow.<sup>96</sup> The city directories made clear that there were black women who escaped the confines of household labor and learned services as seamstresses, dressmakers, and teachers.<sup>97</sup> Finally, leadership and moving positions held by the white and black women of Wilmington, as principals, teachers, and as salesladies demonstrated that not only did these women strive to fill, the widening opportunities, just as their male counterparts, but also sought roles within their city's economy that provided them with power to shape and move within their community. However, positions as teachers and principals become more aligned with middle

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<sup>95</sup> Tera Hunter, *To Joy my Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

<sup>97</sup> *Wilmington City Directories*, 1883, 1885, 1889, 1897. New Hanover Public Library, Wilmington, N.C.

class occupations than that of the working class. For example, Emma Canady, white, and Maggie Burhimer, also white, served as teachers, and Miss M.A. Bradley as the Principal of Tilston Normal School.<sup>98</sup> With such interests, working class black and white women joined men in driving and shaping Wilmington's growing industrial setting, and therefore in shaping the diversity of the city's economic opportunities.

Along with Fusion politics and an expanded working class, Wilmington's black middle class also represented one of the visible identities within the city. During the final decades of the nineteenth century, middle class African Americans began to carve out a place for themselves within Wilmington's community. Individuals became active in politics, such as William H. Waddell who was nominated for the North Carolina House.<sup>99</sup> Wilmington's black middle class women took part in civic work within the city, as members of The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). The WCTU allowed middle class black women to work alongside their white counterparts and "impose new values on southern life."<sup>100</sup> Composed mostly of Methodists and Baptists, the WCTU provided women a social outlet in which to shape their society. Notably, an 1881 statewide prohibition referendum provided the grounds for the WCTU's entry into North Carolina.<sup>101</sup>

Wilmington's black middle class also built their identities around benevolent organizations, city celebrations, and new churches and schools that further diversified Wilmington's economy and civic life. The Gregory Normal Institute and the Wilmington

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<sup>98</sup> *Wilmington City Directories*, 1883, 1897. New Hanover Public Library, Wilmington, N.C.

<sup>99</sup> William M. Reaves, "Strength Through Struggle," 243.

<sup>100</sup> Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 45.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

Missionary Baptists Association were formed in the period after the Civil War.<sup>102</sup> Celebrations such as Emancipation Day and Memorial Day featured “parades and speeches by both blacks and whites.”<sup>103</sup> Black citizens, just as their white neighbors, “developed literacy societies, built libraries, established benevolent organizations to provide relief for the needy and formed baseball leagues.”<sup>104</sup> Early each year, African American citizens gathered to celebrate Emancipation Day in recognition of President Lincoln’s proclamation during the war. This celebration remained a male tradition until 1893. However, during this particular ceremony, ladies were asked to participate, such as Miss Mary Washington Howe who read the Emancipation Proclamation and a performance of original poems by Miss Nora Allen.<sup>105</sup> The Kooners Celebration, where young African Americans went to houses on Christmas Day dressed in costumes reciting *The Cooner Man* poem, also saw increased participation from women in the 1890s.<sup>106</sup> Like Emancipation Day and the Kooner’s Celebration, Memorial Day became a fixed feature within the black community’s yearly celebrations. It is important to note that, many white citizens viewed the celebration as a “Yankee holiday, only recognized by Union Veterans, Yankee lovers, and foreigners.”<sup>107</sup>

Black citizens became active in literary societies and musical programs. Wilmington’s African Americans formed the Benjamin Banneker Literary and Library Association in 1883 with membership opened to both males and females interested in “improving their minds and

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<sup>102</sup> William M. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 77.

<sup>103</sup> LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *Day of Blood*, 18.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> “Emancipation Celebration,” Wilmington Messenger, Wilmington NC, December 11, 1892.

<sup>106</sup> William M. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 35-37.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*



increasing their facilities for their attainment of useful knowledge and innocent enjoyment.”<sup>108</sup>

The United Order of the Tents, created and directed by black females, sought to care for the sick and ensure a decent burial for the dead, while the Order of the Good Samaritans and Daughters of Samaria sought to promote temperance and morality among black citizens, brotherly love, support orphans, and raise funds for education.<sup>109</sup> The Colored Masons of North Carolina and the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) also strived to unite the black community and promote advancement. Events at the Wilmington City Hall and Theater, like music programs, became a favorite pastime for many middle class African Americans.<sup>110</sup>

The church also served as “central to the development of black cultural and civic life in Wilmington.”<sup>111</sup> Following the war, several white churches in Wilmington allowed African Americans to attend. However, many blacks opted to form their own churches during the latter part of the nineteenth century. These church congregations included Baptist, Episcopal, A.M.E. and Catholic denominations. African American church attendance reflected the “social stratification within the city’s black population.”<sup>112</sup> For example, many wealthier African Americans attended St. Mark’s Episcopal Church or Chestnut Street Presbyterian Church, while other black citizens attended St. Stephen’s A.M.E. Church.<sup>113</sup> Despite this class separation within the black community, many black churches contained large congregations and became active in

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<sup>108</sup> “Address Before Colored Literary Society,” *Wilmington Morning Star*, November 10, 1883.

<sup>109</sup> “Daughters of Samaria,” *Wilmington Morning Star*, September 29, 1880. Wilmington, North Carolina.

William M. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 13-16.

<sup>110</sup> William M. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 39-47.

<sup>111</sup> LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *Day of Blood*, 18.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

education and political affairs.<sup>114</sup> Churches became a place where the black community, and thus middle class African Americans, could come together. Churches held concerts, lectures, debates, and other social activities, while also conducting political meetings and participating in rallies and parades.<sup>115</sup> These churches also became very active in the temperance movement by creating the Temperance Band of Hope.<sup>116</sup> Organized in 1885, a board of local officers, including female treasurer Julia Amy, led the Band of Hope.<sup>117</sup> Female church members also raised most of the funds for church repairs.<sup>118</sup> During the late nineteenth century, women even began to take on male positions within the church. For example, in 1883 a female preacher conducted services at St. Luke's A.M.E. Zion Church, and "those who heard her, say she preached a very good sermon."<sup>119</sup> Serving as the cornerstone of black middle class social life, the church offered windows for recreation, community organization, politics, and even for women to take on roles in shaping their society. The church also placed heavy emphasis upon education, as black churches formed parochial schools and adult literacy classes.<sup>120</sup>

By the late nineteenth century six black schools were open to the middle class black community. For example, the Peabody School, housing both male and female teachers, stood as the largest educational facility available to Wilmington's black community, while the Gregory Normal Institute provided training for future teachers and leaders of Wilmington.<sup>121</sup> The schools also provided a place for women to not only work as teachers, but act as leaders. For instance,

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<sup>114</sup> LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *Day of Blood*, 19.

<sup>115</sup> "Colored Baptists Association," Wilmington Morning Star, May 30, 1883.

<sup>116</sup> William M. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 77.

<sup>117</sup> "Colored Temperance Society," Wilmington Morning Star, January 15, 1885.  
William M. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 77.

<sup>118</sup> William M. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 79.

<sup>119</sup> "Local Dots," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. February 27, 1883.

<sup>120</sup> William M. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 153.

<sup>121</sup> LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *Day of Blood*, 19.

Mary Washington Howe served as principal of the Williston Graded School for twenty years.<sup>122</sup> While Wilmington thrived both economically and politically, the city's black middle class found ways to exert their influence and power as leaders in benevolent organizations, literary societies, officers within churches, preachers, teachers, and as school principals.

Wilmington's working class black women played a vital role in the city's diverse economy, as they served in occupations as seamstresses, maids, cooks, or washers. There were distinct differences between the black middle and working classes. Wilmington's black working class women would not have likely served in leadership positions as teachers, principals, or on literary societies. Thus, these avenues to effect change were closed to them. The terrain in which to voice politics became confined to the city streets. Within this domain, these working class black women spent their days traveling to work and to home. The nature of new economic and social opportunities and Fusion politics created a "safe-haven" within Wilmington society. This provided for the city's working class black women the confidence to publically practice their politics of recognition, and perhaps also some assurance that fatal danger would not ensue after such political outcries.

During the late nineteenth century economic growth, a vast black middle class and fusion politics characterized Wilmington. Nevertheless, adding to the excitement of Wilmington's terrain were the working class black women's demand to be recognized. These women, though deemed "unruly," found the streets their political battleground. An array of economic opportunities, the integration that accompanied fusionist politics, and a growing black middle class allowed Wilmington to grow and change along with the rest of the New South. However, the middle class narrative within the city's growth often took precedence. Middle class African

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<sup>122</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, October 5, 1887, Wilmington, NC. William M. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 153.

Americans were determined to establish themselves as the Best Men and Best Women, as explored by Glenda Gilmore. These middle class African Americans argued that all members of their race should not be looked upon as “boys and wenches.”<sup>123</sup> The political, social, and economic activities of the black middle class and their political efforts in acquiring Victorian respectability, overshadowed the activism of Wilmington’s black working class women. This middle class centered, Fusionist minded, and economically charged society became the world from which the Wilmington’s working class black women came. But besides key components of Wilmington’s society discussed in this chapter, the roles and activism of Wilmington’s working class black women created a politics of recognition that made the city captivating.

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<sup>123</sup> Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 75.

## CHAPTER TWO WE WILL BE RECOGNIZED

In the late nineteenth century, veiled behind larger political, economic, and social activities, Wilmington's working class black women crafted their own politics of recognition. These politics of recognition contained layers of an assertion of womanhood and demands for protection both publicly and privately. On the streets, these women participated in daily confrontations and evasive actions that became hidden behind organized political movements and actions. Uncovering the street activism of Wilmington's black female working class required reading the daily reports of black women labeled "disorderly" within The Morning Star to interpret political outcries, considering why these women were labeled "disorderly," and evaluating their daily unruly behavior, as political activism. It meant analyzing the various behaviors, such as drunkenness, theft, and assault as a means in which to politically voice their presence to citizens of Wilmington both black and white. While these reports lacked the direct voice of these black women and at times left much to be desired in detail, such limits also presented a moment of possibility. The reports provided the opportunity to potentially unearth the political voice of these women by evaluating the hidden transcript of what these women were asserting on the streets. These working class black women strained their street politics through their experiences and various facets of their daily life. This resulted in everyday resistance by defying the expectations of a white community. A white community that in turn, responded by deeming the blacks "disorderly." The everyday forms of resistance by these women held just as much political merit as the daily resistance studied by Stephanie McCurry in *Confederate Reckoning*, Victoria Bynum in *Unruly Women*, and Steven Hahn's *A Nation Under our Feet*.

