

# Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II

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Historical  
Perspectives  
ΦΑΘ

Santa Clara  
TRADITION  
SHATTERED

Santa Clara University  
Undergraduate Journal of History  
December 2022  
Series II, Volume XXVII

Photograph, Martha O'Malley with newspaper, 1961  
Santa Clara University Archives and Special Collections

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## **The *Historical Perspectives* Peer Review Process**

*Historical Perspectives* is a peer-reviewed publication of the History Department at Santa Clara University. It showcases student work that is selected for innovative research, theoretical sophistication, and elegant writing. Consequently, the caliber of submissions must be high to qualify for publication. Each year, two student editors and two faculty advisors evaluate the submissions.

Assessment is conducted in several stages. An initial reading of submissions by the four editors and advisors establishes a short-list of top papers. The assessment criteria in this process, as stated above, focus on the papers' level of research innovation, theoretical sophistication, and elegance of presentation. No one category is privileged over the others and strengths in one can be considered corrective for deficiencies in another. The complete panel of four editors and advisors then votes on the final selections. Occasionally, as needed, authors may be asked to shorten or edit their original submissions for re-submission.

# The Santa Clara



Vol. 39, No. 16

SANTA CLARA, CALIFORNIA, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 22, 1961



\$2.00 Per Year

# TRADITION SHATTERED



## Girls To Shatter 110-Yr. Tradition

A hundred and ten years of tradition were broken at Santa last night.

In a surprise announcement, the Very Rev. Patrick Donohoe, S.J., officially put women on the Bronco campus.

Beginning next semester, the oldest all-men university west of the Mississippi will go co-educational.

The women will be admitted to all departments.

But boarding facilities will remain exclusively for men, according to the President.

### PRESIDENT'S STATEMENT

In a press interview with the Santa Clara last night, Fr. Donohoe cited as reason for the move "terrific pressure on Santa Clara."

"A lot of people since 1956 have asked us about it. Two years ago our board of trustees strongly recommended it. We took a national survey.

"One third of the Jesuit colleges in the United States are co-ed."

### NATIONAL TREND

The President cited what he called "a national trend."

The admission of women makes SCU the first Catholic co-educational institution of higher learning in California.

Admission of women will not involve any departure from present University admission standards, said Fr. Donohoe. "We'll take them on our terms," he told Santa Clara reporters.

How many women will apply? "It is already late in the spring, and many young women made their choice for next year. Dayton started with 31 women. Now they have over 700."

The President also blamed a University deficit of from 115 to 120 thousand dollars. "Even a hundred girls would relieve the budget," he said.

"Women will bring on new needs. They will cost money. But they will add tuition."

According to Fr. Donohoe, the \$200 hike in tuition will remain for the beginning of next year.

"If you are going to maintain salaries at competition, you have to have students," asserted the President. "Our upper division courses have an average of under 15 students. They could be twice as big."

For the first time, San Jose State has had to turn down students. These students are under "a terrific press for a place to go," said Fr. Donohoe.

(Continued on Page 2)

BOB FIORIAN, BOB CALLAN AND THE NURSES  
... campus will be swarming with co-eds in fall.

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## Introduction

Santa Clara University's Phi Alpha Theta chapter publishes a number of exceptional essays annually in the History Department's journal, *Historical Perspectives*. This year, we faced the difficult decision of choosing among many well-written student essays that cover significant topics spanning many years and the world across. As a result, the essays chosen represent some of the most impressive undergraduate writing that Santa Clara University students have produced for advanced seminars, original research, and senior theses. We are grateful to every student who submitted their papers for consideration and the faculty members who assisted student writers with their essays. We are proud to share the meaningful work from our community that exemplifies the outstanding academic achievements and unique perspectives of Santa Clara University students for the 2022 edition of *Historical Perspectives*.

Reflecting on the 2022 school year, we at Santa Clara University have witnessed many landmark changes for women and women's rights. In our Santa Clara community, we celebrated the inauguration of our first lay and first female President of Santa Clara University, Julie Sullivan. This marks a turning point in our university's history, and it has also been 61 years since Santa Clara became a coeducational university. To go along with these themes, this year we have received a pair of essays on the challenges that women in the community have faced in the past. Bianca Romero's "Notre Dame/Our Lady: The Economic Origins of Multilingual Education at a Bay Area Catholic School" discusses the early years of a local women's institution, like Santa Clara University, founded in 1851. It examines the early stakeholders in the community and the racial tensions that divided them as California shifted from a Spanish cultural space to an American cultural space. Many of the first women to attend Santa Clara graduated from Notre Dame High School. Hannah Hagen's "Tradition Shattered" discusses the challenges that women faced when the



university first became coeducational during the 1960s, as well as the community that developed to support these women. Santa Clara has continued to develop as a coeducational institution in the male dominated Silicon Valley.

At the same time as this progress in our local community, nationwide women's rights, health, and sexuality face new challenges. With the release of the decision in June in the case *Dobbs vs Jackson* the longstanding precedent of *Roe vs Wade*, which lasted 50 years, was overturned. This has allowed for the prohibition of abortion and government infringement on the health and rights of women across the country. This year's journal includes two papers reflecting on the history of women's health and sexuality in America. In Adelaide Vergnolle's "Medicalization of Sex in the Cold War," she discusses the medically enforced politics of heteronormativity and the stripping of feminine sexual pleasure in the 20th century. Additionally, Sydney Shead's "'Granny' Midwife to Nurse-Midwife: The Decline of Southern Black Midwifery in the 20th Century" examines the decline of black midwives and their replacement by the white medical community, despite the quality of care and variety of services they offered to women in rural communities. Lili Tavlan's "The Infamous Rosalie: Infanticide as Female Slave Resistance" examines the role of infanticide as resistance in Haiti during the Haitian Revolution. All of this scholarship at Santa Clara University shows the way these issues have existed throughout history as we continue to reexamine them today.

Following the precedents set in recent years, this year's journal includes a book review written by Continuing in the vein of tradition shattered, this year's journal does include the first ever short fiction published by *Historical Perspectives*. Sophie Wink's story "The Girl" is inspired by her research on the history of eugenics and sterilization in Maine. The story is about a fictional woman reflecting on the effects of the trauma she suffered in a mental institution.

This year's edition features a variety of commentaries on sex and gender and which is reflected in our cover image. It is a photo from the Santa Clara University archives depicting the university's first female applicant. This was a year where tradition was shattered, so it is a fitting subject for our cover. We wanted to highlight the progress made, with the hope that it inspires optimism for the future, while also acknowledging the fight for the continued protection of the rights of all.

### **Acknowledgments**

We congratulate the student authors who submitted their essays as well as Professor Naomi Andrews, the faculty advisor, and Melissa Sims, the History Department office manager. This year's publication would not have been possible without them. On behalf of the History Department, we would like to thank the faculty, staff, and students who contributed to the department during this turbulent year. We are honored to have represented the History Department, and we hope you enjoy this year's edition of *Historical Perspectives*.

Sean Chamberlain and Bianca Romero, Student Editors

## Tradition Shattered: How Women’s Recreation at SCU Aided the Acceptance and Assimilation of the Santa Clara Woman

Hannah Hagen

On March 22, 1961, *The Santa Clara*, the newspaper for Santa Clara University, announced the impending arrival of female students in all capital letters, filling half the front page with the alarming words “TRADITION SHATTERED.” The article underneath explained that Reverend Patrick Donahoe cited ““terrific pressure on Santa Clara”” and ““a national trend”” as the reasons he decided to admit women for the upcoming fall term.<sup>1</sup> In a more direct denouncement of this decision, one editorial declared, “The staff of The Santa Clara regrets that the administration has been forced to make this decision.”<sup>2</sup> The unveiled hostility in the article’s wording illustrated the obstacles that these women would face in gaining respect from their peers. They faced the challenge of establishing themselves in a historically male-dominated territory, where the decision to allow their presence was made begrudgingly in accordance with external societal changes. In eleven years, Title IX would mandate that “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education



Figure 1 The first female undergraduate applicant, Martha O'Malley, poses with *The Santa Clara* newspaper article announcing women's admittance to SCU in the upcoming fall. Santa Clara University Archives & Special Collections, *About this Collection*.

<sup>1</sup> “Tradition Shattered: Girls to Shatter 110-yr. Tradition,” *The Santa Clara* 39, no. 16 (March 22, 1961): 1. SCU Archives & Special Collections.

<sup>2</sup>P.A.C., “Editorial: End of an Era,” *The Santa Clara* (March 22, 1961): 2. SCU

program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.”<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, however, these women held seats at SCU without being guaranteed the resources or respect that their male counterparts received. When asked to make a prediction about female involvement in student activities, one male student interviewed by The Santa Clara, surmised “I don’t think there will be a great influx at once [...] They will not assume positions of leadership in campus organizations for some time.”<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, within two years, an organization arrived at the university which empowered female students to get involved and take pride in their presence at Santa Clara. The Women’s Recreational Association gave these new “coeds” the opportunity to make meaningful contributions to college life and created a powerful sense of community for them in a male-dominated university.

The Women’s Recreational Association (WRA), a national organization that established a Santa Clara University (SCU) chapter in 1963, encouraged women to become involved in athletic activities and other activities on campus. Women students became automatic members of the WRA upon enrollment at the university, making its opportunities accessible to the entire female student body.<sup>5</sup> Marygrace Colby, the Director of Women’s Athletics, presided over the WRA chapter at SCU and put together a series of scrapbooks to capture its accomplishments.<sup>6</sup> This organization provided more than just an outlet for physical activity and entertainment to the female student body; through its opportunities to lead, volunteer, receive recognition for achievements, and bond with other students, the WRA helped the university’s first female cohorts find a sense of belonging and importance in an otherwise masculine environment.

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<sup>3</sup> Title IX of the Education Amendments Act (1972)

<sup>4</sup>S.M., “Editorial: End of an Era,” *The Santa Clara* (March 22, 1961): 2.

<sup>5</sup>Marygrace Colby, *Women’s Recreational Association Scrapbook 1, 1963-1972* (1973): 72. SCU Archives & Special Collections.

<sup>6</sup> Marygrace Colby, *Scrapbook 1* (1973).

The Women's Recreational Association acted as a unique avenue for women's athletics during a time when formal women's varsity teams were not a widely available option. The organization began at Pennsylvania State University as the "Women's Athletics Association" (WAA) in 1919 to help female students fulfill the university's physical education requirement. Notably, "the word athletics was dropped in keeping with the feeling of the times that women were not to be encouraged to undertake competitive sports."<sup>7</sup> The word "recreation" implied more leisure and comradery in physical activity, and thus more in line with feminine prescriptions, making the organization more palatable to colleges and society in general.

While still in its "WAA" infancy, the WRA adopted and popularized the concept of "Play Days" for university women. Mills University in Oakland first pioneered this concept in 1928, making it part of the Bay Area's heritage before it swept the nation. The Play Day emphasized the social and collaborative aspects of physical activity and often included "an afternoon of games, stunts, sports, parades, pageantry, teas, and the occasional soda or pastry."<sup>8</sup> These activities promoted an atmosphere of friendliness, cooperation, and fun that fit society's standards of femininity. Although this reinforced gender stereotypes in one regard, it also redefined femininity - historically associated with frailty - to justify female physical activity and broaden women's social horizons. Universities affiliated with the WRA -- including SCU -- applied Play Day philosophy to women's recreation throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Colby's scrapbooks make several mentions of casual sports interspersed with social activities, suggesting the prevalence of the Play Day philosophy within the WRA program at SCU. However, SCU's WRA program

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<sup>7</sup> Pennsylvania State University Libraries, biographical note to *Guide to the Women's Recreation Association Records, 1919-1974* 738, n.d.

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Eikleberry, "More than Milk and Cookies: Reconsidering the College Play Day," *Journal of Sport History* 41, no. 3 (2014): 472.

implemented non-competitive sports as a supplement - rather than replacement - to competitive female sports.