Thus, Wilmington's working class black women participated in political activism that was outside the traditional realm of politics.

In a great social distance from the black middle class world of Wilmington, the city's working class black women found the streets, the place where they traveled to and from work, a stage on which to make their presence known. This presence led to the women being deemed "disorderly" by the local newspapers. While white working class women were occasionally referenced, it was Wilmington's black working women that were frequently mentioned within The Wilmington Morning Star as being "disorderly." In 1890, Lucy Carrol and Justin Cooper, two black women, were arrested for "obstructing the streets with baby carriages."<sup>1</sup> The same year, Martha Sanders, also black, was fined ten dollars for carrying a concealed weapon, while both Amelia Bradley and Ella Martin were both reported as being "drunk and disorderly."<sup>2</sup> The hidden transcript recorded working class black women forging a politics of recognition on the streets.

In September of 1882, Wilmington's The Morning Star featured a short news report that contained a loaded message. Entitled, "A Determined Husband and Disobedient Wife," it proceeded to tell the story of a dispute between an African American couple in the middle of one of Wilmington's busiest streets. While she resisted "with all the strength and energy she possessed," the husband dragged his wife through the street.<sup>3</sup> Wilmington police finally arrived upon the scene and insisted the man let his wife go. The same day, another report ran concerning a scuffle between Dick Ferguson and Mary Ann Giles. The two met before a judge on the charge

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<sup>1</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. May 4, 1890.

<sup>2</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. May 23, 1890.  
Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. May 19, 1893.

<sup>3</sup> "A Determined Husband and Disobedient Wife," The Morning Star Vol XXX no 148, Wilmington, N.C. September 13, 1882.

of “an affray with a deadly weapon.”<sup>4</sup> It seems that prior to the trial the two quarreled, and one grabbed an ax and a carving knife, and the other responded with a stick and wash tub.<sup>5</sup> In August of 1887, a black man got wounded in a fight at the city’s baseball grounds. There Dave Hawkins received a cut on the arm from Ed. Edwards. It was noted that Mag, Sarah, and Alice Edwards also “took part in the affray.”<sup>6</sup> In 1893, Ella Martin, black, found herself fined ten dollars on the charge of being drunk and disorderly.<sup>7</sup> In another, two black women broke into a fight in the magistrate’s court room. Rosa King “was arrested on a warrant sworn out by Mary Jane Jordan and brought before Justine Buntin to stand trial for disorderly conduct.”<sup>8</sup> Failing to pay her fine, the judge ordered King to jail. Before she could be taken away, King struck at Jordan.

During the late nineteenth century, news accounts, such as these, filled the front pages of The Wilmington Morning Star. It became typical to read of women, such as Rebecca Green and Mary Hayes, who had been found guilty of “disorderly conduct,” and brought before the judge.<sup>9</sup> A “disobedient wife” defied her spousal role by refusing to comply with her husband’s wishes. Yet the young woman continued to fight as she strongly resisted the arm of her “determined” husband. Mag, Sarah, and Alice Edwards chose to intervene in a violent fight between their male peers. Rosa King and Mary Jane Jordan after being found guilty of “disorderly” conduct exhibited the same behavior within the courtroom.

Several types of behaviors characterized Wilmington’s working class black women as “disorderly” during the 1880s and 1890s. Rather than examining these behaviors as

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<sup>4</sup> “On the War Path,” The Morning Star, Vol XXX no. 148 Wilmington NC, September 13, 1882.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “A Cutting Scrape,” The Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. August 7, 1887.

<sup>7</sup> “Magistrates Court,” The Morning Star, Wilmington NC, March 19, 1893.

<sup>8</sup> “Magistrate’s Court,” The Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C., January 1, 1897.

<sup>9</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” The Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. February 26, 1890.

dysfunctional, they are also perhaps a window into the politics of these women, a politics of the streets, where they demanded recognition, protection, and asserted who they were as women. To uncover the politics of Wilmington's black female working class, one must approach "history from below" as Robin Kelley emphasized "how do African American working people struggle and survive outside of established organizations or organized social movements."<sup>10</sup> While the hidden transcript allowed interpretation of Wilmington's working class black women's politics of recognition, assessing the public transcript revealed the advantages a white press found in reports of ambiguous "disorderly" images, outrageous, fines, and violent behaviors.

Wilmington's black working class women were not the only women in history to exhibit disorderly behavior. Victoria Bynum traced disorderly behavior to the Old South. In her own research, three broad categories captured the defiant women of the North Carolina Piedmont: women who "publicly complained about misbehaving husbands or other male household members they accused of abusing male prerogatives of power, women who defied the rules of society by engaging in forbidden sexual behavior, and women who implicitly or explicitly defied the authority of the Confederate state during the Civil War."<sup>11</sup> Even women of the Confederacy, as the work of Stephanie McCurry illustrated, behaved in an unruly fashion by creating a politics of subsistence. In 1929, the women of the Appalachian South in Elizabethton, Tennessee, exhibited their own politics and unruly behavior through labor militancy. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall noted that through their strike efforts and protests, the women of Elizabethton, Tennessee, in

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<sup>10</sup> Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (The Free Press, 1994), 8.

<sup>11</sup> Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 1.



both dress and language demanded their place as women but also as political beings and crafted it for their “own rebellious purposes.”<sup>12</sup>

Common among these three different historical periods were southern working class women who defined and created rebellious behavior by defying the expectations of their society and in turn offered their own brand of politics that shaped the world around them. The working class black women of Wilmington did not create a politics of subsistence or voice their political outcries through organized labor strikes, as the women within McCurry’s or Hall’s research. However, Wilmington’s working class black females shared similarities with these other women in that they forged their own politics using the tools available to them, such as language and the use of public space. In the streets, Wilmington’s working class black women shaped a politics of recognition that asserted their own version of womanhood and demanded their right to protection as citizens of the New South. These working class black women engaged in forbidden behavior as defined by the city’s white culture as to how a “colored” woman should act, and chose to use this “disorderly behavior” into their own brand of street politics. This unruly behavior in the public streets made them visible to both white and black Wilmington citizens and offered these black working women a stage from which they could be seen and heard. While there were news reports of unruly white working class women, these remained few in number in Wilmington. A majority of the newspaper reports focused upon the “disorderly” behavior of Wilmington’s black women.

Yet, what made the disorderly behavior of these working class black women political? Victoria Bynum argued that “the task of moving subordinate people into the historical limelight

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<sup>12</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol 73, no. 2 (September 1986), 355-356.

without losing sight of the political framework in which they operated is challenging.”<sup>13</sup>

Focusing only upon those who controlled and held the most traditional power in Wilmington, not only those within the white community but also among the middle class African Americans, made the working class black women of Wilmington appear only as passive, inactive, immoral, unruly figures in the shadows of the common historical narrative. But expanding our concept of what constituted politics beyond organized political parties and meetings, revealed women, who through daily acts of resistance contested “society’s definition of them and maintained vitality and self-respect by exhibiting unruly behavior.”<sup>14</sup> These women expressed their need and right to experience life as citizens in deserving the protection and the services of the municipal government-not in areas, like courtrooms and through political parties, but in the streets; a place of comfort, where they knew they would be able to operate. Timothy Tyson stated that as white newspapers reported street confrontations concerning black women, “these stories suggest that black women struck back in the language of the streets.”<sup>15</sup>

To understand the street politics of Wilmington’s working class black women required readjusting the perspective of political activism. Robin D.G. Kelley argued to be political does not necessarily mean one is part of an organization or institution. Rather, the unorganized daily resistance of the working class revealed “a larger story waiting to be told.”<sup>16</sup> The working class black women of Wilmington participated in what James C. Scott calls “infrapolitics.” Daily political resistance forged by subordinate groups hidden under overlapping political landscapes, like Wilmington’s working class black women, becomes like “infrared rays, beyond the visible

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<sup>13</sup> Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and its Legacy* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 82.

<sup>16</sup> Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 4.

end of the spectrum.”<sup>17</sup> Uncovering such teaches us that behind established organizations and mainstream movements are common everyday people who go against the normal expectations of political activism and have a hand in shaping not only their society but history in general.

Therefore, Wilmington’s working class black women represented more than a group of black working women, but active political actors amid Wilmington’s fusion politics, burgeoning middle class, and economic diversity. These women exhibited a politics of recognition that demanded they be heard, as seen by their continual display of unruly behavior in the public streets of Wilmington. They asserted their own ideal of womanhood by exhibiting behaviors that went against the traditional notion of feminine behavior of white society and black Victorian values. Deborah Gray White argued that while white women, especially those in upper classes, hid “their personal strength under a veil of femininity in order to claim ‘ladydom,’” black women shaped a womanhood that “ran counter to dependence,” and “demanded respect for their abilities.”<sup>18</sup> Also, these women in bringing violence to the streets demanded protection perhaps against the abuses they faced at home and in the public sphere as they were sentenced outrageous fines and punishments. This type of politics related to the yeoman women discussed in Stephanie McCurry’s *Confederate Reckoning*, as Wilmington’s working class black women demanded civic institutions recognize them not just as women, but as citizens who deserved protection in order to survive within an industrializing society. Disorderly conduct became the door in which the women sought the attention and recognition they may have desired, and the hidden transcript the key to interpreting such political activism. The working class black women of Wilmington found the traditional realm of politics closed off to them. Wilmington’s working class black

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<sup>17</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, 1990), 183.

<sup>18</sup> Deborah Grey White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (W.W. Norton and Company, Revised Edition, 1999), 176-186.

women strained their street politics through their experiences and various facets of daily life that resulted in everyday resistance by defying the expectations of a white community that responded by labeling them “disorderly.” These women conducted their own politics of recognition that impacted Wilmington and its position within the New South, whether they intended to or not.

During the 1880s and 1890s, the news reports of Wilmington’s working class black women varied in types of unruly behavior. In one aspect, there were ambiguous reports of simply the label “disorderly” without much further detail. For example, The Morning Star reported that Mary Howe and Jane Ross were charged with “disorderly conduct,” but failed to provide any other information as to the details of what made their behavior defiant.<sup>19</sup> In most accounts, these working class black women were given the option to pay a fine for their sentences, work the streets, leave town, or be jailed for a set amount of days. On March 31, 1896, Carrie Davis faced the punishment of paying twenty dollars for her behavior on the streets or being imprisoned for thirty days.<sup>20</sup> On October 9, 1888, Eliza Brown and Hannah Davis were able to pay fines for their behavior and became suspended from judgment, while Martha Mashburn and Millie King were charged five dollars each for their actions on Fourth Street.<sup>21</sup> Fanny Gore was fined ten dollars or the choice to spend twenty days in jail.<sup>22</sup> Leah Brown also charged with similar behavior faced a fine of ten dollars or to “work twenty days on the street.”<sup>23</sup> Like Brown, Mary Ann Jordan, Allie Sampson, and Julia Potter were sentenced to pay a fine of ten dollars, but Jordan’s fine was suspended when she promised to leave town.<sup>24</sup> Also, Carrie Styles, Celia

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<sup>19</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. February 25, 1890.  
“Magistrate’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. May 3, 1892.

<sup>20</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington N.C., March 31, 1896.

<sup>21</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. October 9, 1888.

<sup>22</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. June 10, 1887.

<sup>23</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. February 14, 1888.

<sup>24</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. May 31, 1888.

Wright, and Annie Phillips found themselves suspended from judgment as they were able to pay their fines.<sup>25</sup> Mamie Huggins was given the choice of paying five dollars “into the city treasury or spending ten days in the guard house.”<sup>26</sup>

These numerous vague reports that simply labeled Wilmington’s working class black women “disorderly,” can be read as a way in which Wilmington’s white newspapers began to draw clear divisions between the flourishing black middle and working classes. In doing so, a white community found an outlet in which to dismantle black respect and ability within Wilmington. After the Civil War, African American men and women strived to prove their place within the New South and demanded that they deserved “equal citizenship.” They sought to “achieve economic independence and well-being” for themselves and their families.<sup>27</sup> A flourishing middle class worked to overcome racial stereotypes by participation in the Women’s Temperance Union, in political offices, as Wilmington’s Board of Alderman, built schools, and strove to become the “best men and women” in the eyes of the city’s white community.<sup>28</sup> However, when The Morning Star publicly reported and used negative language to describe the street behavior of working class black women, such as Mary Howe and Jane Ross, the idea that African Americans could become the “best men and women” became harder to accept for the white community. Democratic white supremacists viciously fought to regain their power and

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“Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. June 15, 1890.

“Local Dots,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. October 20, 1893.

<sup>25</sup> “Magistrate’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. December 17, 1895.

“Magistrate’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. September 17, 1896.

<sup>26</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. August 1895.

“Justice’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. January 25, 1896.

<sup>27</sup> Tera Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 51.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 62-63.

control by creating the image of the black beast rapist violating white homes to destroy the credibility of African Americans within North Carolina, and therefore within Wilmington.

Portraying working class black women as “disorderly” possibly served as the female version of the “black beast,” helping to achieve the aim of the white supremacists. White supremacists fueled the hysteria around the notion of the black man raping white women. The “disorderly” reports within The Morning Star portrayed the image that like the “black beast rapist,” these working class black women were unmanageable and a threat to an ordered society. This type of description and reference to the actions of African Americans created a divide between the black middle and working classes of Wilmington. Wilmington’s white press gave an unruly connotation to African Americans that weakened the black middle class’s attempts to become “equal” in the eyes of a white community, and become therefore, the “best men and women.” This drew divisions between the black middle and working classes, as the middle class saw the behavior of the black working class women as harming their efforts to overcome social prejudice. Ultimately by using rowdy and disruptive language to describe the behavior of the city’s working class black women the public transcript of The Morning Star revealed a white press furthering the campaign of “home protection.” The idea that their ordered, southern “home,” meaning more than white households but also Wilmington itself, needed not just protection from the black rapists, but also the unruly female black ruffians of the streets.

Along with ambiguous reports, the amount of these fines at times became very costly compared to wages. For example, Julia Murray found herself in the city prison for thirty days in default of a payment of twenty dollars for being unruly in the streets.<sup>29</sup> Lucy Gillian and Carrie

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<sup>29</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. June 30, 1887.

Foster were sent to jail for their behavior in the non-payment of their fines.<sup>30</sup> Mary Larkins and Amelia Bradley referred to as “colored damsels” in The Morning Star were fined twenty dollars each for acting in a “disorderly manner at the races.”<sup>31</sup> Melissa Hines charged with “acting very disorderly” on Nutt Street was required to pay five dollars or “go below for thirty days.”<sup>32</sup> Sometimes these working class black women did not have a choice of a fine or to serve time, as some were sentenced to serve time right away. For instance, Millie Jenkins, Martha Wescott, and Betty Pigford found themselves in jail for thirty days.<sup>33</sup> From simply stating “disorderly” conduct” as justification for the charges and fines imposed upon Wilmington’s working class black women, The Morning Star left much to be desired in terms of more specific details concerning their behavior in the streets.

While the label of “disorderly” furthered the notion of “home protection” for white southern residents, Wilmington’s white press also created justification for the incarceration of African Americans. The fines and punishment served as a source of control that a white community could exercise over their black counterparts. In the *New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander argued that mass incarceration functions as a racial caste system.<sup>34</sup> Like slavery and the eventual emergence of Jim Crow, mass incarceration operated and operates as a form of “racialized social control.”<sup>35</sup> Putting these “disorderly” working class women behind bars for a period of time allowed a white community to exercise power over a black race, and the label of “disorderly,” provided the validation for

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<sup>30</sup> “Magistrate’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C., January 18, 1896.

<sup>31</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. May 3, 1891.

<sup>32</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. August 2, 1884.

<sup>33</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. June 20, 1889.

“City Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. January 17, 1890.

<sup>34</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the age of Colorblindness* (The New Press, 2011), 13.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

them to do so. By using the term “disorderly,” justification was created to tame this female “black beast,” and stop their negative influence in an “orderly” society. When Julia Murray, Millie Jenkins, Martha Wescott, and Betty Pigford were jailed for thirty days this was not a punishment for their behavior, but an over exaggerated sentence put in place for the white community to exercise their racial power.<sup>36</sup> The disruptive label given to the working class black women’s behavior allowed the white community to justify jail time, exercise racial control publicly for the city of Wilmington to witness, and create a “legalized” racial caste system through fines prior to the firm enforcement of Jim Crow. Thus, this use of fines and jail time state may have allowed a white community to enact the notion of “home protection” by reprimanding and pulling these “unruly heathens from the streets,” and therefore the public sphere of Wilmington, their home.

At times, the street behavior of Wilmington’s black working class women escalated to violence. This violence included fights between men and women, their participation in fights between men, and violence amongst themselves. Ada Harris found herself charged for participating in an affray, while Rose Pearsall, Rosa Barnes, Eliza Berden, Harriet Dewberry, Adeline Eborn, Annie Hall, and Elsie Lewis were charged with assault and battery upon unnamed individuals in the public streets.<sup>37</sup> In March of 1896, Belle Washington was charged

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<sup>36</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. August 2, 1884.

Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. June 20, 1880.

“City Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. January 17, 1890.

<sup>37</sup> “Magistrate’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. May 23, 1883.

“Magistrate’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. June 18, 1881.

“Magistrate’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. November 18, 1881.

“Criminal Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. June 3, 1883.

“Magistrate’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. August 6, 1880.

“Magistrate’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. November 14, 1880.

“Magistrate’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. December 8, 1881.

Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. January 1, 1897.



with assault with a deadly weapon within the streets. These violent street assaults at times became directed towards their male peers when the working class black women joined in the altercations of men or directly confronted them. This type of violence may have indicated their intent to no longer take physical abuse from men, and that they would fight back. Mag, Sarah, and Alice Edwards joined in a fight that left a young “colored” man wounded at the city’s baseball grounds, and were arrested for their display of public violence in that fight.<sup>38</sup> In March of 1896, Lizzie Lucas aided John Phillips in his assault upon Mr. W.L. Thrap.<sup>39</sup> While often such violence became directed against other male citizens, at times these opponents were their husbands.

Also, domestic violence between the working class black women of Wilmington and their husbands was described in the city’s leading newspapers. In September of 1882, a “colored man” attempted to force his young wife to go home. This resulted in him dragging her down the street in the neighborhood of New Market House.<sup>40</sup> However, the black female resisted “with all her strength and energy she possessed.”<sup>41</sup> Labeled a “disobedient wife” by The Morning Star, the police arrived on the scene and ordered the man to let her go or at least “desist in the use of violent measures to ensure her obedience to his wishes.”<sup>42</sup> The black woman eventually ran from her husband with him chasing after her. Thus, working class black women were often not offered protection in the home or in the streets. Like this incident, John Gilmore and his wife Nancy displayed rowdy conduct through their frequent fighting in the streets. John spent thirty days in

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<sup>38</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. Marcy 18, 1896.  
“A Cutting Scrape,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. August 7, 1887.

<sup>39</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. March 27, 1896.

<sup>40</sup> “A Determined Husband and a Disobedient Wife,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. September 13, 1882.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

the county jail while Nancy was released.<sup>43</sup> In August of 1881 Carrie Walker committed assault and battery upon Charles Parker.<sup>44</sup> When these working class black women brought domestic violence to the streets, they blurred the lines between public and private space. By bringing domestic issues to the public streets, these women asserted their womanhood and made domestic violence a public issue that, for them, would no longer be hidden and handled privately. These actions in turn also redefined the lines of marriage and womanhood that did not align with the Victorian notions that women should behave meek, mildly, and keep domestic issues at home. While making domestic violence a public issue that required attention, Wilmington's working class black women also found protection in bringing such to the city streets. For it was better to be in jail than at home facing abuse.

While battling their husbands and other male peers in the streets, Wilmington's working class black women often acted out in violence towards each other, in the courtroom, and at times such violence included deadly weapons. It was not uncommon to see articles entitled "Colored Women Fighting" grace the front pages of The Wilmington Morning Star with details of black women being arrested for fighting.<sup>45</sup> Henrietta McNeil, Betsy Crawford, Violet Henry, Mattie Williams, Alice Hall, Hattie Preolean, Clara Andrews, and Etta Shaw demonstrated defiant behavior by fighting with other women in the streets.<sup>46</sup> Like their confrontations with men, these fights often turned violent. Women, such as Georgiana Gause, Tena Wells, Sarah Ann Betts, Emma Pugh, Eliza Hamilton, Alice Green, Rosa Richardson, and Bell Hall assaulted and injured

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<sup>43</sup> "Mayor's Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. January 25, 1888.

<sup>44</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. August 4, 1881.