The WRA's competitive sport offerings at SCU garnered campus-wide attention due to their success within the WRA's first decade of operation, thereby providing its female athletes yet another opportunity to break the mold of femininity. As newspaper clippings in the scrapbook advertise, the WRA offered five intramural sports (volleyball, basketball, softball, bowling, and tennis) and three intercollegiate sports (volleyball, basketball, and tennis).<sup>9</sup> The clippings show SCU's women's teams placing second in a tennis tournament in Ojai, California and taking fifth place in a national swim meet.<sup>10</sup> Impressively, these feats illustrate how an organization founded upon feminine "recreation" accomplished anything but keeping women in their traditional feminine roles, instead, it granted female participants a foot in the door to prove themselves in the revolutionary world of women's sports. This development fueled female empowerment outside of the sports sphere because "women's participation in the institution [of sport] disrupts gendered power relations" and challenges notions of femininity and masculinity.<sup>11</sup> In other words, by succeeding in an arena previously reserved for men, female athletes could translate their newfound confidence to other arenas such as university classrooms or society at large.

The efforts and enthusiasm of SCU's female athletes did not go unrecognized. Each year, WRA student presidents received a nomination for the "Who's Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges" award as they were "recommended by the University on the basis of citizenship, leadership, scholarship, and promise."<sup>12</sup> The leadership positions afforded to female

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<sup>9</sup> Marygrace Colby, *Scrapbook 1* (1973): 8.

<sup>10</sup> Marygrace Colby, *Scrapbook 1* (1973): 13, 93.

<sup>11</sup> Cheryl Cooky and Michael A. Messner, *No Slam Dunk: Gender, Sport, and the Unevenness of Social Change* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 81.

<sup>12</sup> "Santa Clara Who's Who Nominees Announced," *The Santa Clara* (January 13, 1966) in Marygrace Colby *Scrapbook 1* (1973): 16.

students through this organization allowed individual women to make names for themselves at the university and qualify for the same awards as men. The increasing notoriety of the WRA also gained its determined women access to a particular building at SCU previously reserved only for men. As one 1967 news clipping excitedly announces, “there will be a little break from the books on Tuesday nights for the girls,” as they now could practice in the on-campus gym during that time slot and eventually on Wednesday mornings, too.<sup>13</sup> Despite protests from some male athletes, this gesture overall indicated a major step in the university’s validation of the female presence on campus.

Thanks to a revived feminist movement during the 1960s, women’s athletics gained some legitimacy on a national level. In 1963, the Division for Girls and Women in Sport (DGWS) announced its position that intercollegiate athletic competition for women was “desirable,” and by 1969, national competitions existed for women’s gymnastics and track among other events.<sup>14</sup> Evidently, the WRA’s program at SCU reflected an increasing acceptance of women’s athletics throughout American society as a whole, but in a way felt directly by female SCU athletes as they navigated their newfound presence at the university.

On a more personal level, the WRA created a safe and supportive environment for women on campus, as it was one of the



*SCU's first women's basketball team with their first-place trophies. Marygrace Colby, director of the SCU WRA chapter, is on the far right. Photograph, SCU women's first basketball team, 1964, Archives of SCU*

<sup>13</sup> “WRA in Gym Each Tuesday,” *The Santa Clara* (February 1967) in Marygrace Colby, *Scrapbook 1* (1973): 25.

<sup>14</sup> Richard C. Bell, “A History of Women in Sport Prior to Title IX,” *The Sport Journal* (March 2008).

few places where men and their interests did not outnumber them. A woman from the Class of 1965 recalled, in a press release upon graduation, that women on campus “were so scared. I remember how we used to band together to walk down the dining hall. It must have looked like a parade.”<sup>15</sup> Open hostility on campus prompted frequent discomfort among the women, as the men harassed their co-eds with chants like “Two, Four, Six, Eight, We don’t want to integrate!”<sup>16</sup> When the WRA arrived with its female-exclusive activities, it provided the women a much-needed respite from exposure to such attitudes. Women partaking in team sports or group activities with other women reaped the benefits of personal development in tight-knit female communities. Indeed, Colby’s scrapbook is full of photographs of young women smiling over team dinners and laughing together at practices and games.<sup>17</sup> Partaking in sports also trained women in the ability “to assert themselves but also to rely on others and to allow others to rely on them.”<sup>18</sup> In this way, the WRA facilitated an atmosphere that taught women to balance being assertive, confident, and cooperative instead of socializing women to develop passive traits for the sake of male company.

This female-driven atmosphere extended beyond WRA sports to other WRA activities as well. Particularly in the 1960s, before intercollegiate competition became the primary focus of the organization, the WRA’s quasi- or non- athletic activities attracted plenty of female participants. In fact, the same article that announces female access to the SCU gym ends with a reminder that “instruction in sewing, knitting, and bridge are still being offered in the lounge.”<sup>19</sup> Other activities for women on campus

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<sup>15</sup> Peggy Major, *University of Santa Clara Press Release* (June 2, 1965).

<sup>16</sup> Peggy Major, *Press Release* (1965).

<sup>17</sup> Marygrace Colby, *Scrapbook 1* (1973): 10.

<sup>18</sup> Deborah L. Brake, *Getting in the Game: Title IX and the Women’s Sports Revolution* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>19</sup> Marygrace Colby, *Scrapbook 1* (1973): 47, 33.



included self-defense and “lifesaving” (or lifeguarding) lessons.<sup>20</sup> For leadership experience, women could gain leadership experience as WRA officers, and volunteer by ushering ball games or selling cupcakes at fundraisers. This variety of outlets created opportunities for women of varying interests - traditional and nontraditional - to develop important leadership skills and acquire valuable experiences alongside other women.

The WRA played a particularly important role in empowering female students on Santa Clara’s campus compared to other Bay Area universities because SCU is a private Catholic institution. Catholic universities in particular struggled to accept a female presence on campus because “women were portrayed as sex objects, mindless playthings for the amusement of men, which did not fit with the image of an idealistic Catholic institution” which valued purity as a virtue.<sup>21</sup> In fact, men at SCU before 1961 considered the lack of women to be an important mark of distinction for the university because it meant fewer distractions. As student Richard McLaren described in an issue of *The Owl* journal in 1955, the life on campus “is usually studious. There are no girls [...] And in the average dormitory, conversation about girls is not the all-pervading thing that seeps into the very stones of the place and



*Women’s volleyball practice.  
Photograph, Volleyball practice,  
1966-1967 in Scrapbook 1*

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<sup>20</sup>Santa Clara University Archives & Special Collections, *About this Collection: Women’s Recreational Association Scrapbooks*. SCU Digital Collections.

<sup>21</sup>Leslie Miller-Bernal and Susan L. Poulson, *Going Coed: Women’s Experiences in Formerly Men’s Colleges and Universities, 1950-2000* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press 2004), 203.

saturates the men who live there.”<sup>22</sup> Traditional attitudes like this considered the temptation of women to be a direct obstacle to men’s academic performance and development. More objectifying attitudes sprawl across the pages of SCU’s 1962-1963 yearbook with the captions for images of female students on campus with quotes like “the blonde bombshell in action” and “We always get our man!”<sup>23</sup> The men at SCU, many of whom had attended sex-segregated Catholic high schools without ever studying in a woman’s presence, now viewed their female counterparts as temptresses and man-traps instead of peers.

The same trends appeared at other Catholic universities across the nation even decades after female admittance due to their particularly conservative views on gender relations. At Boston College in the 1950s, “the student weekly newspaper published a number of sexist articles; ‘How to Date a Co-ed’ in which “the beginner was advised to begin with a ‘not-too beautiful specimen’ and progress to prettier ones as basic skills improved.”<sup>24</sup> Nearly thirty years after female admittance to Boston College, these articles attempted to assuage the still-existing male sexual anxieties about the women present among them. Meanwhile, at Georgetown University, “the regulations forbade sports attire; shorts and pants outside of the dorms, except on Sunday” and set a “10:30 PM curfew for first-year women on campus with a midnight curfew for the rest” of the women.<sup>25</sup> Santa Clara University female housing in the early 1960s included similar regulations of the students’ daily lives and dress. The 1962 handbook of House Rules and Regulations subjected women to curfews, room cleanliness checks,

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<sup>22</sup> Richard McLaren, *The Owl* (1955) in George Giacomini and Gerald McKeivitt, *S.J., Serving the Intellect, Touching the Heart: A Portrait of Santa Clara University 1851-2001* (Santa Clara: Santa Clara University, 2000): 212.

<sup>23</sup> Santa Clara University, *The Redwood*, 1962-1963, 104, 108. SCU Archives & Special Collections.

<sup>24</sup> Leslie Miller-Bernal and Susan L. Poulson (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press 2004), 203.

<sup>25</sup> Leslie Miller-Bernal and Susan L. Poulson (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press 2004), 229.

strict check-out procedures to leave campus on the weekends, and dress codes. In this in loco parentis system, school authorities acted as parental figures for the women. The handbook mandates that “bermuda shorts and slacks are NEVER to be worn on campus” and “men are NEVER allowed in student apartments.”<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, the men were not subjected to this level of discipline in their housing accommodations. Religious emphasis on female purity magnified the pressures and scrutiny felt by women on Catholic college campuses whether in the presence of men or in their own dorm rooms. In this atmosphere, the WRA provided meaningful athletic opportunities to women that enabled them “to counter the cultural forces that turn women’s bodies into objects that exist for the use and pleasure of others.”<sup>27</sup> The WRA’s activities allowed women to engage their bodies in a healthy way outside of the male gaze.

At the time of the WRA’s establishment at SCU in 1963, the novelty of the situation further compounded conservative Catholic views of women on campus. Male students were still reeling from the shock of Reverend Donahoe’s decision two years prior. The 1962-1963 yearbook spread revealed the extent of the grief over lost tradition at that time. To honor the last class of all-male students - also known as “the ‘old’ Santa Clara---a term they wore with pride”, this entire yearbook edition dedicated itself to reminiscing about the university’s long-lost all-male past with old photos and anecdotes from that time. The yearbook trepidatiously remarks that because “The Santa Clara Man finds the Santa Clara Woman at his side [...] we feel we should pause at the end of an era and look at the past. The future will be great if we preserve with grateful hearts what was glorious of the days that were history”<sup>28</sup> If attitudes blaming female presence for disrupting the glory days of Santa Clara were committed to print in a medium as high-profile as

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<sup>26</sup> Santa Clara University, “House Rules and Regulations for Women Students Living at Park Lanai,” *Broncos Handbook: Student Directory 1961-1962* (1961): 2.

<sup>27</sup> Deborah L. Brake, *Getting in the Game*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Santa Clara University, *The Redwood*, 6.

the yearbook, they no doubt prevailed among the student body on a daily basis and likely to a much greater intensity. Hence, the WRA proved critical in helping female students find a sense of belonging on campus.

With female enrollment so recently opened, it would take time for female participation in coed activities to match those of long-integrated universities. Women's newly established presence at SCU created a lag in female participation in co-educational extracurricular activities, and this lack of women in many clubs and extracurriculars on campus exacerbated the mystique that they held for the male students on campus. By contrast, the nearby secular San Jose State University (SJSU) admitted women since its inception in 1857, and by 1963 their presence was fully normalized. This is evidenced by their 1962-1963 *La Torre* yearbook which shows female presence in nearly every club on campus and women often represented equally to men. Women composed half of prominent organizations such as the Student Council and the Student Magazine and even dominated the Community Service Committee and Social Affairs Committee.<sup>29</sup> This is starkly in contrast to Santa Clara's 1962-1963 *The Redwood* yearbook in which even the Co-ed Council - an organization with the stated purpose of helping women on campus integrate themselves into student government - ironically included six men and only one woman.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, women and men rarely interacted outside of the classroom in organized activities, perpetuating the gender divide in SCU's culture.

To fill this gap, the WRA, despite being a women's organization, sponsored several "mixed" programs as well. It sponsored an intramural mixed bowling league in which both men and women comprised each of the teams, an activity described by an editor of *The Santa Clara* as "quite enjoyable and worthwhile

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<sup>29</sup>San Jose State University, *La Torre*, 1962-1963. SJSU Special Collections & Archives.

<sup>30</sup>Santa Clara University, *The Redwood*, 170.

for all of its participants so far.”<sup>31</sup> Later on, the WRA facilitated “co-rec nights” in the gym offering refreshments and activities like swimming and volleyball.<sup>32</sup> By integrating male and female athletes in these choice casual events, the organization facilitated positive environments in which male students could acclimate to and perhaps even ally with the female students on campus.

Indeed, by the end of the decade, rhetoric in *The Santa Clara* shifted from reticence about women’s presence on campus to acceptance and even occasional advocacy for their increased inclusion. In 1969, the sports section editor Vic Merolla dedicated an article to denouncing sex discrimination in the access to athletic facilities for women. He lamented that “the women are allowed one night and one morning in the gym a week. I guess it never occurred to our beloved administration that a person needs a good half an hour of exercise a day.” He goes on to point out that all of the neighboring universities - private, state, and junior colleges alike - granted their women unrestricted access to athletic facilities even if those facilities were often separate. Merolla explains that “there are quite a few females who are very athletic [...] In the Olympics last summer, I would like to note that it was two girls who represented Santa Clara.”<sup>33</sup> As evidenced by this compliment to the two Olympians, female participation in athletics at the university allowed them to be seen and appreciated alongside their male counterparts. Undoubtedly, female success in athletics offered at SCU helped garner the respect and support of men in their endeavors.

The WRA played a pivotal role in women’s assimilation at Santa Clara due to another important distinction: the relative lack of activism at SCU compared to other Bay Area colleges. This left fewer avenues for marginalized groups to directly advocate for

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<sup>31</sup> “Mixed Bowling Big Success,” *The Santa Clara* (February 13, 1964) in Marygrace Colby, *Scrapbook I* (1973): 4.

<sup>32</sup> Marygrace Colby, *Scrapbook I* (1973): 145.

<sup>33</sup> Vic Merolla “Sex Discrimination,” *The Santa Clara* (September 26, 1969) in Marygrace Colby, *Scrapbook I* (1973): 72.

their interests on campus. The neighboring SJSU, by contrast, exemplified the liberal atmosphere and high-profile student activism common in this region and era. For example, Cesar Chavez recruited students there for his United Farm Workers labor union movement in 1962, football players boycotted games in response to racial discrimination on campus in 1967, and - most notably - student athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised clenched fists at the Olympic Games in 1968 as a controversial protest to racial injustices in America.<sup>34</sup> Santa Clara University, traditionally considered a “safe and quiet bastion of protective Catholicism” valued tradition and hence discouraged challenges to the status quo throughout much of its history.<sup>35</sup> A shift began in the late 1960s with a “Christian-Marxist Conference” on campus in 1967 which encouraged discussion of nontraditional ideas.<sup>36</sup> Student demonstrations occurred a few years later but on a limited scale. A student report from 1970 in *The Santa Clara* remarked on the significance of an anti-war rally at “a conservative school like Santa Clara.”<sup>37</sup> The rally was contained on the lawn outside of O’Connor Hall, likely because the university reserved the right to limit where protests take place on the property as a private institution. At SCU, social awareness and progressivism developed gradually through more subdued means like classroom dialogue, newspaper editorials, and positive interactions among an increasingly diverse student body. Santa Clara’s female students gained gradual acceptance through participation in organizations like the WRA which slowly and quietly created the more inclusive environment advocated elsewhere with more outspoken protests.

The Women’s Recreational Association at Santa Clara University bridged the gap between the complete dearth of

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<sup>34</sup> San Jose State University “Activism: It’s in Our DNA,” *Together: News from the College of Social Sciences* (2016): 4.

<sup>35</sup> Eugene C Bianchi, *The Santa Clara* (1967) in George Giacomini and Gerald McKeivitt, *S.J., Serving the Intellect*, 228.

<sup>36</sup> “Student Report,” *The Santa Clara* (May 4, 1970) in George Giacomini and Gerald McKeivitt, *S.J., Serving the Intellect*, 237.

<sup>37</sup> George Giacomini and Gerald McKeivitt, *S.J., Serving the Intellect*, 228.

women's involvement on campus and the eventual acceptance of formal women's varsity sports in years to come. The SCU chapter of this organization left in 1986 when "there was a total merger of women's and men's athletics at Santa Clara," meaning that both sexes received equal access to intramural, club, and varsity sports.<sup>38</sup> In addition to serving as an opportunity to maintain a healthy lifestyle and social life for its participants, the WRA allowed women to gain recognition, empower themselves, and join each other in the solidarity of assimilating into a male-dominated space. It helped individual women to foster their own meaningful connections with a university previously inaccessible to them and also allowed the university's character to become increasingly shaped by these women and their contributions. On a larger scale, the organization fostered empowerment for women as they redefined their femininity and claimed space for themselves in new spheres in society.

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<sup>38</sup>Santa Clara University Archives & Special Collections, *About this Collection*.

## **Notre Dame/Our Lady: The Economic Origins of Multilingual Education at a Bay Area Catholic School**

**Bianca Romero**

Passing through downtown San Jose today, it is unlikely the average passerby would notice the 170-year-old institution at the intersection of Second and Reed streets. Like the school, the city of San Jose too has changed vastly in the last 170 years, welcoming new development, people, and ways of life as the valley has aged. In 1851, when Notre Dame High School first opened, the city of San Jose was itself in the midst of great cultural and demographic shifts. In the wake of the 1849 gold rush, white Americans flocked to northern California with hopes of finding wealth. While California was a new frontier ready for development for many of its newest settlers, the state was already home to a large and established population of previously Mexican citizens, their civil organization, and culture. New white immigrants imagined the Californios of the area as incredibly foreign-- they were Catholics and ranchers with no conception of private property and its deliberate fenced markers. Gradually, white Americans disenfranchised the original Spanish inhabitants to take their wealth and land and to thoroughly Anglicize the area. It was at this turning point in California history that the Sisters of Notre Dame arrived to educate future generations of Catholic women, including both new immigrants and the long established Californios.<sup>1</sup> Amidst cultural tension and at points, inexcusable violence, the Sisters of Notre Dame in San Jose educated Mexican-American and white students alongside each other and in the face of competing cultural forces. Ultimately, the economic sway of the previously established Californios established an initial space of integration that disappeared with their wealth and power in the area.

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<sup>1</sup>Stephen J. Pitti, "Prologue: The Devil Defined, " in *The Devil in Silicon Valley: Northern California, Race, and Mexican Americans* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 26.



In this essay, the term Mexican-American refers to individuals native to California of Spanish and Native American descent, also known as Californio/a(s). By the late eighteenth century, few residents of Santa Clara county were of pure Spanish blood as defined by Spanish racial delineations.<sup>2</sup> It is safe to assume that most Californios were of mixed descent with variance among their proportions Indian or European heritage. The term white, or white American refers to European immigrants or American immigrants of European descent. Though at this point in America at large, the monolithic white identity was less common and some European immigrants faced discrimination from Nativist groups. It is especially important to consider that “In the 1840’s and 50’s American ideologies of race grouped Mexicans with Indians as nonwhites.”<sup>3</sup> Legally, Mexican-Americans were considered white, however they were set apart because social ideology imagined them as foreign. Due to a lack of demographic information, my conclusions about the school’s ethnic composition are merely informed by the names of students. Those with Spanish names I have dubbed Mexican-American, though there may be more or less ethnically Hispanic or Latino students because of this inferential error. Limited records and unclear and sometimes contradictory racial categories further complicate each student’s background.<sup>4</sup>

Much of my research in establishing the overarching context and narrative of the Sisters of Notre Dame at San Jose, is informed by two books chronicling the history of the Sisters on the West Coast. The first, *In Harvest Field by Sunset Shores*, is viewed as a nostalgic account of the Sisters' work and was published in 1934. This source is generally regarded as less reliable by those familiar with the archive because of its glorification of the Sisters' work,

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<sup>2</sup> Pitti, “Prologue,” 14.

<sup>3</sup>Pitti, “Prologue,” 30.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Rosenthal, "Nahoa's Tears: GOLD, DREAMS, AND DIASPORA IN CALIFORNIA," In *Beyond Hawai'i: Native Labor in the Pacific World*, (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018. Accessed July 5, 2021): 132-65, 164.

evident even in the title, though it does provide greater detail on the years preceding their arrival in San Francisco. The overt bias of this book can be linked to the author's membership as a sister in the congregation. Her pride shines through in her historicization, celebrating the 84th anniversary of the sisters in San Jose. The second book, *A Light in the Valley*, was published in 1967 and is regarded as the authoritative source on the Sisters in San Jose. This book was written and researched by Mary McNamee, also a sister at Notre Dame. This source is more exhaustive and considerably less biased, nevertheless, her linkage to the school is evident in her glorified framing of the school's history.<sup>5</sup>

The order of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, founded in 1804, are a group committed to the education of women to this day. The foundress of the Sisters of Notrer Dame, Saint Julie Billiart, was a devout Belgian peasant who lived through the French Revolution. Saint Julie was specifically concerned with the education of poor girls who could not otherwise afford an education. In 1844, the order expanded beyond Europe when a delegation of Sisters from Belgium took the perilous journey around Cape Horn. They hoped to establish the first women's institutions west of the Mississippi river and bring their mission to the Western United States. Initially working in Oregon, the Sisters established schools at two sites. They established a school for orphans and French-Indian children in Saint Paul and a boarding and day school for young women in Oregon City.<sup>6</sup> The dearest cause to those early pioneers was the conversion of Native Americans to their Catholic faith. On their voyage to the Americas, "hours were spent in study of the English and of the Indian

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<sup>5</sup> These books proved vital in constructing the surrounding context of the premiums, ledgers, and rosters which make up the majority of my inquiry and analysis. Secondary sources chronicling the school's early history are extremely limited as a result of the equally limited research in this archive.

<sup>6</sup>Mary Dominica McNamee, *Light in the Valley* (Berkeley, CA: Howell-North, 1967).

language.”<sup>7</sup> In order to more efficiently spread the Catholic religion, the Belgian Sisters learned English and Native American languages from a Native American teacher on board the ship, evidence of their dedication to evangelization. From the start of their mission, sisters viewed multilingualism as a tool of their cause, learning and adapting to their target group.

Alongside this main mission, there are descriptions of Sisters teaching housekeeping and other domestic skills to their pupils. Though this may have been reflective of the social status of these students, the historian has framed it as a request of their French-Canadian fathers. Another important aspect of the sister’s educational praxis to this day is their affirmation that they teach students “what they need to know for life”; this was how they adjusted their curriculum for each school and student body. In 1849 the discovery of Gold marked a turning point in American history at large, but also in the history of the Sisters of Notre Dame on the West Coast. Faced with the allure of California Gold, Oregonians left en masse in hopes of making their fortune. This mass emigration from Oregon shocked the Sisters. Fortunately, the Bishop of San Francisco invited them to move and serve a different emerging community. The Sisters built their school in San Jose in the hopes of creating a formal settlement and educating the women in the area.

Before the school officially opened, the Sisters stayed with the prominent Californio Sunol family. Their first four students were taught in the Sunol house, mostly in Spanish. Their shared Catholic faith was a likely motivator for the Sisters’ engagement with the Californio population. This marked a change in the Sisters’ mission because Californio families were highly prejudiced against Native Americans and would not permit them to be educated alongside their daughters at the school in San Jose. Additionally, the heavy biases of Californio and white families, the

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<sup>7</sup>Sarah-Alice Katharyne Quinlan, *In Harvest Fields by Sunset Shores: The Work of the Sisters of Notre Dame on the Pacific Coast* (San Francisco, CA: Gilmartin Co., 1926.) 53.

school's main benefactors, against Native Americans, likely prevented the Sisters from recruiting Native American students for their new school. It is also likely that the Sisters had to cater to different demographics at their school in San Jose since there were only 157 Indigenous people in all of Santa Clara county when the school opened.<sup>8</sup> With the move of their physical location, the demographics surrounding the school shifted as well. With an extremely limited Native American community, the Sisters turned to the pre-existing Catholic community in San Jose to establish their school for young women.

There was one known Native American student. She is not present in the school's records because she attended for only a few weeks, however, her autobiography revealed she was briefly enrolled at Notre Dame San Jose. As a child, the esteemed Native American author Sarah Winnemucca enrolled at Notre Dame with her sister, but they were forced to leave by Californio families.<sup>9</sup> In her autobiography, *Life Among the Piutes*, Sarah Winnemucca explained, "We were only there a little while, say three weeks, when complaints were made to the Sisters by wealthy parents about Indians being in school with their children. The Sisters then wrote to our friends to come take us away, and so they did."<sup>10</sup> Her very brief description of these events does not provide great detail to the nature of her time there and there are no records from the Sisters to add additional context, other than the girls' forced removal. It is the current belief at the Sisters' archive in Belmont that the Californio families pushed out the Winnemuccas, but there is no written evidence that confirms this. Considering this event in the greater context of California history, Mexican-American and white Californians held many prejudices Native Americans. The

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<sup>8</sup> In the early 19th century cholera and smallpox outbreaks ravaged the Native population. The threat of disease met with the imposition of Spanish colonial forces in culture and labor.