<sup>45</sup> "Colored Women Fighting," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. November 18, 1885.

<sup>46</sup> "Magistrate's Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. August 21, 1883. "Mayor's Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. March 27, 1884.

Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. May 18, 1886.

"Mayor's Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. December 23, 1885.

other black women in the streets.<sup>47</sup> In the 1890s, Mary Howard was found guilty of assault and battery with a deadly weapon upon Mag Evans while Mary Waddell faced similar charges from an altercation with Sarah Waddell.<sup>48</sup> On August 4, 1880, Winne Loftin and Sarah Davis were arrested for quarreling in the neighborhood of Fourth and Brunswick streets. The fight escalated when Davis “drew a knife from her bosom and cut Loftin on the arm and shoulder.”<sup>49</sup> Loftin responded by seizing a rock and hurling it at Davis and knocking her down.<sup>50</sup> Also, in August of 1880, “two colored girls got into a difficulty in the neighborhood of Third and Dock Streets,” that left one of the girls struck in the head with a brick, “from which the blood flowed freely” in “streams” down her face.<sup>51</sup> In January of 1882, a “free fight” broke out between black women on Sixth between Taylor and Howard Streets.<sup>52</sup> The articles stated that at least one hundred and fifty to two hundred spectators gathered to watch the affray, as “brickbats and fence palings were freely used” with Becky Davis, Lavinia Easterland, and Mary Ann Jones arrested for their participation in the fight.<sup>53</sup> In another case, Malissa Pigford and Rachael Sykes assaulted each other in the streets, and Pigford drew a deadly weapon during the confrontation.<sup>54</sup> By bringing woman on woman violence to the streets, Wilmington’s working class black women may have

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<sup>47</sup> “Magistrate’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. June 21, 1880.

“Magistrate’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. February 10, 1884.

“Magistrate’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. September 22, 1881.

“Magistrate’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. January 3, 1883.

Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. June 9, 1889.

“Magistrate’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. October 12, 1880.

Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. February 2, 1884.

<sup>48</sup> “Criminal Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. November 14, 1893.

<sup>49</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. August 5, 1880.

<sup>50</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. August 5, 1880.

<sup>51</sup> “Struck with a Brick,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. August 18, 1880.

<sup>52</sup> “A Free Fight among Colored Femines,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. January 8, 1882.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. February 26, 1896.

been demonstrating their politics of recognition. By exhibiting this violent behavior, these working class black women may have been stating that this was the type of women they were; assertive, tough and the opposite of the meek, delicate image of Victorian femininity. Also, in order to receive the protection they may have sought these women could not act within the traditional notions of womanhood. Such violent behavior indicated that they were deadly and willing to fight back no matter the situation in order to receive the protection they deserved. It was symbolic imagery meant, consciously or not, as a veiled threat to abusive husbands and male peers, and a public society that marginalized them.

Also, the working class black women used weapons in their violent conflicts. Mamia Council assaulted and cut James Clark with a razor. Clark, too seriously injured to attend court, maintained a cut from the altercation “extending across his forehead around the back of his neck cutting through his right ear.”<sup>55</sup> When confronted about the incident in court, Council very openly and clearly admitted her part in the fight and in causing the injury. Finally, on occasion these women continued their fighting from the streets into the courtroom. In January of 1897, Rosa King and Mary Jane Jordan broke into a fight right before Justice Buntin.<sup>56</sup> Whether directed towards each other or towards men in simple altercations or bloody fights, the working class black women of Wilmington added a violent nature to the “disorderly” conduct they exhibited to demonstrate their strength to fight back against abuse, and ultimately redefining the lines of marriage and the private sphere. For traditional ideals called for domestic issues to be handled privately, but these women perhaps took their private issues between husband and wife to the public streets transforming the boundaries of societal spheres.

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<sup>55</sup> “A Serious Cutting Affair,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. August 13, 1886.

<sup>56</sup> “Magistrate’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington N.C. January 1, 1897.

Wilmington's white press created the assumption of black women as dangerous by describing the violence of working class black women in resisting arrest, and in altercations against men and each other. An image made available to the citizens of Wilmington through the public transcript of the newspaper. Rumors circulated that accused and suspected black men of raping white women. While black men were the focus of rape charges and other outrages, Wilmington's white press found a way to continue raising white fears concerning the dangerous behavior of African Americans by reporting on the disruptive violent behavior of the city's working class black women. Perhaps such reports served as an outlet for white supremacists to create the female version of the black beast, a dangerous "heathen" plaguing Wilmington society. John Gilmore and his wife Nancy were known for their frequent fights in the streets while black women like Mary Howard and Winnie Loftin were found guilty of fighting with deadly weapons.<sup>57</sup> Continually reporting on incidents as these on the front page of the city's Morning Star, allowed white newspapers to strip these women of womanhood and further intensify the idea of a violent and threatening black race endangering their "homes," a term including the city of Wilmington. The idea developed that the city's African Americans were not beneficial to Wilmington, as fusion politics suggested, but were a deterrent to an orderly society. The publication of this type of unruly behavior by the city's working class black women served as a vehicle to further validate white fears of vicious black behavior, and the presence of such aggressive people as now "full members" of the New South structure.

The working class black women of Wilmington created a politics of recognition through their behavior on the streets, in part to assert their own definition of womanhood and demand

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<sup>57</sup> "Mayor's Court," *Wilmington Morning Star*, Wilmington, N.C. January 25, 1888.  
"Criminal Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. November 14, 1893.  
"Mayor's Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. August 5, 1880.

protection. Physical abuse and attacks may have been a common feature these women faced from their husbands and from others. In January of 1882, a wife accused her husband of beating her, while in February of 1883 a white man “badly bruised and crippled” a black woman on her way home from church.<sup>58</sup> In August of 1890, Clara New was shot by Julius Bloodworth.<sup>59</sup> A witness to the murder testified that “they were playing, and the next thing I knew a pistol was fired.”<sup>60</sup> In 1884, Edward Thomas committed assault with a deadly weapon upon Frances Moore near the intersection of Chestnut and Water streets.<sup>61</sup> Thomas became jealous when he saw Moore with another man, and “commenced cursing and threatening her, finally drawing a sheath knife and flourishing it and swearing that he could cut her open.”<sup>62</sup> Finally, in September of 1898, Charles Taylor, Lizzie Barnes, Ella Hunter, and George Barnes were called before Justice Borneman due to a family quarrel.<sup>63</sup> Danielle McGuire argues that the rape and physical violence toward black women served to “enforce the rules of racial and economic hierarchy.”<sup>64</sup> Violence against black women had “been a feature of Southern race politics since slavery.”<sup>65</sup> Like the black women within McGuire’s research, the working class black women of Wilmington forged their own political outcries and used their street behavior as weapons in which to call attention to their abuse and that they were strong and capable of fighting back. Issues they chose to take to the public streets ultimately redefined the lines between the private and public spheres of the Victorian era. In September of 1882, the “disobedient wife” openly resisted her husband “with

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<sup>58</sup> “Colored Woman Assaulted on the Street,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. February 2, 1883.

<sup>59</sup> “A Fatal Pistol Shot,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. August 16, 1890.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. October 3, 1884.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. September 4, 1898.

<sup>64</sup> Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Black Power* (Vintage Books, 2010), xix..

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

all her strength and energy she possessed.”<sup>66</sup> Mamia Council also openly and freely admitted to cutting James Clark with a razor in the streets when asked.<sup>67</sup> The working class black women of Wilmington demonstrated a politics of recognition that attempted to counter the image of Victorian womanhood and sought protection against the abuse they faced on the streets from white and black peers, and within their homes by publicly and openly protesting working conditions and fighting against men, taking part in male altercations and violently fighting each other for all to witness. These women perhaps sought to redefine the lines between public and private space. No longer would their suffering be hidden behind the closed doors of the home, but such blemishes upon an “orderly” society brought into the public eye to assert their womanhood within Wilmington as citizens of the New South; a citizenship that entitled them to protection.

So what made Wilmington’s working class black women disorderly according to the types of actions discussed in this chapter? During the 1880s and 1890s, white newspapers of the city grouped these women into various categories to define what constituted unruly behavior. Ambiguous descriptions, outrageous fines, and violence are only a few of the types of behaviors that captured the actions of Wilmington working class black women. At times, the papers did not provide much more detail than the title of “disorderly” to define the women. Individuals as Eliza Blackwell resisted and insulted her arresting officers as she was pulled from the streets. The actions of these women did not go unpunished either, as they faced fines of five dollars or more or time spent in jail. Therefore, during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, according

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<sup>66</sup> “A Determined Husband and Disobedient Wife,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. Vol XXX no. 148, September 13, 1882.

<sup>67</sup> “A Serious Cutting Affair,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. August 13, 1886.

to Wilmington's leading newspapers, the city's working class black women displayed rebellious behavior in the streets.

Although Wilmington's white press found their own gain in their portrayal of working class black women, these females crafted their own politics of recognition that existed within the hidden transcript of the newspapers. Behind the white media's "disorderly" and unruly jargon to characterize the working class black women of Wilmington lay a political world created on the city streets. Wilmington's working class black women possibly chose to commit behavior, understood to be deemed unruly by their white superiors, in public, in clear view for all to witness their resistance to authority in order to receive the recognition they perhaps desired. Robin Kelley argued that too often a focus is placed upon "how" people participate, rather than "why" they act politically. He stated that "by traditional definition the question of what is political hinges on whether or not groups are involved in elections, political parties, or grass-roots social movements."<sup>68</sup> But in order to discover the politics of the oppressed, such as Wilmington's black working class women, our focus must be shifted to "what motivated disenfranchised black working people to struggle and what strategies they developed."<sup>69</sup> The working class black women of Wilmington were motivated by their desire to be recognized as women on their own terms, and citizens entitled to protection in both the public and private spheres. They resisted a societal structure that had denied them the traditional title of womanhood, and thus the right to protection under the law as citizens of the New South. Therefore, they perhaps sought to alter their city's societal structure to claim their identity as women and citizens. A citizenship that demanded the respect and attention of their civic institutions to provide the protection in which they were entitled.