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Looms, "Unfortunate Era at Historic S.J. School," *Mercury News*, 1975.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims* (Bishop, CA: Chalfant Press, 1969,) 70.

monetary sway of these students as benefactors of the school likely meant the Sisters had to maintain their contentment, despite their initial interest in teaching Native Americans. In the very least, this instance reflects a racial hierarchy at the school that placed white and Californio students above Native Americans, despite the Sisters' original evangelizing intentions in America.

For a significant amount of the nineteenth century, schooling was conducted in both Spanish and English. The program for the 1853 commencement exercises lists a Senior class and a separate Spanish class.<sup>11</sup> A prospectus from the 1891-92 school year lists the cost of attendance, graduation, outcomes, and school rules in both English and Spanish.<sup>12</sup> They received separate awards and are referred to on the premium as “the spanish students.”<sup>13</sup> The program lists many awards and distinctions outside of their recognition of the Spanish students, but few of the Spanish students received recognition outside of their specific distinction. There are many allusions to the prominence of both languages in secondary accounts, though with an air of disdain, such as the, “Spanish Young Ladies’ were adamant; they must be taught in their native tongue.”<sup>14</sup> Sister McNamee in her framing of the early curriculum upheld that the Spanish mothers wanted their daughters educated in different arts. They asked specifically for their daughters to be taught domestic arts such as embroidery and crocheting over composition or music. She framed their preferences in such a way that the Spanish students wanted to receive an entirely different education from the other girls. Such domestic classes are listed in many of the premiums from the school in the nineteenth century. The convergence of several testimonies on the subject of the Spanish curriculum maintains the narrative that Spanish students asked to be taught separately. Sister McNamee explained that after the leave of the native Spanish

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<sup>11</sup>“Commencement Program for the 1853 School Year” (San Jose, n.d.).

<sup>12</sup>“School Handbook” (San Jose, n.d.).

<sup>13</sup> “Commencement Program Listing Students’ Names and Accolades” (San Jose, n.d.).

<sup>14</sup> McNamee, *Valley*, 47.

teacher, a Belgian sister was taught Spanish by her pupils in order to continue Spanish instruction. This seemed contradictory, however, especially considering another prospectus explained that, “French, German, and Spanish are taught by native teachers,” which seems to mean native speakers of those languages.<sup>15</sup> By 1862, the separate Spanish Division was dissolved, however, the school continued to offer a parallel Spanish curriculum and continued to print official documents in both languages.<sup>16</sup>

As the school and city grew, more white students enrolled. Many of the white students were of Irish, Belgian, and French descent. Many of the students shared a common Catholic background that likely motivated their choice to enroll at Notre Dame. In 1862, of the 196 pupils listed on the school premium, 23 had Spanish last names.<sup>17</sup> The format of the prospectuses varied from year to year. The 1857, 1864, 1865, 1866, and 1867 prospectuses list students' countries of origin and included students from Mexico, Chile, Peru, Vancouver Island, France, Belgium, Ireland, England, and Australia. Others list only the students' names. Any foreign students were likely white, or at least incredibly wealthy, in order to afford boarding school in another country. However, this prospectus evidences that in addition to the Californio students, students from other parts of Latin America attended Notre Dame and likely took advantage of the Spanish division. This program, though segregated, must have been somewhat prestigious in order to attract wealthy international students.

One article analyzing the diary of a Santa Clara College student touches upon the cultural climate at Notre Dame from an outside perspective. A scholar's comments on the journal explained, “At nearby Notre Dame College, a ‘state of cold war’ raged in the 1850s between Californio and Anglo Students. Raised in home environments that protected them from the world, the

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<sup>15</sup> “Commencement Program for the 1853 School Year” (San Jose, n.d.).

<sup>16</sup> “Commencement Program for the 1853 School Year” (San Jose, n.d.).

<sup>17</sup> “Commencement Program Listing Students' Names and Accolades” (San Jose, n.d.).

Spanish-speaking young woman felt ‘ill at ease’ among less restrained ‘yanquitas’”, meaning yankee women.<sup>18</sup> This testimony from a man at a similar Santa Clara county Catholic institution offers an outsider’s look into the contemporary climate at the school. The article argues that because women were raised at home, and thus less exposed to other people and cultures, the women at Notre Dame faced greater cultural conflict. This is one critical analysis of the Mexican-American families' request for separate instruction. Not only was there a language barrier, but there was mutual disdain among the Mexican-American and white students. These two analyses of the Spanish curriculum offer two stories behind this separate division, one of cultural tension and the other of accommodation. It seems both the Californio community and the white community at Notre Dame were wary of each other, and asked for separate schooling to avoid the corrupting forces of the opposite culture. In short, wariness of new white American culture in conjunction with fear of losing their cultural identity inspired Californio families to request a separate Spanish curriculum.

On the other hand, in the face of prejudice towards Californios in tandem with their declining economic sway, it was remarkable that the Sisters included Spanish students in their school and accommodated their requests. With the increasing white population who systematically disenfranchised Californio families, one would imagine that supporting this group so fervently might mark some sort of allegiance. Regardless, the sisters Other interesting points of consideration are the ways the Sisters did not force English upon the Mexican-American students. As a new part of the United States, classes were conducted predominantly in English. Students all studied an additional language and had a choice between French, German, and Spanish. Second language requirements were the same for Spanish students, however, their

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<sup>18</sup>Jesús María Estudillo and Gerald McKeivitt, "Hispanic Californians and Catholic Higher Education: The Diary of Jesús María Estudillo, 1857-1864," *California History* 69, no. 4 (1990): 328.

language of instruction was Spanish and English was a second language option. As Belgian immigrants who represented a linguistic, ethnic, and religious minority in the fast-growing state, perhaps the Sisters had less interest in foisting English upon the Mexican-American students. Both Sister McNamee and historian Gerald McKevitt conceded that Mexican-American students were wary of their white peers.

Without testimonies from the students themselves it is impossible to know whether Spanish students found a welcome community at Notre Dame college. The present archive of student testimony of the Bay Area Sisters housed in Belmont is largely a result of Sr. McNamee's research for her book. From that collection, there are several letters from a student named Isabel Ramirez which offer insight into the experiences of Californio students at Notre Dame. Isabel wrote a letter to her godfather, the benefactor of her education that follows, "My dear God father I have the pleasure to inform you that I am very much pleased with my situation. I make much progress in my study, and now I am in the first class of the elementary school it seems to me I will improve very much because I do all in my power to learn my lessons to accomplish your desires."<sup>19</sup> It is important to consider that all letters were monitored by the Sisters, meaning any complaints Isabel may have had could have been censored by herself or the Sisters. However, her pleasant experiences at the school were upheld by her Granddaughter who shared, "Isabel was the first pupil from Southern California enrolled at Notre Dame college in San Jose. ... In later days she loved to recall her convent school days and told us how kind the Sisters were to her and how the parents of her classmates often invited her to their homes and treated her as a daughter."<sup>20</sup> As an adult, Isabel fondly recollected her time at the academy. It appears she was a beloved pupil and was warmly regarded by the families of her peers. Eventually,

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<sup>19</sup>Isabel Ramirez (San Jose, CA, n.d.).

<sup>20</sup> Mary E Valla (Los Angeles, CA, n.d.).



Isabel's family ran out of money to send her to Notre Dame, which forced her to return home. At minimum, boarding students had to pay \$92.50 to attend Notre Dame, accounting for the entrance fee, the year's tuition, and a quarterly physicians fee. After California became a state, the mass immigration of white Americans devastated the pre-existing "Mestizo Bourgeoisie."<sup>21</sup> Many white Americans arrived in Silicon Valley, squatted on land, shot or stole grazing cattle, or manipulated the cultural disparities between Spanish and Anglo views on private property to take Californio land.<sup>22</sup> In the 1860's Mexican-American land ownership dropped from 129 families to 63 and forced many to become wage laborers.<sup>23</sup> In the early years of the school, Californio wealth had significantly greater sway. They were the long established land owning families who had already made their fortunes. However, over the course of the first two decades, Californio families became increasingly disenfranchised, lost their wealth, and could no longer afford such luxuries like private boarding school. This likely explains the declining Mexican-American population at Notre Dame.

Among Isabel's letters is a note she received from a classmate at Notre Dame. The letter, written on a paper doily, was the only correspondence between Isabel and one of her peers. The letter to Isabel follows,

Dearest Isabelita,

how happy I feel to address you these few lines to tell you that I am enjoying good health and I hope you will be the same, Dear friend I would like to receive a letter from you but I think you have forgotten me, as for the first time I write to you I cannot make it longer. Sister Mary Cornelia and Sister Mary sends [sic] their love to you and of the [sic] young ladies. Josefina

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<sup>21</sup>Pitti, "Prologue," 20.

<sup>22</sup>Pitti, "Prologue," 35.

<sup>23</sup>Pitti, "Prologue," 39-40.

Delgado sends her best respects. Sofia sends her best respects to you. From your dear friend Rebecca Hanks  
P.D. querieda [sic] Isabel Mariquita está muy triste de no haber recibido carta de ti y así Querida Isabelita dispénsame lo mal escrita que está.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly Isabel was dearly missed by her peers, including her white friend Rebecca Hanks. Their relationship then is indicative of friendships among Spanish and Anglo students at Notre Dame. Additionally, the Spanish postscript implies a familiarity not only with Isabel, but with her culture that is a true testament to their friendship. Students could learn Spanish as an additional language, this served as a possible vehicle for cultural exchange as it may have facilitated greater mutuality among Mexican-American and white students. It is possible that the relationship between Isabel and Rebecca was an anomaly. The social climate at the time, especially among new immigrants to the area, was highly informed by anti-hispanic sentiment.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, some students did form bonds amidst this period of hatred and mutual disdain among the Mexican and white communities. At the same time, such relationships were evidence for those who opposed integrated classrooms because they facilitated multicultural solidarity.

The Sisters' archives have little to no records from the students. As a result, it is unclear whether Isabel's experience was an exception or the status quo for the experience of Spanish students at Notre Dame. Fortunately, their founding parallels that of Santa Clara university in 1851. The schools' shared Catholic identity links their history in Santa Clara County and offers insight into the experiences of Californios who attended both schools. An analysis of a journal written by a young Californio who attended Santa Clara College mentions Notre Dame academy several times. Jesus Maria Estudillo, the journal's owner, frequented the campus

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<sup>24</sup> Rebecca Hanks (San Jose, California, n.d.).

<sup>25</sup> Pitti, "Prologue," 26.

at Notre Dame. The article shaping his experiences explains that, “with acculturation as their ultimate objective, Catholic bishops and educators created primary and secondary schools and colleges that met the needs of post conquest Californios.”<sup>26</sup> Immigrants themselves, the Jesuits at Santa Clara helped their students transition to the newly Anglicized state. Notre Dame’s curriculum, as the women’s institution in the area, is generally regarded as a parallel to the acculturation approach that the Jesuits took for women. Meaning, Catholic education in California generally aided in the assimilation of pupils to the dominant culture. However, the Spanish curriculum at Notre Dame preserved Spanish language and culture for the young ladies in the program. The girls learned every subject, including history, math, and science, in their language. The Spanish curriculum made space for instruction in their own language, despite the diminishing Californio influence in the area. Over the course of the nineteenth century, as Californio families lost considerable wealth and influence, many families could no longer afford Notre Dame’s boarding school. Eventually, the Spanish division was completely dissolved and classes were conducted in English.

The first few decades at Notre Dame reflected the history of San Jose in the mid nineteenth century as a moment of cultural and economic transition. Segregation in and of itself suggests discriminatory practices, however, it appears that the Mexican-American families’ wariness of white classmates informed this request. While it is highly likely the white families held their own prejudices, there is no evidence that they asked the Mexican-American students to be segregated. Eventually, the separate Spanish curriculum was dissolved and schooling was conducted in English only. However, there are decades of Spanish language documents at the school, drafted to accommodate a multilingual student body. With the waning wealth and influence of Mexican-

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<sup>26</sup> Estudillo, *Diary*, 321.