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<sup>68</sup> Robin, Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 9.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*



Finally, the working class black women of Wilmington moved beyond the label “disorderly conduct” to try their hand at more organized politics within the streets, seemingly different from the outlet of unruly street behavior. In 1881, a group of black women who worked as domestics met for the purpose of forming their own labor union. The women “resolved to strike and established a code of rates and wages which are far beyond the pockets of the majority of our people.”<sup>70</sup> In 1886, a group of black female servants maintained this union mindset, and met to form their own chapter of the Knights of Labor advocating for “increased pay and shorter hours of labor.”<sup>71</sup> Finally, in 1891 a colored woman campaigned for prohibition on Second Street near Princess and was “harangued before a crowd of men and boys until she was induced to move on.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, Wilmington’s “disorderly” working class black women were part of a larger political culture. While the Knights of Labor attempted to organize within the city, “racial intimidation and the threat of firing forced them to work in conditions of secrecy and fear. They made little headway.”<sup>73</sup> In the late nineteenth century “legislation to support worker’s rights to organize or to limit the working hours of children and women got nowhere.”<sup>74</sup> These women were politically charged during this period. While attempts of forming labor organizations and political campaigns are few in number, the streets remained the stage upon which to perform daily acts of resistance to what was expected of them by the white culture. Although they were part of a much larger political culture, as seen with the Knights of Labor, the working class black women of Wilmington wanted and needed the public stage of the streets to grab the attention of Wilmington citizens and leaders. Attempts at organized politics left them at a loss, short of what

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<sup>70</sup> “Female Strikers,” The Daily Review, Wilmington, N.C. October 13, 1881.

<sup>71</sup> “Female Knights of Labor,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. June 18, 1886.

<sup>72</sup> “Local Dots,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. January 7, 1891.

<sup>73</sup> Timothy Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed*, 168.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

they needed to be recognized as women on their own terms and as citizens who deserved protection both privately and publicly. Thus, denied traditional arenas in which to practice political activism to bring about change, Wilmington's working class black women took to the public streets, ultimately becoming "disorderly."

### CHAPTER THREE OUR VOICE, OUR WEAPON

During the 1880s and 1890s, the working class black women of Wilmington created their own politics of recognition within the streets of their city while a white press of the city gained power through the depiction of the working class women as “disorderly.” However, the working class black women, revealed in the hidden transcript of the newspaper reports, demonstrated a strong presence of black female political activism. Their “disorderly” behavior may have been an attempt to call attention to their own political outcries asserting their womanhood and demanding protection. They created an “unobtrusive realm of political struggle,” “headline grabbing protests, demonstrations, and rebellions” through their unruly behavior that they waged daily.<sup>1</sup> These political actions became as Scott stated like “infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum,” invisible “in large part by design—a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power.”<sup>2</sup> However, ambiguous descriptions, the sentencing of outrageous fines and violence are not the only types of reports and actions that served as power for the city’s white press, and vehicles for the politics of black working class women. These women exhibited several other types of “boisterous” behavior in the streets that can be read as both public and hidden transcriptional meanings. Their ideas of how to assert themselves and their roles as African Americans and as women in Wilmington, and thus in the New South may have become their political vision, and the streets their arena in which to protest and demand recognition.

Wilmington’s working class black women also contained layers of assertion and protection behind their politics of recognition. In July of 1880 The Wilmington Morning Star ran

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<sup>1</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, 1990), 183.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

a short news report focused upon the “disorderly” conduct of a “colored” woman. Susan Frank was charged for using “a considerable amount of profane language” in what was called “Paddy’s Hollow.”<sup>3</sup> In 1885, Mary Davis found herself charged for being drunk and “disorderly” in the streets, and required to work out a fine of ten dollars in which she was unable to pay.<sup>4</sup> In 1897, Maggie Hypsher was granted a divorce from her husband.<sup>5</sup> Actions as these continued to make black working class women worthy of front page news. Susan Frank and Mary Davis did not exhibit ladylike behavior while Josephine McKoy and Maggie Hypsher broke with the maternal ideals of the Victorian period. Just as the women who violently fought in the streets, women who committed these actions were not orderly in the eyes of Wilmington’s white media at all. Like the ambiguous reports, fines, and violent fights discussed in the last chapter, profane language, drunken behavior, resisting arrest, and divorce served as other forms of “disorderly” actions that the Wilmington’s working class black women displayed on the streets to craft a politics of recognition.

Many working class women throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries actively participated in strikes shaping their own politics of recognition. Gary Fink argued that within the 1914 Fulton Bag strike in Atlanta, Georgia ethnic conflict, social and economic reform, regional and sectional differences, and gender divisions existed.<sup>6</sup> A woman by the name of Ola Delight Smith took “responsibility for mobilizing Fulton’s bag workers and leading the strike.”<sup>7</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall found that women workers would become “outraged when they

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<sup>3</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. July 24, 1880.

<sup>4</sup> “City Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. November 18, 1885.

<sup>5</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. April 14, 1897.

<sup>6</sup> Gary Fink, *The Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills Strike of 1914-1915: Espionage, Labor Conflict, and New South Industrial Relations* (Cornell University Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

found their wage earning roles belittled and their jobs suddenly taken away.”<sup>8</sup> The women of Elizabethton, Tennessee, created a “distinctive form of collective action” and used language and gestures as “points of entry to a culture.”<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the women within the 1929 Loray Mill Strike in Gastonia N.C. protested against working conditions in speech, language, and dress that in turn requested a redefinition of gender roles and aided in shaping the social, political, and economic relations of the New South. Although the women within the Loray strike were unionized, the manner which they acted holds prevalence to this thesis. Similar to the women within the Loray strike, Wilmington’s working class black women used foul language and other “disorderly” behaviors to forge their politics of recognition with the public sphere. As Alice Kessler-Harris stated working women have always “faced a constant tension between home and the marketplace.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, they have to “cast their notions of womanhood more broadly to encompass whatever was required to contribute to their family’s welfare,” even display what could be deemed “disorderly” behavior.<sup>11</sup>

While strikes are normally about economic matters, the Elizabethton, Loray, and Fulton Bag strikes also represented moments when women asserted themselves and sought to expand or alter their identity within their society. In the case of these strikes, these women through language, dress, and their choice to protest demonstrated that women, like men, can move outside the home to successfully provide for their families, even if that means taking their concerns to the streets. Similar to these later women who redefined womanhood through their

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<sup>8</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 311-312.

<sup>9</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol 73, no. 2 (September 1986), 357.

<sup>10</sup> Alice Kessler Harris, *Women Have Always Worked: A Historical Overview* (The Feminist Press, 1993), 10.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (University of Illinois Press, 1997), 148.

verbal assertions, labor conflicts, and strikes, Wilmington's working class black women created their own notions of womanhood and demanded recognition by exhibiting unruly behavior within the city streets.

Through drunken behavior, resistance to arrest, foul language, and other miscellaneous unruly actions Wilmington's "disorderly" working class black women continued to be labeled unmanageable by the city's white press. However, these women by exhibiting these behaviors displayed their politics of recognition in a relentless verbal campaign. The public transcript, and thus defiant connotation given to these women, served a purpose for Wilmington's white community/media. But most importantly the hidden transcript revealed black working class women forging a politics of recognition on the streets. Their political motivations, as Robin Kelley emphasized, were embedded within their "issues of economic well being-safety, pleasure, cultural expression, sexuality, freedom of mobility, and other facets of daily life."<sup>12</sup> The politics of these women were not separate from their life experiences, and they strove to "roll back constraints and exercise power over or create some space within, the institutions and social relationships" that dominated their lives.<sup>13</sup>

During the 1880s and 1890s, The Morning Star's description of the city's black working class women focused on intoxication. On April 17, 1883, The Morning Star reported that Laney Moore indulged "too frequently in alcoholic stimulants and then" exercised "her lungs on the public streets, to an extent that her noise was voted a nuisance."<sup>14</sup> The city locked Josephine Lewis up for thirty days in failure to pay a fine of twenty dollars for acting drunk and unruly on

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<sup>12</sup> Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (Free Press, 1996), 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> "Mayor's Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. April 17, 1883.

the streets.<sup>15</sup> Like Lewis, Lilly Elliot, Lena Persall, Mary Davis, Betty Lewis, Juliana Hunter, Alice Simpson, and Lizzie Floyd found themselves charged with “disorderly” conduct for being drunk in the city streets.<sup>16</sup> Both Lila Cox and Martha Wescott were found “drunk and down” in the streets.<sup>17</sup> In February of 1883, The Wilmington Morning Star reported on the drunk behavior of Susan Frank, Laura Haggett, and Laura Hall. The paper described these women as “damsels,” and felt compelled to also include details of their figure as “neither large nor small,” within the report. Wilmington’s working class black women challenged this idea of womanhood by bringing their drunk and unruly behavior to the streets. These women were found guilty and faced a fine for their behavior.<sup>18</sup> Some women, like Mary Lewis, were repeat drunken offenders upon the streets.<sup>19</sup> At times these working class black women kept the white society of Wilmington busy in reports of their drunken behavior. Eliza Blackwell found drunk and “disorderly” resisted and insulted a police officer.<sup>20</sup> Mary Eliza Lively became “charged with being tipsy and acting very disorderly on the public streets.”<sup>21</sup> To spectators and a white press, these drunken women displayed unruly and unladylike behavior. But these working class black women, although a bit tipsy, chose to bring such defiant behavior to the public streets to perhaps

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<sup>15</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. May 28, 1887.

<sup>16</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. May 12, 1887.

“Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. May 26, 1887.

“Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. April 17, 1883.

“City Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. November 8, 1885.

“Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. July 27, 1884.

“City Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. December 9, 1881.

Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. February 19, 1896.

<sup>17</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. August 13, 1893.

“Local Dots,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. April 23, 1890.

<sup>18</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. February 15, 1883.

<sup>19</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. May 3, 1883.

<sup>20</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. July 4, 1880.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

assert their own definition of womanhood that did not fit the mold of the self-contained, quiet, delicate woman in alignment with Victorian ideals.

The working class black women of Wilmington also found themselves guilty of “disorderly” conduct for choosing to use profane language in the streets. For instance, Mary Ann Davis became a nuisance and used “language not proper or becoming on the public streets.”<sup>22</sup> Lucy Fisher, charged with “acting very boisterous,” did not only use her “tongue to great advantage” but hurled pots, kettles, and other items” about in a most indiscriminate manner, and also flourished an axe and threatened to hurt somebody with it.”<sup>23</sup> Likewise, Virginia Brown was also fined for swearing and “being loud and boisterous.”<sup>24</sup> Eliza Blackwell, Amelia Bradley, and Mary Eliza Lively insulted officers while Laney Moore, charged with drunken behavior, decided to “exercise her lungs on the public streets.”<sup>25</sup> Lively continued to use a profane tongue as it was decided to put her in a “dark cell” after “some threatening remarks she made as judgement was being pronounced in her case.”<sup>26</sup> Mary Huggins was brought into the Magistrate’s court for slandering, and in July of 1880 Susan Frank was arraigned for using “a considerable amount of profane language in Paddy’s Hollow,” and in October of 1887 Celia Osborne abused and insulted Rev. Mr. Kelly.<sup>27</sup> This behavior challenged traditional womanhood, as Victorian ideals viewed women as proper and quiet, not exercising profane language in the public streets.

The reports of the drunken behavior and foul language of the women allowed a white press of Wilmington the access to more power and control through the public transcript. By

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<sup>22</sup> “A Nuisance,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. October 23, 1880.

<sup>23</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. July 4, 1880.

<sup>24</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. January 17, 1884.

<sup>25</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. July 4, 1880.

“Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. April 17, 1883.

“Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington N.C. April 8, 1887.

<sup>26</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. July 4, 1880.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*



publicly discussing and reporting on this drunken behavior and language, Wilmington's white newspaper created the foundation for the idea that the working class black women, could not control themselves. Howard Odum stated that part of the southern credo believed that African Americans were in nature irresponsible and immoral, inferior, and untrustworthy.<sup>28</sup> For example, Laney Moore, according to the Wilmington Morning Star indulged "too frequently in alcoholic stimulants," and then became a "nuisance" on the streets due to raising her voice, while Mary Eliza Lively became charged with being tipsy and acting very disorderly on the public streets.<sup>29</sup> Mary Ann Davis used "language not proper or becoming on the public streets, and Virginia Brown was fined for swearing and being "boisterous."<sup>30</sup> Such reports served as a way to enforce notions that the black women, could not function as "appropriate" citizens within the emerging New South society. They were unfit for broad civic action. These reports robbed the working class black women of their right to an identity as citizens and as women. It also kept them "beyond the pale of womanhood" as done since slavery and fueled the racial stigma for their entire race.<sup>31</sup> Such reports on the inability of these women to control their drink raised questions of the danger they posed not just to themselves, but to those around them. Therefore, these reports of drunken behavior and foul language set the black working class women up as containing a lack of work ethic to operate in an "orderly" society. They served as a way for a white community to justify white fears of the inability of African Americans to function as "proper" citizens, and the working class black females as women, within the southern structure,

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<sup>28</sup> Howard Odum, *Race and Rumors of Race: Challenge to American Crisis* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1943), 20.

<sup>29</sup> "Mayor's Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. April 17, 1883. "Mayor's Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. July 4, 1880.

<sup>30</sup> "A Nuisance," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. October 23, 1880.

<sup>31</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (W.W. Norton and Company, 1985), 76.

and validation for their desire to protect themselves from such an “unmanageable” race in a time when racial conflicts were intensifying.

Nevertheless, the working class black women of Wilmington wanted to claim their rights as citizens of the New South and the identity of womanhood, but on their own terms. However, their definition of citizenship meant more than claiming womanhood, but also the right to protection. In *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America*, Nancy Isenberg discussed how in order to ensure rights as citizens, female activists of the antebellum period sought self-protection that provided a relationship with the state and active role in “defending and securing their own protection.”<sup>32</sup> No longer would how they behaved be dictated by a white culture and growing black middle class within their society. These women were bent on redefining womanhood, and demanding recognition and protection as citizens of the New South. Perhaps one way in which Wilmington’s black working class women sought these changes was through drunken behavior and foul language in the streets. Lily Elliot, Lena Pearsall, Mary Davis, and Betty Lewis chose to display their drunken behavior on the public streets while Mary Huggins and Susan Frank used foul language.<sup>33</sup> Laney Moore combined both behaviors as she was charged for being drunk, and then “decided to exercise her lungs on the public streets.”<sup>34</sup> Their unruly behavior culturally redefined the lines of womanhood and demanded civic institutions recognize them. During the Victorian era of the late nineteenth century, intoxication and the use of foul language were not traits that characterized a proper lady. By exhibiting these unruly behaviors within the public

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<sup>32</sup> Nancy Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 39.

<sup>33</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. May 26, 1887.

“Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. April 17, 1883.

“City Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. November 8, 1885.

Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. July 24, 1880.

Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. July 4, 1880.

<sup>34</sup> “Mayor’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. April 8, 1887.

sphere, Wilmington's working class black women challenged a traditional notion of womanhood to assert their own, in stating that those behaviors existed within the womanhood they would be claiming on their terms.

Akin to these women, female workers of later eras protested for their rights and identity through their language and other actions. In the 1929 Loray Mill Strike in Gastonia, N.C. mill women marched down the streets in men's overalls and caps, "calling cops all kinds of dirty things."<sup>35</sup> One woman carried her baby in one arm and a stick in the other while protesting.<sup>36</sup> Also, Mr. Charles Corley attempted to wrestle a rifle from a guardsman during a protest, while Bertha Thompson beat one of the guardsmen breaking through a troop line.<sup>37</sup> The working class women within the Loray Strike felt the steady decline in working and living conditions and the loss of income just as the male employees in the Loray Mill. While these women were part of a larger, organized, political labor protest they defied their expected gender roles in behavior and language, as did the working class women of Wilmington decades earlier. For Wilmington's working class black women, drunken behavior could not be only a state of intoxication nor foul language a marker of their inferiority, but political outcries. These outcries they perhaps knew did not align with expected behavior and would catch the attention of the city's civic institutions to recognize their definition of womanhood.

Thus, drunken behavior and foul language served in as an assertion of redefined womanhood within Wilmington's working class black women's politics of recognition. This verbal assertion demanded attention to their desire for protection as women and as citizens, but

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<sup>35</sup> Patrick Huber, "Mill Mother's Lament: Ella May Wiggins and the Gastonia Textile Strike of 1929," *Southern Cultures*, 15.3 (2009), 90.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> John Salmond, *Gastonia 1929: The Story of the Loray Strike* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 30.

behavior that also in itself redefined the image of womanhood against the Victorian notions of their time. These women may have known that their actions would capture public attention. Actions not deemed to be ladylike, nor part of the qualities of a “decent” woman, and in that regard a “proper” citizen. But with these continual public demonstrations of such behaviors, Wilmington’s working class black women made the statement that they were there and present as citizens of the New South, and yes they were women, a title they would be claiming. But their terms of womanhood were not going to be confined to the control of white rule and the ideals of a growing black middle class.

Besides drunken behavior and foul language, Wilmington’s working class black women also sought to break the bonds and ideals of marriage and attempted to readjust the lines and claim the identity of womanhood through how they treated their marriages. In 1887 The Wilmington Morning Star reported that “divorce cases in the superior court for this county are getting to be rather common.”<sup>38</sup> Alice J. King, Patience Merrick, and Maggie Hyspher filed for divorce from their husbands.<sup>39</sup> In 1887 Robert and May Williams had been married but became separated, and it was reported that May had been living “unlawfully with George Ritter.”<sup>40</sup> Finally, in October of 1880 Mary Brown was arrested for being “too married,” or for bigamy.<sup>41</sup> Like their drunken street behavior, Wilmington’s working class black women perhaps displayed “disorderly” behavior publicly by resisting and reshaping maternal and matrimonial roles. During the 1880s and 1890s, the working class black women of Wilmington did as Laura

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<sup>38</sup> “Suits for Divorce,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. October 7, 1887.

<sup>39</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. October 1, 1887.

Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. January 27, 1893.

Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. April 14, 1897.

<sup>40</sup> “Suits for Divorce,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. October 7, 1887.

<sup>41</sup> “Arrested for Bigamy,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. October 29, 1880.

Edwards suggested in her own research, and “cast their notions of womanhood more broadly.”<sup>42</sup> These black women asserted their own definition of womanhood through particular behaviors, such as the mistreatment of marriage. Edwards also stated that “legal marriage and family law were part of a patriarchal framework that had justified the subordination of marginalized men, as well as women.”<sup>43</sup> In the public reports of divorce, these black women proclaimed that a long and happy marriage were not a distinct marker of feminine identity. They could obtain the title of womanhood without becoming what society dictated they should be. Wilmington’s working class black women sought through the “disrespect” of marriage to alter the definition of matrimonial womanhood and “infuse their own ideas about men and women’s rights and societal roles.”<sup>44</sup>

Through the public transcript, along with drunk behavior and profane language, the reports of The Morning Star in Wilmington found an outlet to deny working class black women the rights of womanhood by creating the image that they were improper mothers and wives, and thus disrespectful towards the institution of marriage and motherhood. Alice J. King and Maggie Hyspher filed for divorce while May Williams committed adultery by living with another man, and Mary Brown was arrested for bigamy.<sup>45</sup> According to the reports, these working class black women perhaps did not live up to the idea of a proper mother figure as a female nor that of a wife. Since slavery, black women were expected to be “submissive because they were black,”

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<sup>42</sup> Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (University of Illinois Press, 1997), 148.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 185.

<sup>45</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. October 1, 1887.

Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. April 14, 1897.

“Suits for Divorce,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. October 7, 1887.

“Arrested for Bigamy,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. October 29, 1880.

and before the Civil War slaves.<sup>46</sup> Deborah Gray White stated that “black in a white society,” and “woman in a society ruled by men,” black women “had the least formal power.”<sup>47</sup> The nation following the war “was not prepared to respect their citizenship, much less their womanhood.”<sup>48</sup> Reports on divorce and even bigamy set the stage that these African American women were not deserving of womanhood, let alone citizenship, while in the meantime their middle class sisters were trying to reveal how the “best women and men” deserved such a status. Such reported behavior of working class black women demonstrated to a white community that these women did not contain maternal instincts and care for children and husbands in the way that they should as women. In the same regards, during this period by divorcing their husbands and breaking the bonds of marriage they were violating a Victorian ideal critical to the image of femininity, of a woman’s place in the household and at her husband’s side, focused on restraint, and keeping issues privately within the household. By publicly reporting such incidents, Wilmington’s Morning Star kept working class black women confined to the “identity limbo” that slave law had placed them in decades before; a place within society where they just were not considered “proper” citizens and denied protection, but also barred entry into the realm of womanhood in society.

Besides profane language, the working class black women of Wilmington displayed “defiant” behavior through theft. Loretta Williams engaged in stealing a pair of blankets from Alice Sampson, while Lizzie Floyd stole a mattress and other articles from Julia Ford.<sup>49</sup> Mary Ray, Annie Freeman, and Fanny Baker were arraigned and brought in for committing theft by

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<sup>46</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 16.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 162.