Americans in San Jose, economic forces likely pushed out many of the Spanish speaking students, which limited their influence at the school. Nevertheless, the institutional initiatives to accommodate Mexican-American students' educational endeavors conveyed a sense of multicultural solidarity among the varying Catholic demographics in Notre Dame's initial student bodies.

## **“Patriots not Partizans”: The Response of Independent Newspapers to the Rise of Political Parties in California**

**Sean Chamberlain**

Today, it is easy to see that political parties are entrenched and established in California, and across the nation. The major political parties have established infrastructures, clearly defined bases of supporters, and more. These party apparatuses are active and visible throughout the state, and it is difficult to think of a time when they were not. When California first entered the Union in 1850, however, political parties worked feverishly to establish themselves, drawn by the potential political capital of the new state.<sup>1</sup> This was not always easy or welcomed though, as California was 3,000 miles from Washington D.C. and had different concerns from older, more established states. The way that independent newspapers assailed the Democrats, Whigs, and eventually the Republicans revealed this and demonstrated some of the issues with the political parties of the time. These criticisms may not have stopped the parties from gaining power in California, but they provide insight into the nature of politics at the time and are a look into the challenges of party building in a new state. As the independent newspapers of the early 1850s demonstrate, many Californians resented or dismissed the political parties of the era, who had to fight to establish themselves as powers in the state.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the history of California see: Kevin Starr, *California: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2005). Starr’s work chronicles various eras of California’s history and numerous topics. For more information on early California politics and government see: Joshua Paddison, and Teena Stern. *Taming the Elephant: Politics, Government, and Law in Pioneer California*, Edited by John F. Burns, Richard J. Orsi, and Marlene Smith-Barazini, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), California had an interesting beginning, politically, and Paddison and Stern cover a variety of topics and figures in depth. For more information on California’s connections to the Civil War and the national politics of the era see: Leonard L. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007). National events and politics played a key role in California’s development and the views of those leading the state.

Instead of these corrupt parties, during the early 1850s these newspapers seemed to hope for and imagine a more independent and principle-based style of politics. This hatred of corruption and the different priorities of Californians revealed how the political parties were deeply flawed and were not inherently appealing for those away from the centers of their political power and control. As demonstrated by non-partisan newspapers during the early 1850s, the Whigs, Democrats, and others were viewed as corrupting forces, stripping Californians of their independence and ability to advocate for their own needs, which only made existing disinterest in politics worse for many Californians.

Before looking at non-partisan newspapers from the early 1850s, it is first necessary to understand California's political position in the Union at the time. The federal government had long been interested in California, with Andrew Jackson even offering to buy much of the state from Mexico in 1837.<sup>2</sup> It was not until 1849 though that delegates met in Monterey to write California's state constitution.<sup>3</sup> This group was far from representative of the state and included "...no women, Native Americans, African Americans, or anyone of Asian descent [and] Only eight were Hispanic."<sup>4</sup> Delegates from Northern California outnumbered those from the less populous South, and, unrepresentative of the state's population, the delegates were "not primarily miners," but instead, many were lawyers, businessmen, or men of "elegant leisure."<sup>5</sup> California had not yet entered the Union, and "its government was extralegal," but its first election led to the approval of the state's constitution, elected a governor, lieutenant

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<sup>2</sup> Joshua Paddison, and Teena Stern, "Capturing California," In *Taming the Elephant*, 130.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon Morris Bakken, Joshua Paddison, and Teena Stern, "The Courts, the Legal Profession, and the Development of Law in Early California," In *Taming the Elephant*, 74.

<sup>4</sup> John F. Burns, Joshua Paddison, and Teena Stern, "Taming the Elephant: An Introduction to California's Statehood and Constitutional Era," In *Taming the Elephant*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

governor, and the legislature.<sup>6</sup> Some have argued that the first state legislature "...may have been the purest and best," despite its shortcomings, such as its discriminatory laws and policies, and its reputation as the "Legislature of a Thousand Drinks."<sup>7</sup> This group also faced challenges due to the rapidly expanding and gold fever-fueled population that was quickly flooding into the state, and was primarily concerned with "'making their pile' and going home" as quickly as they could.<sup>8</sup>

California also dealt with the issue that not everyone was interested in civic responsibilities.<sup>9</sup> As a result, "A tension between order and chaos ran through gold-rush society. Clergymen, businessmen, and entrepreneurs spoke of the need to 'tame' wild California..."<sup>10</sup> This language betrayed the racialized attitudes of the Anglo-American newcomers to be sure, but the state government also grappled with lawlessness and a lack of established institutions. California was filled with transient newcomers seeking to make their fortune, however misguided this might have been, who often ignored the "other duties" that citizens have and this hindered the growth of the body politic.<sup>11</sup> California though was able to establish a government and enter into the Union.

Regardless of the issues with California's early government, it soon became bogged down by national politics. Those in California's government believed that "...the federal government would... (as it had other territories and states) ... [remit] to it those monies collected by customs officers at local ports of entry in

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<sup>6</sup> Judson A. Grenier, Joshua Paddison, and Teena Stern, "'Officialdom': California State Government, 1849–1879," In *Taming the Elephant*, 137.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 130.

<sup>8</sup> Burns, "Taming the Elephant: An Introduction to California's Statehood and Constitutional Era," 4-5.

<sup>9</sup> "The Approaching State Election," *Alta California*, September 15, 1850, *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*.

<sup>10</sup> Paddison, "Capturing California," 128.

<sup>11</sup> "The Approaching State Election," *Alta California*. See also: Warren C. Wood, "Fraud and the California State Census of 1852: Power and Demographic Distortion in Gold Rush California," *Southern California Quarterly* 100, no. 1 (2018): 28, 37.

1848–49, the so-called ‘civil fund.’ But... no such money ever was provided. It was a grave handicap for the fledgling state.”<sup>12</sup> The state was in a “... financial straitjacket that crippled the government’s ability to function...” since many of its proposed taxes failed and the federal government was failing to aid it. California was also in a difficult position since a “Question and answer between Washington and San Francisco took up to three months, leading the San Francisco newspaper [the] *Alta California* to remark, ‘The Golden State is the only one which, in consequence of its isolation, is forced to work out her own destiny.’”<sup>13</sup> All of this put significant responsibility on the state government. California was on the nation’s periphery, and this separated it from assistance and the nation’s political centers, leading many to have a more independent mentality.

The federal government and national politics did not completely ignore California though. After the “...state’s admission to the Union [had been] delayed for months until a new balance between free and slave states could be reached. National political parties transplanted themselves to California with varying degrees of success.”<sup>14</sup> With this, “The federal government [helped to build] an infrastructure—but it [also] brought along corrosive political patronage.”<sup>15</sup> The national parties attempted to establish their influence in California, and six of the first seven governors were Democrats, with the only other being a Know-Nothing.<sup>16</sup> The Whigs, although unsuccessful in statewide elections, also attempted to gain support in California.<sup>17</sup> Another example is how the Republicans’ first presidential nominee was John C. Frémont,

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<sup>12</sup> Grenier, “‘Officialdom’: California State Government,” 142.

<sup>13</sup> Robert J. Chandler, “An Uncertain Influence: The Role of the Federal Government in California, 1846-1880,” *California History* 81, no. 3/4 (2003): 225.

<sup>14</sup> Paddison, “Capturing California,” 131.

<sup>15</sup> Chandler, “An Uncertain Influence: The Role of the Federal Government in California,” 225.

<sup>16</sup> Paddison, “Capturing California,” 131-2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 131-2.



who had helped start the Bear Flag Revolt of 1846.<sup>18</sup> As a result of these efforts, "...as the decade of the 1850s progressed, the legislative and executive branches increasingly were caught up in the partisan bickering that accompanied the rise of political parties and rancor over the spoils of office."<sup>19</sup> These parties constantly struggled with each other, even though they shared similar patterns, such as how "... when a new party came to power, it fell into the same pattern of patronage and payoffs as its predecessor."<sup>20</sup> Political parties saw opportunities in California and pursued them while drawing criticism from many Californians and the independent press.

Analyzing newspapers from the early 1850s demonstrates that attempts at establishing political parties in California extended into the local media. The major parties in California had "...respectable array[s] of newspaper[s that had the] ability to commend and defend them..."<sup>21</sup> These were not always the most reliable sources of information though, and "were one to judge... the chances of success by the confidence with which each editor speaks of the prospects of his party, it would be an extremely difficult matter to decide who will be elected."<sup>22</sup> These papers acted as extensions of the various political parties and thus were more concerned with rallying support for them than providing honest information and analysis. One article from 1850 described how partisan presses "... are invariably cringing to the dictates of their masters, even while they profess to dictate. In reality they follow, while they assume to lead," as they were completely dependent on their parties.<sup>23</sup> Partisan presses were widespread and thus disseminated this slanted information, and as a result, "The

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 131-2.

<sup>19</sup> Grenier, "'Officialdom': California State Government, 1849–1879," 137.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>21</sup> "The Political Parties," *Alta California*, 15 July 1851, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> "Party Struggles," *Alta California*, 15 Sept. 1850, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

independent press... [was an] important... influence in the production of results, and is so generally relied upon, in the State and out of it... [as] it is extremely important to an elucidation of our true political condition.”<sup>24</sup> The partisan newspapers could not be relied upon to produce accurate information, for the state, local communities, or the rest of the nation, so papers that proclaimed themselves to be independent, such as the *Alta California* in San Francisco, the *Herald* in San Francisco, the *Herald* in San Diego, and the *Los Angeles Star*, were important sources of trustworthy information.<sup>25</sup>

These papers held an important role in society, and were so significant that one newspaper proclaimed, in 1851, that “The State may... be fairly... divided into three parties: the Independent, Democratic and Whig. The two last of these parties have made their nominations for the State general ticket and are exerting themselves to organize and concentrate their forces...” the third though, “...the independent party—the true California party—has made no nominations.”<sup>26</sup> The independent press competed with partisan organizations in communicating with the public. These newspapers had an idea of what California should be, but they considered themselves to be more honest and open than partisan newspapers.

An example of a neutral paper is the *Alta California*, which was published from 1841 to 1891.<sup>27</sup> This newspaper was based in San Francisco and covered a variety of topics.<sup>28</sup> Edward Gilbert was one of the founders and the editor of the *Alta California* at the time. He was born in New York and spent time in a New York Volunteer Regiment as a lieutenant before eventually helping to

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<sup>24</sup> “The Political Parties,” *Alta California*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

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

<sup>27</sup> “Daily Alta California (1849-1891),” *UCR: California Digital Newspaper Collection*, <<https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=cl&cl=CL1&sp=DAC>>.

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

found the paper.<sup>29</sup> He was also a part of California's constitutional convention in 1849 and served in Congress as a Democrat for just under six months.<sup>30</sup> He was killed a year later though in a duel in San Francisco.<sup>31</sup> Because of Gilbert's experience as a Democratic politician, it would be easy to think that the paper would lean toward Democrats, but this does not appear to be the case. Instead, the paper was highly critical of all the major political parties and lacked a clear partisan slant, revealing some of the resistance to political parties and partisanship in California at the time.

One paper claimed "... that both the *Alta California* and *Pacific News* are in politics Democratic," but the *Placer Times* responded that these allegations were "...unfounded... [and that] there is nothing clearer in the world to the public mind here and elsewhere, than the uncompromising neutrality of the *Alta California*..."<sup>32</sup> These non-partisan newspapers saw themselves as neutral and important parts of the public discourse. Yet some partisan papers, vying for some of the same readers, responded by trying to discredit more neutral newspapers. These independent newspapers, even if they had their own biases and leanings, were different from many of the partisan presses that were filled with material clearly supporting one party or faction and attacking all others. Reading through these newspapers, they lack an obvious partisan slant, instead, they focused on criticizing all political parties.

The political parties of the time, particularly the Whigs and Democrats, fought for control of California. This struggle was often characterized as "More a struggle for power [rather] than principle."<sup>33</sup> Much of what people were exposed to, when it came to the various political parties, were partisan attacks, instead of

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<sup>29</sup> "Gilbert, Edward," Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, <<https://bioguide.congress.gov/search/bio/G000172>>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> "Present Politics and the Prospective Press," *Placer Times*, 29 Apr. 1850, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

<sup>33</sup> "Party Policy," *Alta California*, 1 Aug. 1851, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

substantial policy debates. This was so prevalent that “Part of the political creed... [appeared to be making] the opposite party appear as ignorant, ridiculous and wrong as is possible, for on the defamation of one the other lives and thrives.”<sup>34</sup> Partisan attacks, in the media and outside of it, were common and dominated politics. This was likely seen as an easier, or at least quicker, way to win voters than working to understand the interests of Californians and then ensuring that this is reflected in party platforms or building up an infrastructure to secure votes. For example, the *San Joaquin Republican* in 1859, while pondering what a Democrat is, described Democrats as “... ultra hater[s] of every political thing, act, opinion, expression, thought that did not have friendly intercourse with the great, grand and glorious dogma of popular sovereignty.”<sup>35</sup> There is only the slightest suggestion of political policies and ideas here, but the substantive part of this piece is the partisan attacks against the Democratic party.

Many in California found partisan politics and partisan attacks disillusioning. One article described how, despite seemingly significant campaign efforts there was “... scarce any feeling, and no enthusiasm, is yet evinced by the masses.”<sup>36</sup> The lack of political interest was also demonstrated in 1849 when the “... California constitution was put up for ratification... [but] with virtually all white men able to vote, ‘interest could not have been intense,’ and only about 15 percent...” of those eligible voted.<sup>37</sup> There are a variety of reasons why people may not have voted, and many were not allowed to vote, but feeling disconnected from the political parties of the time was likely part of it. The rivalries, divisions, and beliefs of political parties simply do not seem to

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> “Now, Therefore, What’s a Democrat?” *San Joaquin Republican*, 24 December 1859, UCR: California Digital Newspaper Collection.

<sup>36</sup> “The Political Contest,” *Alta California*, 15 July 1851, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

<sup>37</sup> Joshua Paddison and Teena Stern, *Taming the Elephant: Politics, Government, and Law in Pioneer California*, Edited by John F. Burns, Richard J. Orsi, and Marlene Smith-Barazini, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2003), 5.

have connected with Californians early on, and the parties struggled to distinguish themselves to Californians who often did not care about the policies that were being proposed.

This goes along with how many felt that the concerns of the national political parties were simply not relevant to Californians because they cared about different issues. Many people could not differentiate between the parties, because, from their perspective, the views and goals of the major political parties were very similar, and they did little for California.<sup>38</sup> People did not feel connected to the platforms and arguments of the national parties, because “What have we... to expect from the ascendancy of either of these great parties? Are we a manufacturing community? Or an agricultural, and have [we]... ought to look for from a high or low tariff?”<sup>39</sup> The issues of national politics were far removed from California, or at least the minds of Californians, and seemed irrelevant to many. Additionally, California was still establishing itself and did not have long-standing connections to the national parties, proposals, or platforms, let alone a unified identity that would have allowed Californians to better understand what the state wanted or needed. Some even believed that:

It seems to us almost wickedly absurd to try and make appear the necessity of organizing for an election here in California, upon the old exploded and by gone differences of Whigs and Democrats... [especially] in the face of the fact that on the one question which was and is of more interest to us than all others, there was no show in Congress of Whig or democratic party. It seems an absurd attempt to make alive in California what is nothing but a corpse at home.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “Correspondence of the Placer Times,” *Placer Times*, 17 Nov. 1849, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

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

<sup>40</sup> “Getting Ready,” *Alta California*, 15 Oct. 1850, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

California did not have a legacy or tradition of entrenched party politics or relationships with any political parties, since it was a new state and thus had not been part of the country long enough to develop these. Also, with many Californians focused on gaining wealth and not on developing a strong government, there was not much of a reason for many to desire these connections. The squabbles of the Whigs, Democrats, and others were far removed from California and many simply did not care about them.

This is not to say that people saw no value in political parties, but nothing immediate. Many believed that if “matters of great magnitude, and immediately local” importance to California were given prominent positions in platforms and the actions of politicians, then they would support them.<sup>41</sup> California was part of the plans of various political parties to accumulate power, but these parties had yet to learn how to represent Californians. There were also a “... few who... [thought] that the safety of the country depends upon a majority, or at least plurality of voters exercising their privilege in favor of the men whom these warm partizans favor.”<sup>42</sup> Some had political leanings for various reasons, often based on the beliefs they had before coming to California, but this does not appear to be the case for many. For the most part, people do not seem to have been interested in the political parties due to their lack of support for the needs and desires of California and Californians. This was only exacerbated by how some believed that the state had “been very improperly treated by Congress, and the general government,” such as the earlier mentioned decision not to give California access to the “civil fund.”<sup>43</sup> Many argued that the state was taxed at high rates, but did not see anything, or at least not enough, of value in return, either due to the unwillingness of politicians to spend money in the state or because they did not

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> “Party Policy,” *Alta California*. See also: Grenier, “‘Officialdom’: California State Government,” 142.

care about the state.<sup>44</sup> The national parties were criticized for being filled with "...ambitious men... [who] are so much more anxious for office than for their country's good..."<sup>45</sup> The success of their party seemed to be more important to many politicians than the good of the people.

Beyond the political parties being seen as largely irrelevant to the state's politics, many argued that they were attempting to trick Californians for selfish reasons. Some even saw the work of the political parties as an attempt "... to create a kind of Albany regency similar to the cliques that pull the wires in the states and pull the wool over the eyes of the dear people."<sup>46</sup> Many neutral newspapers interpreted the actions of political parties as attempts to incorporate California into the broader, corrupt political system that dominated the nation. One article even described how, leading up to an election, "The political cauldron, which has simmered, seethed, boiled and bubbled with 'Double, double, toil and trouble,' for the past six months, into which have been thrown the usual election ingredients, and around which the incantation of party has been performed, over and over again..." seemingly describing disdain for political parties and corruption.<sup>47</sup>

Many viewed the parties as trying to assert their power in the state, not for public benefit or out of principle, but out of a desire for power. Independent papers seem to have believed that the goal of the political parties was to create men "... who [have] no will but to vote for whomsoever a certain party nominates, no matter by what means and methods that nomination has been effected, and irrespective of any fitness for the office or worthiness of the individual candidate..."<sup>48</sup> One described these men as "slave[s for]

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<sup>44</sup> "Party Policy," *Alta California*.

<sup>45</sup> "The Presidency," *Alta California*, 31 Oct. 1850, *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*.

<sup>46</sup> "Getting Ready," *Alta California*.

<sup>47</sup> "The Election Day," *Alta California*, 15 Sept. 1851, *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*.

<sup>48</sup> "Getting Ready," *Alta California*.

all intents and purposes” to a political party.<sup>49</sup> Non-partisan newspapers wanted Californians to resist the corrupting powers of the political parties, and maintain a greater sense of independence to avoid the toxic politics that dominated the rest of the country. Independent papers wanted people to think critically and independently. They wanted voters to “Feel themselves perfectly free to vote for the men they have reason to believe will make the best officers. It is absurd everywhere to think of chaining the choice of freemen irrevocably down to the dictum of party.”<sup>50</sup> Without this, voters and democratic society were not free, instead, they were trapped by pressure from political parties. Non-partisan papers did not want to eliminate politics, rather, they wanted to create a more open and free style of politics

Independent newspapers also claimed that “political pretenders” had, more than in other states, “... plundered [California] in various ways, through the unprincipled schemes of these seekers after place, power, or wealth, and her public character has been injured and sullied by the ills they have brought upon her. Poor State.”<sup>51</sup> Some even claimed that Democrats had corrupted California’s initial allocation of seats in the House of Representatives to gain an extra seat for their party.<sup>52</sup> To them, this was not done in the best interests of the state, but instead in furtherance of the power of the political parties, as evidenced by California being

...regarded as a country which possesses none of the elements of stability, security and morality which are essential to the well-being and prosperity of a commonwealth. We are regarded as living in a

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> “Political Pretenders,” *Alta California*, 16 Jan. 1852. Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

<sup>52</sup> “The Pacific Courier,” *Placer Times*, 29 Apr. 1850, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers. See also, Wood, “Fraud and the California State Census of 1852,” 11.



modified barbarian condition, where... dangerous human passions are restrained only by the remembrance and the influence of the latent spirit of civilization which we have brought hither with us from our former homes.<sup>53</sup>

California was not considered to be strong and stable, because of how new of a state it was and its unique conditions due to the boom of the Gold Rush. Independent newspapers wanted California to stop being part of the wild west, and instead, have more strongly established laws and government, and join the reformed society some had been accustomed to.

It was not only the existence of organized political groups that agitated these newspapers, but also, their apparent lack of effectiveness. These papers endorsed the “old Roman’s” ideal that when one

...had been elected to an inferior office, [and] his friends [attempted to dissuade] ... him from accepting it, upon the ground that the office was not honorable. His reply was, then I will accept it and make it honorable. Such should be our course— Elect men to office who are able to make the position they occupy more honorable because they are in it.<sup>54</sup>

These papers did not dismiss the importance of government or the political process, but they believed that it had to be done differently. They believed that what they were doing and arguing for was what was truly best for California. One paper urged Californians that with “The election... fast approaching... it would be well to discuss like patriots, rather than partizans, the many and interesting questions involved in it.”<sup>55</sup> These newspapers

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<sup>53</sup> “Political Pretenders,” *Alta California*.

<sup>54</sup> “What Should Our U. S. Senator Be?” *Alta California*, 15 Jan. 1851, *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*.

<sup>55</sup> “The Approaching State Election,” *Alta California*.

understood how important politics were, and that is why they were critical of political parties. They may have attacked political parties and politicians, but they still believed that “The election has been an exciting one, intensely exciting... in the quiet of each honest patriot’s heart.”<sup>56</sup> These writers understood the importance of what they were writing about, but they were upset with the direction of politics in California. They did not want the lawlessness of the wild west or the combination of apathy, party loyalty, and corruption that the political parties desired and were cultivating across the nation, instead, they wanted fervent patriots to favor the common good over partisan goals.

These writers had hopes that California could be better, as they thought that the “Independent party so greatly outnumbers the others that little progress can be made against them. Beyond the few whose associations in the Atlantic States have brought them to regard party as the charm that is to preserve the Republic, there is no interest or enthusiasm manifested in the political contest thus far.”<sup>57</sup> They thought that they would win their struggle and establish a better California that would resist the corruption and division that had infected politics elsewhere, particularly as the Civil War neared. To them, their main concern was the terrifying “...idea of raising fifth rate or fiftieth rate men to honorable and responsible stations for the offices to honor, while [these] officers are incapable of giving any in return.”<sup>58</sup> The goal of these newspapers was to convince Californians to move away from partisanship and to a more open style of politics that focused on principles, integrity, and results.

With their main concern being the betterment of California, and with the understanding that “... it is undeniable that party politics have so far entered into the present contest that either the Democratic or Whig ticket must succeed. Much as many regret this, it is evident that either one ticket or the other is to achieve

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> “The Political Parties,” *Alta California*.

<sup>58</sup> “What Should Our U. S. Senator Be?” *Alta California*.

success by the influence and votes of the third or independent party.”<sup>59</sup> Because of this understanding, the independent newspapers were not able to completely abandon the parties, but instead, they pressured them to nominate better candidates. The political parties of the time did wield significant power, so keeping them out of the state’s government was not reasonable, so these newspapers pursued the next best thing: trying to pressure these parties to improve. Because of this, so long as the candidate that was elected was honorable and a true patriot “... we will rest content, be he Whig or Democrat. And we must earnestly appeal to political men, that if they must vote alone for men of their own party, to vote for the best one of the party.”<sup>60</sup>

Independent newspapers in California struggled against the national parties that attempted to establish themselves in California. They did this because they believed that many politicians were unwilling to do what was truly best for the state, at least not when it cost their party. The political parties of the time were not strongly connected to Californians. It may have been difficult to do so, and they did make some efforts, but these national organizations were focused on national issues and ambitions, so it was easy for one new state to be ignored in some ways. The political parties of the time seemed to be unable or unwilling to adapt to California, and this likely reflects national political conditions at the time. This was a chaotic time in American history, as the Whig party collapsed and the Civil War was on the horizon, likely limiting the flexibility of political parties. Independent papers were fearful of major political parties becoming dominant in politics and not paying attention to the true desires and needs of Californians. In the end, the hopes of independent newspapers to move away from partisanship have not been realized and national political parties have become established in California and across the nation. Anti-political party

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<sup>59</sup> “The Political Parties,” *Alta California*.