<sup>49</sup> “Magistrate’s Court,” Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. March 20, 1884. Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. May 3, 1892.

receiving stolen goods.<sup>50</sup> Lastly, black women, such as Ida Mulligan, Becky Claridy, Mildred Davis, Mary Cronly, Mary Crawford, and once again Alice Sampson exhibited unruly behavior by being found guilty of larceny.<sup>51</sup> Just as through their other acts of daily resistance the working class black women committed theft and became deemed disruptive and unmanageable, not characteristics of proper, orderly women according to traditional notions.

A series of miscellaneous categories also labeled these women as unruly- a vehicle they ultimately used for their own politics of recognition. Ill house-keeping became a marker of unruly conduct for Wilmington's working class black women. Laura Taylor and Francis Outlaw were brought in on the "charge of keeping a disorderly house on Castle between Second and Third Streets," and in April of 1889 Ida Chambers, Amoreet Hawkins, and Mary Fareer "for keeping a house of ill fame."<sup>52</sup> Louise Moore, Mary J. Hayes, Fannie Holmes, Amy Davis, Alice Cowan, Mary Houstin, Nancy Keith, Carrie Houstin, Martha Wescott, and Matilda Howe violated the sanitary laws of the city.<sup>53</sup> Wilmington's white media also characterized women as "disorderly" for not working enough. For instance, Alice Hall was arrested in that she was "a person who is able to labor and that she has no apparent means of sustenance and that she spends her time in dissipation and sauntering without employment."<sup>54</sup> Along these same lines of unruly behavior Mary Williams sold liquor on Sundays, Martha Sanders carried a concealed weapon,

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<sup>50</sup> "Magistrate's Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. November 17, 1881.

Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. March 12, 1896.

<sup>51</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. May 17, 1889.

"Magistrate's Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. November 24, 1895.

"Criminal Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. September 22, 1893.

"City Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. August 3, 1895.

<sup>52</sup> "Mayor's Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. April 9, 1889.  
Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. July 19, 1880.

<sup>53</sup> "Mayor's Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. April 19, 1889.  
Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. January 27, 1891.

<sup>54</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. July 21, 1885.

Hannah Greene was believed to be insane, and Amelia Bradley gambled.<sup>55</sup> These miscellaneous actions perhaps demonstrated a survival of the spirit for the working class black women's street politics, and their efforts to maintain their political energy and activism. From breaking the sanitary laws of the city to using foul language and exhibiting drunken behavior the working class black women of Wilmington demonstrated "disorderly" behavior according to the reports of the Morning Star.

Finally, at times, the rebellious street behavior of Wilmington's working class black women escalated as they refused particular parts of their sentencing or struck back at officers in the language of the streets. In part, the resistance to an arrest may have revealed a sense of political security. In the 1890s Fusion politics created a safe space for biracial political activism. Thus, Wilmington's working class black women may have felt safe to step out into the streets, resist arrest, and play out their survival politics. For example, Becky Claridy resisted an officer while being arrested for unruly behavior, likewise Louisia Robinson also contested her arresting officer.<sup>56</sup> Both Robinson and Claridy faced a fine of twenty dollars or jail for their actions.<sup>57</sup> After being caught and found guilty of acting unruly in the city streets, these working class black women continued to display such behavior by challenging their arresting officers and the conditions of their sentences.

Through other deemed unruly behavior, through The Morning Star created, a reality of Wilmington's black working class women as dangerous. In validating fears of the presence of

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<sup>55</sup> "Criminal Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. June 3, 1883.

Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. August 2, 1890.

Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. April 6, 1895.

"Criminal Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. November 24, 1893.

<sup>56</sup> "City Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. February 27, 1895.

"City Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. February 11, 1890.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.



black citizens in the New South, The Morning Star's public transcript fueled notions that African Americans were not deserving of American citizenship nor social recognition politically, economically, or culturally. They presented for themselves the need for an adjustment to the southern political and social structure. Howard Odum argued that “the heart of the southern credo was manifest in the central theme-‘the Negro is a Negro, and nothing more.’”<sup>58</sup> Alongside that, Odum stated that the South believed African Americans were an inferior race, “and that it was logical that they should be kept in an inferior place,” and “that the Negro was by nature inclined to criminal behavior, partly because of his animal nature and partly because of his irresponsibility and immorality.”<sup>59</sup> Although this was an era of possibilities with industrialization and Fusion politics, white supremacists maintained the mentality discussed in Odum’s own research. White society would go to great lengths to “keep the Negro in place at any costs,” especially when African Americans started to become a “threat” to white supremacy and control.<sup>60</sup> Through the public transcript a white community generated “a sense of exaggeration that turned what was real-that is, African American discontent-into something fantastic.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, these reports can be read as a way a white community sought to “trivialize African American behavior,” as that of the working class black women, to alert whites “to black anger,” and “reassure each other that the system of white supremacy” was indeed needed.<sup>62</sup>

However, the working class black women of Wilmington practiced a politics of recognition by resisting officers in the streets. Amelia Bradley cursed her arresting officer, while

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<sup>58</sup> Howard Odum, *Race and Rumors of Race*, 22.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 19-20.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

<sup>61</sup> Bryant Simon, *Fearing Eleanor: Racial Anxieties and Wartime Rumors in the American South 1940-1945*, *Labor in the Modern South*, Glen Eskew (University of Georgia Press, 2001), 96.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*.

Mary Eliza Lively not only verbally abused the police but physically fought back.<sup>63</sup> These women by resisting the police and parts of their sentencing publicly protested against the racial control used through fines and incarceration. This type of protest made known their feelings toward the city's process of justice, that they were also citizens and were not going to tolerate the attempts to enforce a racial hierarchy in the city. Therefore, these working class black women protested for their right to carve their own identity within the city, as citizens and women on their own terms.

During the 1880s and 1890s, white newspapers of the city grouped Wilmington's working class black women into an array of categories to describe their unruly behavior. Drunken behavior, divorce, profane language, theft, selling liquor on Sundays, and even breaking the city's sanitary laws are only several of the behaviors Wilmington's working class black women exhibited in the streets. Together the types of behavior reported in The Morning Star warranted and validated white notions that a more strict structure of "laws" needed to be enforced to guide the black and white races of the New South. The public reports of these behaviors in Wilmington's Morning Star served two purposes. Such descriptions and reports fueled white power within the city and provided benefits for a white culture/media. However, at the same time in the hidden transcript were politics shaped by these women through their street behavior, politics of the dispossessed. Evaluating both the effects of the public and hidden transcript revealed the full impact the behavior of Wilmington's working class black women and their politics of recognition, had on the world around them.

The public transcript served as a public service announcement that something more was needed to protect a white community from this "heathen" "immoral" race, and also policies and

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<sup>63</sup> Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. July 4, 1880.  
"Mayor's Court," Wilmington Morning Star, Wilmington, N.C. April 8, 1887.

regulations enforced that would direct these working class black women, and thus African American race, how they should act. As the South shifted and reshaped itself in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the southern landscape became charged with racial tension. The Morning Star's served a political function by expressing the “fears” and “apprehensions” of a white community, and began to “point to the established way of life” they desired.<sup>64</sup> White supremacy and white society strived to keep up appearances, and therefore particular ideals, to maintain their form of domination within Wilmington.<sup>65</sup> James C. Scott argued that the public transcript is “designed to be impressive to affirm and naturalize the power of dominant elites, and conceal the dirty linen of their rule.”<sup>66</sup> By controlling the public stage through The Morning Star and describing the behavior of the city’s working class black women, a white community created an image that they wanted of these women. Therefore, the public transcript of the women’s street behavior became a “respectable performance” by The Morning Star's white culture that maintained their power, denigrated the efforts of the black middle class, and promoted the need for a more organized law system to “control” these women, and thus black race, that would ultimately become known as Jim Crow.<sup>67</sup>

However, interpreting the hidden transcript of The Morning Star's reports revealed that Wilmington’s working class black women formed a politics of recognition on the streets that redefined womanhood and demanded protection. Thus, “the hidden transcript comes in this way, to be the repository of the assertions whose open expression would be dangerous.”<sup>68</sup> The actions evaluated in this chapter depicted Wilmington’s working class black women’s politics for social

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<sup>64</sup> Bryant Simon, “Fearing Eleanor,” 86.

<sup>65</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, 70.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

recognition in their verbal assertion of who they were as women. These women fought and shaped their identity not only as citizens of Wilmington but also as women. Deborah Gray White commented that “in the nineteenth century when the nation was preoccupied with keeping women in the home and protecting them, only enslaved women were so totally unprotected by men or by law...only black women had their womanhood so totally denied.”<sup>69</sup> Black women in the late nineteenth century “wanted all the rights of citizenship and the right to define themselves as women on their own terms.”<sup>70</sup> During the 1880s and 1890s, black women were perhaps focused upon tearing down the stereotypes of mammy and jezebel that had in earlier years stripped them not only of an identity as citizens but also as women. As a result, the South’s white community faced a “black woman they did not recognize,” a woman “aggressive in her defense of her freedom,” and “intent on making her dreams of freedom come true.”<sup>71</sup>

The working class black women of Wilmington exhibited a politics of recognition through their “disorderly” behavior in the city streets and public eye. But in order to understand such politics we have to look at where these women were political, rather than where we were taught they had to be. This required broadening the definition of politics beyond traditional areas and actions of political activism. Unlike the women within the 1881 Atlanta black washerwomen’s strike, Wilmington’s working class black pursued individual action in the city. The streets of the Wilmington represented some of the “violent aspects of race and gender oppression” that impacted how they physically and economically survived and identified themselves as citizens and women.<sup>72</sup> Like the “Birmingham Untouchables” in Robin Kelley’s work, Wilmington’s working class black women found that public space of the streets “afforded

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<sup>69</sup> Deborah Gray, White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 162.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 169.

<sup>72</sup> Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 75.

more opportunities than the workplace,” or the privacy of the home for that matter, “to engage in acts of resistance.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, the “disorderly” behavior of these women must not be seen as a marker of immorality and irresponsibility as portrayed by the city’s white media, but politics of the black working class women who turned the public space of the city streets into a contested terrain of class, race, and gender through their unruly actions.