<sup>60</sup> “United States Senator,” *Alta California*, 15 Feb. 1851, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

sentiments are not unheard of in American history and this leaves open the question of whether there were similar sentiments and opposition to political parties forming in other new states. The independent newspapers of California demonstrate that these sentiments existed during the early 1850s in California.

## **“Granny” Midwife to Nurse-Midwife: The Decline of Southern Black Midwifery in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century\***

**Sydney Shead**

“No new granny midwives are to be certified after April 1, 1978,” Dr. Robert Goldenburg, the Alabama state health director of maternal and child health, proclaimed in the late 20th century.<sup>1</sup> Declarations made by Goldenburg and other health professionals officially ended lay midwifery in the South, outlawing the work of many Black midwives, regardless of experience or certification. In the 1900s, the United States experienced a dramatic shift in birthing practices; from slavery to the early 20th century, Black midwives with informal training predominantly delivered babies in both Black and white communities in southern states. Black women working as midwives were trusted to safely support women in childbirth during a time when Black women were given few rights and little respect. However, the public image and general acceptance of these “granny midwives” began to decline at the turn of the 20th century for a variety of reasons that emerged from what historians have termed “the midwife problem.” While the national debate over “the midwife problem” affected midwifery in the South at a slower rate than the rest of the country, it nonetheless set in motion the eventual decline of Black midwifery.

The effects of the “midwife problem” were slower to impact the South because midwives were needed in rural and poor areas. As regulations and attention to midwives increased, southern midwives saw fewer white women but continued to attend to Black women in the earlier decades of the 20th century. However,

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\* Sydney Shead’s “‘Granny’ Midwife to Nurse-Midwife: The Decline of Southern Black Midwifery in the 20th Century” won the 2022 Frederick J. Mehl Prize. The Mehl prize is given to the student who wrote the best senior thesis in the field of history as determined by the faculty of the Santa Clara University Department of History.

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Smith, *Listen to Me Good: The Life Story of an Alabama Midwife* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996), 135.

regulation eventually increased to the point where even southern midwives treating Black women were restricted and excluded from the field. By the 1940s, Black midwives, regardless of experience, were required to attend trainings and maintain licensure in order to continue delivering babies, even for Black families. Increased regulation and licensing enforced on midwives resulted in the elimination of “granny” midwives and the creation of the nurse-midwife. The 1970s saw the end of legal midwifery in the United States, with traditional lay midwives no longer being allowed to renew their permits to practice. The shift from traditional lay midwifery to nurse-midwifery eventually led to the exclusion of Black women in a field in which they used to dominate: today, only 6.7% of nurse-midwives are Black.<sup>2</sup> Through exploring the history of Black midwifery in the South, it is evident that in the 20th century, Black midwives faced increasing regulation and exclusion due to the professionalization of both white and Black medical communities, racism and sexism within the medical and social spheres, and the creation of the nurse-midwife.

The role of Black women in the field of midwifery and as healers prior to the 20th century has been well documented by historians Deirdre Cooper Owens and Marie Schwartz. Their works are extremely important for providing context surrounding the work of Black women as midwives beginning on slave plantations and for demonstrating the ways in which Black women’s bodies were used to form the field of gynecology. Litoff’s *American Midwives: 1860 to the Present*, along with Thompson’s and Varney’s *A History of Midwifery in the United States*, link the decline of midwifery to the development of germ theory, the perceived safety and prestige of hospital births, and the fear surrounding mortality rates. The unique experiences of Black midwives and the culture of Black midwifery has been explored by historians Gertrude Fraser, Valerie Lee, Ellen Terrell, and Dominique Tobbell. Other works, including those of Jenny Luke

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<sup>2</sup> “Certified Nurse Midwife Demographics and Statistics In The US,” ZIPPIA.

and Debra Anne Susie, analyze the role of Black midwives in the South and the specific choices southern states made in regulating midwives. Their works reveal the 20th century demand for midwives in the South due to the lack of physicians available to rural, poor, Black women. There are very few memoirs and oral histories from 20th century Black midwives themselves, but Onnie Lee Logan's *Motherwit: An Alabama Midwife's Story*, Margaret Charles Smith's *Listen to Me Good: The Story of an Alabama Midwife*, and Claudine Curry Smith's *Memories of a Black Lay Midwife from Northern Neck Virginia* provide insight into the feelings and practices of Black midwives.

While historians have highlighted the important work of Black midwives prior to and during the 20th century, this essay aims to explore the various factors that resulted in the Black, female-dominated field of midwifery becoming one in which Black women are now the minority. The goal of this research is to explore early 20th century concerns about the legitimacy and safety of midwives in comparison to physicians. I will use the fields of ethnic studies and history, along with their associated theories and perspectives, to analyze and emphasize the role that race and shifting cultural norms played in the regulation of Black midwives. I will focus not only on how the white medical community and public treated Black midwives but also how the Black medical community depicted and reformed Black midwifery. I will center the voices of Black individuals in order to create a complete picture of the history of Black midwifery. My work will acknowledge the ways in which Black midwives became marginalized by white and Black physicians, society, and the government. I will examine how the social and cultural standing of Black midwives in the rural South shifted when Black women were pushed out of the field to make room for white, male physicians, and later, white female nurse-midwives.

Black women have been involved in childbirth in America since the 17th century. During slavery, Black women served as

healers in various ways including assisting with childbirth.<sup>3</sup> Oftentimes, doctors could not reach plantations in time for births because of the rural nature of the South, leaving the responsibility of delivering babies to enslaved women. In this way, Black female healers exercised a certain level of autonomy on plantations; they could help fellow slaves give birth without oversight from white doctors.<sup>4</sup> William E. Breckell, a plantation owner in the 19th century, stated that “on plantations, of course it cannot be expected that the physician is to be called in for every case of natural labor,” demonstrating how common it was for women to give birth with the help of a lay midwife rather than a physician.<sup>5</sup> In many cases, enslaved women acted as “the sole matron, midwife, nurse, physician, surgeon, and servant” on plantations.<sup>6</sup> Some midwives were permitted to deliver babies on neighboring plantations, traveling to deliver both white and Black babies, demonstrating how midwifery granted enslaved women some mobility and degree of freedom.<sup>7</sup>

Plantation owners also encouraged enslaved women to act as midwives out of financial interest. It was cheaper for plantation owners to use slaves to deliver enslaved babies for free than to hire a white practitioner. A Mississippi slave owner reflected that his “physician’s bill averaged fifty dollars a year” because he sent his sick and pregnant slaves to an enslaved woman instead of employing a physician.<sup>8</sup> His bill being only \$50 annually is impressive considering that his family and a number of enslaved individuals inhabited his plantation. The use of midwives for

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<sup>3</sup> Sharla Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 118.

<sup>4</sup> Deirdre Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1972), 71.

<sup>5</sup> Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 181.

<sup>6</sup> Owens, *Medical Bondage*, 119.

<sup>7</sup> Debra Anne Susie, *In the Way of Our Grandmothers: A Cultural View of Twentieth-Century Midwifery in Florida* (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press), 23.

<sup>8</sup> Owens, *Medical Bondage*, 66.



childbirth rather than physicians was a cost-effective choice during this time period.

Former slaves have also discussed the role of Black women as midwives on plantations. While firsthand accounts of Black midwifery before the 20th century are scarce, there are some oral histories of Black women working as midwives during and following slavery. Maria Jackson was born into slavery and lived through the emancipation of slaves in Georgia; when interviewed, she revealed that “I has cotched plenny babies in dis world,” including the children of “the rich, poor, and colored folks to... I has wuked wid dem all,” suggesting that she worked as a midwife for both Black and white women.<sup>9</sup> Jennie Gibson divulges that her “grandma was a midwife and doctored all the babies on the place” while enslaved on a plantation in Arkansas.<sup>10</sup> Annie Mae Hunt’s grandmother was a midwife in Texas during the 19th century. In her memoir, Hunt states that “every white man or black man born in that country that’s my age, my grandma caught him.”<sup>11</sup> Black women dominated childbirth assistance as midwives during slavery as well as in the years following, especially within southern Black communities.

Following slavery, women practicing as midwives in the late 19th century to the mid-20th century in southern states were termed “granny midwives.”<sup>12</sup> The term “granny” was used to describe traditional Black midwives specifically. It is worth noting that Black patients used the term “granny” out of respect while the medical elite used it as a derogatory term to degrade Black midwives based on their race. Onnie Lee Logan, an Alabama

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<sup>9</sup> Maria Jackson, interview by Ed Cune, *American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology*, University of Virginia, December 13, 1938.

<sup>10</sup> Jennie Gibson, interview by Irene Robertson, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, The Library of Congress, 1936-1938.

<sup>11</sup> Annie Mae Hunt, *I Am Annie Mae: An Extraordinary Black Texas Woman in Her Own Words* (University of Texas Press, 1983), 19.

<sup>12</sup> Joyce E. Thompson & Helen Varney, *A History of Midwifery in the United States: The Midwife Said Fear Not* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2016), 10.

midwife in the 1900s, recalls how her mother and grandmother were called “granny midwives” or “grannies” in the late 1800s-1900s.<sup>13</sup>

At the turn of the 20th century, physicians began to question the legitimacy of midwifery under the “midwife problem.” One of the contributing factors to the “midwife problem” was the professionalization of the obstetrics field. By the late 19th century, physicians sought to legitimize their profession to increase their salary and prestige. In 1859, the American Medical Association designated practical medicine and obstetrics as one of the four scientific sections of the association.<sup>14</sup> The founding of the *American Journal of Obstetrics* in 1868, the American Gynecological Society in 1876<sup>15</sup>, and the American Association of Obstetricians and Gynecologists in 1888<sup>16</sup> also contributed to the professionalization of the obstetrics field. In 1930, the American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology was formed “to grant and to insure to physicians, duly licensed by law, certificates or other equivalent recognition of special knowledge of obstetrics and gynecology,” establishing standards for the obstetrics field.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the legitimization of the field of obstetrics, physicians remained hesitant to specialize in obstetrics because obstetricians were paid and respected less than physicians in other specialties. Obstetricians blamed midwives for the lack of pay and respect they received in the field. Many physicians believed that midwives overcrowded the obstetrics field, reducing the amount physicians could charge for deliveries and creating an oversaturated market. Dr. Joseph B. DeLee wrote in “Progress Toward Ideal Obstetrics” that “as long as the medical profession

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<sup>13</sup> Onnie Lee Logan, *Motherwit, an Alabama Midwife's Story* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989), 50.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Crawford, *Digest of Official Actions: American Medical Association, 1846-1958* (Chicago, 1959), 643.

<sup>15</sup> Richard B. Morris, ed., *Encyclopedia of American History* (New York, 1965), 574.

<sup>16</sup> Rosemary Stevens, *American Medicine and the Public Interest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 46.

<sup>17</sup> Litoff, *American Midwives*, 72-73.

tolerates that brand of infamy, the midwife, the public will not be brought to realize that... it must pay as well for it as for surgery.”<sup>18</sup> In this work, he argues that midwives reduce the salary of obstetricians because they provide a cheaper option for patients. Dr. H.J. Garrigues, an obstetrician, stated that there was a “superabundance of medical men” seeking obstetric cases.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in 1907, a doctor expressed concern because “it has been estimated that it requires one thousand of the population to insure a physician a decent living, yet in these United States the average is one physician to seven hundred or eight hundred population,” revealing that some physicians believed that there were not enough women requiring obstetricians to keep the profession in demand.<sup>20</sup>

Many doctors accused midwives of taking away potential cases, leaving physicians with few job opportunities. In 1912, physicians Arthur Brewster Emmons and James Lincoln Huntington expressed their concern in “The Midwife: Her Future in the United States” when they wrote that “some 30,000 women have taken enough practice away from the physicians to obtain a livelihood,” accusing midwives of taking away patients and money from obstetricians.<sup>21</sup> These physicians constructed the narrative that midwives were to blame for the perceived lack of patients available for obstetricians. Further, physicians believed that as men, they had a right to patients that female midwives did not. They were specifically concerned with the fact that women were taking away potential patients and money from male physicians.