This group of women expressed politics in response to an official white culture that demeaned them. The behavior they displayed and the arena in which they chose to perform were the options they faced to craft and voice their political concerns. Wilmington’s working class black women saw an open door, and they did not waste the opportunity. Only confining our conception of politics to what is traditionally defined, which is political activism through established civic organizations and institutions, and accepting the conclusion that subordinate groups lack a political agenda, missed “the immense political terrain that lies between quiescence and revolt and that, for better or worse, is the political environment of the subject classes.”<sup>74</sup> James C. Scott argued that “infrapolitics may be thought of as an elementary form of politics...the building block for the more elaborate institutionalized political action that could not exist without it.”<sup>75</sup> Consequently, in the late nineteenth century this is exactly what Wilmington’s black working class women’s politics of recognition did for the city.

The power gained through the public transcript of the “disorderly” for a white culture and therein the politics of the women themselves impacted the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot whether they intended to or not. In the late 1890s, a white supremacy campaign swept through North Carolina, much in part to the success of the Fusionist politics. In early 1898 Furnifold Simmons,

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<sup>73</sup> Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 75.

<sup>74</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, 199.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 201.

chair of the Democratic Party, working with Charles Aycock and Josephus Daniels found a way “back to power after the Democratic Party had lost the governor’s seat and the legislature in 1896.”<sup>76</sup> Simmons and his fellow Democrats settled on the idea of “home protection,” in utilizing the idea of rape to scare voters back into the Democratic Party.<sup>77</sup> The slogan “safety of our home,” helped the architects of the white supremacist campaign to raise fears of whites who warned about African American men violating their hope through rape.<sup>78</sup> Wilmington became the “storm center of the White Supremacy movement, and provided fertile ground for the stories of ‘Negro rule and outrages,’” due to its large black population.<sup>79</sup> In the fall of 1898 the state’s white supremacist campaign moved to the streets of Wilmington. Wilmington’s white men began to organize and arm themselves to fight the threat of the black man to their homes and businesses.<sup>80</sup> The “disorderly,” dangerous, unmanageable image of the city’s black working class women set up through the public transcript became the female version of the “black beast rapist” and the “threat” to white homes. Glenda Gilmore remarks that “since Wilmington was a port city with a large black middle class and many African American officials, its white citizens were sitting ducks for Simmon’s white supremacy rhetoric.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Timothy Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed*, 74.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>81</sup> Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina 1896-1920* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 105.

## CONCLUSION: RIOT TO SILENCE

In the fall of 1898, Wilmington white supremacists received the fuel they needed to intensify their campaign through Alexander Manly, the African American editor of the Wilmington Daily Record. In August of 1898 Manly wrote “an inflammatory editorial” in response to a speech urging white men to increase their lynching to protect white women from black rapists.<sup>1</sup> Manly replied that the comments in the speech would be worthwhile if “indeed there was widespread rape of white women by black men. But not every white woman who cried rape was telling the truth.”<sup>2</sup> In fact he suggested that white women desired black men. Manly also added “tell your men that it is no worse for a black man to be intimate with a white woman than for a white man to be intimate with a colored woman.”<sup>3</sup> After a Democratic victory in the 1898 election, racial tensions exploded in the streets of Wilmington. Armed white men marched on Manly’s newspaper office, and set it on fire.<sup>4</sup> After the fire, the white mob encountered a group of black men also armed.<sup>5</sup> A shot was fired, a white man was wounded, and a bloody battle ensued throughout the black section of the city. When the dust settled after the riot, six black men died, and around five hundred African Americans “fled the city to the nearby woods and swamps in fear of their lives.”<sup>6</sup>

In the two decades before the infamous 1898 Wilmington race riot, the city’s working class black women forged a politics of recognition. Finding traditional arenas of political activism closed off to them, these women found the streets their terrain in which to voice their

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Christensen, *The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics: The Personalities, Elections, and Events that Shaped Modern North Carolina* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

politics. Nevertheless, the actions they publicly displayed within the streets such as drunken behavior, divorce, and violence, became labeled “disorderly” by Wilmington’s Morning Star. During the 1880s and 1890s, such reports of unruly behavior served dual purposes through the public and hidden transcripts. A white press perhaps used such reports as a vehicle to limit the power and progress of a black race within the city, by creating the female version of the “black beast.” Thus, shaping the idea that such women were not deserving of womanhood, citizenship, nor the rights of protection that accompanied such titles.

While the “disorderly” reports did not contain a direct voice from the working class black women and often left much to be desired in length and detail, assessing the hidden transcript offered the possibility to find the political voice of these women. Wilmington’s working class black women through these behaviors and “disorderly” descriptions asserted their own definition of womanhood that countered the ideal of the Victorian woman and demanded protection in both the private and public spheres. By actions such as foul language and divorce, these women voiced and articulated their idea of womanhood as assertive and public beings capable of voicing their concerns in the public sphere. Consequently, Wilmington’s working class black women were not able to act like traditional domestic, Victorian women in order to demand the protection they may have desired. By demonstrating violence in the streets and resisting arrest, these women were redefining the lines between the public and private spheres. This redefinition of public and private life brought attention to the abuses the women were facing at home and the oppression of unjust arrests and fines they faced in the public. Wilmington’s working class black women through these “disorderly” behaviors formed politics of recognition in the streets that demanded attention from civic institutions, redefined womanhood, and thus redrew the lines between the public and private spheres.



The political entrance of Wilmington's working class black women into the public streets, in a way, represented an anomaly compared to past racial interaction and relations. Perhaps during the last two decades of the nineteenth century economic, social, and political changes in Wilmington granted these working class women access into the streets. In the 1890s, North Carolina Fusionists attempted "one of the most daring and radical experiments in southern political history."<sup>7</sup> As this Fusionist experiment reached Wilmington, legislation passed by such leaders focused just not upon Populist concerns, but also that of African Americans and their suffrage rights.<sup>8</sup> The interracial nature of Fusion created a sense of security for African Americans to step out and become politically active in their community, along with the promise of new beginnings that accompanied industrialization. However, due to their position within the socio-economic class Wilmington's working class black women lacked the education and social standing, as their middle class counterparts, to serve in top leadership positions throughout the city. The streets had become their avenue to display their politics of recognition through "disorderly" behaviors.

So what do the unruly descriptions printed by a white newspaper and the politics of recognition by Wilmington's working class black women have to do with the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot and the issues that led up the event? First it is beneficial to examine what the power of a white press within Wilmington gained from the public transcript to influence the riot. Through "disorderly" language in the reports of the street behavior of the city's working class black women, Wilmington's white newspaper chipped away at any black respect present within the community and the efforts of a black middle class to craft the image of the "best man and

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<sup>7</sup> Rob Christensen, *The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *A Day of Blood: The 1898 Wilmington Race Riot* (North Carolina Office of Archives and History, 2009), 23.

woman.” The particular language also provided justification for fines and incarceration that fueled the need for white control over these “heathen” women. Reports of the working class black women’s drunken behavior, foul language, divorce, and resistance to arrest stripped them of their womanhood in the eyes of a white community, by attempting to draw distinctions between them and the white women who “needed” protection.

Reporting on these behaviors, along with violence, set the working class black women up as dangerous, that furthered the “home protection” component of the white supremacy campaign that escalated with the 1898 race riot. This notion of the home under the white supremacy campaign must not be taken in the literal sense. “Home” did not only refer to individual white households, but also Wilmington, and thus North Carolina. It was this “home” that needed protection from the black beast rapist. As the white supremacy made its way to Wilmington, perhaps the public transcript of the “disorderly” reports served as a channel for a white press to gather support. These reports justified white fears of the black race that these women were not deserving of citizenship, and a change and system needed to be enforced to “save” the social and political structure of Wilmington, and therefore the South. Such justification of white fears may have provided white supremacist leaders, such as Furnifold Simmons, the groundwork they needed in which to grow their campaign, especially within the city of Wilmington. The public transcript aided in creating the anxiety on which the leaders could feed their political agenda. It stripped the working class black women of their womanhood placing them in sharp contrast to their white counterparts who needed safety from the black rapist. Possibly as white men in Wilmington began to gather to protect their “homes” against the threat of the black man, they were also attempting to safeguard themselves against these female ruffians of the streets. This may have allowed the white supremacist leaders to maintain the image that only their women

required rescuing and their “homes” protection from the black rapist and dangerous, unmanageable black working class woman, creating a notion that would have helped the campaign gather “all” white support. Thus, by 1898 Wilmington had become a powder keg of racial social and political tension ready to explode, and Manly’s statements the flame. After the smoke cleared following the riot, two decades of building racial tension through the public transcript and the success of the white supremacy campaign allowed the Jim Crow southern structure to finally finish falling into place.

The hidden transcript that revealed the working class black women’s politics of recognition may have been connected to the Wilmington Race Riot. These women developed politics of recognition as they asserted their womanhood and demanded protection by resisting arrest, using foul language, exhibiting public violence and drunkenness, and divorcing their husbands. Such resistance brought into the public sphere may be read as a political outcry. Also, it was The Morning Star that reported that these black women “resisted” arrest and sentencing, therefore such reports could even be read as exaggerations by a white newspaper when in reality these women simply attempted to claim their position within the New South structure and provide their side of what happened. The women also shaped their own terms of womanhood and sought to make it known and claim it through acts of intoxication, profane language, and divorce. While the public transcript of the “disorderly” reports perhaps operated in furthering the idea of “home protection” within the white supremacy campaign, the riot itself may have been in part an attempt to not only silence individuals as Alexander Manly, but also the political street outcries of Wilmington’s working class black women.

During the 1880s and 1890s, Wilmington’s working class black women shaped a politics of recognition in the city streets. These politics did not only redefined the lines of civic

participation, marriage, and womanhood but also blurred the lines between public and private space and demanded protection within both spheres. For instance, domestic issues once only dealt with at home, became public political issues in the city streets. As Democrats regained power in the 1898 elections they may have realized that the growing politics of Wilmington's black working class women needed to be diminished. Perhaps the riot not only terrorized prominent black leaders of the city but restricted the public space of the streets and smothered the political breath of Wilmington's working class black women. Although the Wilmington Race Riot did not end positively for African Americans, and therefore the politics of the city's black working class females, the street behavior and political activism of these women instilled confidence that they were a race, class, and most importantly a gender to be reckoned with. These women found that the years after the Civil War did not change their status, and they still were denied the title of womanhood and "a citizenship of the heart," thus lacking protection.<sup>9</sup> To demand recognition, these working class black women took to the streets to craft their own politics that in turn may have been silenced by the 1898 Wilmington race riot.

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen Kantrowitz, *More Than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic 1829-1889* (Penguin Books, 2012), 1.

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