Obstetricians also worried that midwifery diminished the prestige of obstetrics and that the general public would not respect them because midwives performed similar duties. Dr. B. DeLee

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<sup>18</sup> Joseph B. DeLee, “Progress Toward Ideal Obstetrics,” *Transactions of the American Association for the Study and Prevention of Infant Mortality*, 6 (1915): 114-123.

<sup>19</sup> H.J. Garrigues, “Midwives,” *Medical News*, 72 (1898): 233-235.

<sup>20</sup> C.L. Girard, “A Comparison of the Old-time and Modern Physician,” *Journal of Michigan Medical Society*, 6 (March 1907): 107.

<sup>21</sup> Arthur Brewster Emmons and James Lincoln Huntington, “The Midwife: Her Future in the United States,” *American Journal of Obstetrics and the Diseases of Women and Children*, 65 (March 1912): 383-404.

stated that “the midwife has been a drag on the progress of the science and art of obstetrics... she prevented obstetrics from obtaining any standing at all among the sciences of medicine.”<sup>22</sup> Here, the physician blames midwives for the public’s lack of respect for obstetricians and the slow progress of the field. He argues that patients are less inclined to respect or hire obstetricians because of the idea that “if an uneducated woman of the lower classes may practice obstetrics... it certainly must require very little knowledge and skill - surely it cannot belong to the science and art of medicine.”<sup>23</sup> As long as midwives with no formal education nor training continued to safely, and inexpensively, deliver babies, obstetricians could not routinely charge as much nor expect the majority of patients to choose them over midwives.

As a result of these fears, physicians sought to improve their own status by convincing the public that they were superior and safer than midwives, emphasizing the ways in which they were more qualified. They highlighted hygiene practices and mortality rates as areas of concern. In the 1880s, Louis Pasteur discovered that women in labor were more susceptible to virulent bacterial infection, including puerperal fever.<sup>24</sup> Based on Pasteur’s research in microbiology, Joseph Lister successfully figured out how to use carbolic acid as an antiseptic, reducing mortality from surgery and childbirth. The rise of Germ Theory, the belief that certain diseases are caused by microorganisms too small to be seen with the naked eye, and the use of antiseptics to sterilize equipment and wounds shaped how doctors approached childbirth. During the 1930s, the discovery of sulfa and penicillin provided treatments for infections developed during childbirth.<sup>25</sup> The reformed hygiene practices of physicians contributed to the professionalization of the obstetrics

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<sup>22</sup> Lee, “Progress Toward Ideal Obstetrics,” 114-123.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Dorothy C Wertz and Richard W Wertz, *Lying-in: A History of Childbirth in America* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1977), 125.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 127.

field as doctors adopted standard aseptic and antiseptic practices for childbirth.

At the root of many arguments made by physicians against “granny” midwives was racism against Black women. While midwifery was being questioned nationally, the medical community specifically targeted Black midwives for their race. Racism informed physicians’ assertions about the lack of hygiene and intelligence that midwives possessed. Dr. O.R. Thompson of Macon, Georgia wrote in “Midwife Problem” that southern midwives were more difficult to train than northern midwives because they were “primarily ‘ignorant’ and ‘superstitious’ Negroes.”<sup>26</sup> His sentiments expose how racial prejudice contributed to his negative perception of Black midwives. Dr. Hardin stated that “typical of the midwife of the rural south. She is far below the European midwife in intelligence and no training under the sun could make her a competent obstetric.”<sup>27</sup> He implies that there is a difference in ability between white, European midwives, and Black, southern midwives, linking race and intelligence. In “The Development of Midwifery in Mississippi,” Dr. Felix J. Underwood, director of the Bureau of Child Hygiene for Mississippi, wrote:

What could be a more pitiable picture than that of a prospective mother housed in an unsanitary home and attended in this most critical period by an accoucheur, filthy and ignorant, and not far removed from the jungles of Africa, laden with its atmosphere of weird superstition and voodooism.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> O.R. Thompson, “Midwife Problem,” *Journal of the Medical Association of Georgia* 16, (April 1927): 136.

<sup>27</sup> Hardin, “The Midwife Problem,” 351.

<sup>28</sup> Felix J. Underwood, “The Development of Midwifery in Mississippi,” *Southern Medical Journal* 19, no. 9 (September 1926): 683.

He stated in the same article that “4,209 midwives were actively engaged in the work, that 97 percent were of African descent, all of them untrained, unlettered, and fettered by the grossest superstition, without any idea of what constitutes physical cleanliness.”<sup>29</sup> Dr. Henry Borst published an article in *The Pensacola Journal* in which he recommended that Florida “handle the Ignorant negro midwife question in a sensible manner, by requiring them to go through hospital training before being allowed to do ‘granny’ malpractice.”<sup>30</sup> Here, he suggests that Black midwives are ignorant because of their race and that traditional Black midwifery is illegitimate.

Logan recalls her experiences with racism as a midwife when a doctor told her “you incompetent nigra woman. You don’t know what you’re doin. If you want to deliver any mo’ babies go back to Africa where you come from.”<sup>31</sup> The physician refers to Logan as a “nigra woman,” explicitly using racist language to criticize her. When he tells her to return to Africa, he makes it clear that he disapproves of her because she is Black, not solely because she is a midwife. Paul Coughlin, surgeon and director of the Leon County Health Department, suggested that the medical profession should have “respect for the ‘Grannys’ but caution not to be contaminated by them.”<sup>32</sup> By using the term “contaminated,” Coughlin implies that he believes that by interacting with Black women, white doctors can be tainted. He also suggests that Black midwives are dirty and untrained and that physicians should not attempt to learn from the midwife or engage with her in collaborative work. The racism and sexism present in the obstetrics field cannot be ignored when discussing the “midwife problem” because it largely rested

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Henry Borst, “Pensacola Doctor Writes State Health Officer Long Letter on Question of Protest to Surgeon Blue,” *The Pensacola Journal*, 30 October 1919, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress.

<sup>31</sup> Logan, *Motherwit*, 166.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Coughlin, director of the Leon County Health Department, to Lucille J. Marsh, director of the Bureau of Maternal and Child Health, 3 August 1944, series 904, box 5, FSA in Susie, *In the Way of Our Grandmothers*, 39.

upon arguments made against the southern, typically Black, female midwife.

Racism also motivated physicians to accuse “granny” midwives of being responsible for deaths during childbirth. Published mortality rates placed an emphasis on the safety of women and children during childbirth. In 1917, the federal Children’s Bureau published the *Maternal Mortality from All Conditions Connected with Childbirth*, which stated that “in 1913, at least 15,000 women, it is estimated, died from conditions caused by childbirth; about 7,000 of these died from childbed fever... remaining 8,000 from diseases now known to be to a great extent preventable or curable.”<sup>33</sup> In this publication, the Children’s Bureau expresses concern over the United States childbirth mortality rate and the idea that many of these deaths are, in their opinion, preventable. In “The Midwife Problem,” physician E.R. Hardin wrote that midwives are “ignorant, untrained, incompetent women, and some of the results of their incompetence are unnecessary deaths and blindness of infants, avoidable invalidism, suffering and death of mothers.”<sup>34</sup> Carolyn Conant Van Blarcom, a nurse and midwife who graduated from Johns Hopkins University in 1901, stated that “it is due in great measure to the ignorance and neglect on the part of midwives that many babies become blind from what is commonly known as babies’ sore eyes.”<sup>35</sup> Obstetricians cited their standardized hygiene practices as evidence that hiring a physician was safer and used perceived high maternal and infant mortality rates to condemn midwives as dangerous and unhygienic.

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<sup>33</sup> Grace L. Meigs, *Maternal Mortality from All Conditions Connected with Childbirth in the United States and Certain Other Countries*, United States Department of Labor, Children’s Bureau Publication, No. 19. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917.

<sup>34</sup> E. R. Hardin, “The Midwife Problem,” *Southern Medical Journal*, 18 (May 1925): 348.

<sup>35</sup> Carolyn C. Van Blarcom, “Midwives in America,” *American Journal of Public Health*, 4 (March 1914): 197-207.

Organizations such as the American Association for the Study and Prevention of Infant Mortality (AASPIM) also analyzed the infant mortality rate in the United States and were concerned by the idea that midwives played a role in causing infant and maternal deaths. In 1912, the AASPIM conducted numerous investigations and debated the role of the midwife, contributing to the belief that midwives increased the maternal and infant mortality rate. The organization did not investigate the role of physicians in these mortality rates, suggesting that midwives were the sole cause of high mortality rates during childbirth.<sup>36</sup> The work of these organizations demonstrates how the midwife problem spanned beyond the medical community; governmental organizations and the general public were involved in questioning the competency of midwives in childbirth in the 20th century.

While physicians and organizations blamed midwifery for high mortality rates, there was no evidence to support the idea that maternal and infant deaths were due primarily to the work of midwives. In fact, several studies, mainly conducted by public health professionals concerned with discovering the true causes of the high mortality rates, show that the mortality rates of mothers and newborns did not decrease when physicians assisted with childbirth. The 1930 White House Conference on Child Health and Protection published two volumes investigating maternal and infant health care and found that “the midwife was not the determining factor in the high maternal mortality of any particular area in the United States.”<sup>37</sup> The Committee on the Costs of Medical Care disclosed “that untrained midwives approach, and trained midwives surpass, the record [of successful births] of physicians in normal deliveries,” arguing that midwives delivered healthy babies at similar rates as physicians.<sup>38</sup> Studies conducted in the 1930s found that “uneducated midwives of New York had

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<sup>36</sup> “Section on Midwifery,” *Transactions of the American Association for the Study and Prevention of Infant Mortality*, 3 (1912): 219-276.

<sup>37</sup> Litoff, *American Midwives*, 109.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.



septicemia rates no worse than those of doctors in home and hospital deliveries”<sup>39</sup> and that “maternal mortality had not declined between 1915 and 1930 despite the increase in hospital delivery.”<sup>40</sup> A graph mapping puerperal fever deaths as percent of total maternal mortality demonstrates that mortality rates did not decline during the 1920s, even though hospital births increased.<sup>41</sup> In conclusion, while physicians blamed midwives for the high maternal and infant mortality rates, physicians were no more effective than their midwife counterparts at decreasing these rates.

In some cases, it was even found that midwife-attended births had a lower rate of maternal and infant mortality. Julius Levy published an article titled “Maternal Mortality and Mortality in the First Month of Life in Relation to Attendant at Birth” in which he reported that midwifery and mortality rates were inversely related. In Newark, New Jersey, “the percentage [of midwives] has decreased from 48 in 1917 to 38 in 1921, while in the same five year period the maternal mortality has risen from 4.1 to 6.5.”<sup>42</sup> In Pittsburgh, the percentage of cases delivered by midwives increased from 1920 to 1921 while the maternal mortality rates decreased from 10.0 to 7.6; in Cleveland, cases attended by midwives decreased from 28% to 25% while maternal mortality increased from 5.9 to 6.9.<sup>43</sup> Levy also reported that “the lowest maternal mortality rate is in the city with the highest percentage of births delivered by midwives... the highest maternal mortality rate is in the city with the second lowest percentage of births attended by midwives,” suggesting a connection between midwives and lower maternal mortality rates.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Wertz, *Lying-in*, 127.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>41</sup> Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Brought to Bed: Childbearing in America, 1750 to 1950* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 183.

<sup>42</sup> Julius Levy, “Maternal Mortality and Mortality in the First Month of Life in Relation to Attendant at Birth,” *American Journal of Public Health* 13, (February 1923): 88-95.

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

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

In 1933, New York Academy of Medicine's Committee on Public Health Relations estimated that physicians were present for 61.1% of preventable deaths while midwives attended only 2.2% of these deaths; additionally, midwives had the lowest maternal death rate of any birth attendant at a rate of 1.4% compared to 5.4% for physicians and 9.9% for surgeons.<sup>45</sup> One physician found that "statistics show that 26% to 31% of maternal deaths from puerperal sepsis were attended by midwives; 59% to 71% were attended by physicians"<sup>46</sup> and a Philadelphia doctor observed that "our statistics in Philadelphia show that patients are as well off, if not better, in the hands of our midwives than they are in the hands of doctors,"<sup>47</sup> revealing how in some cities, mortality rates were actually higher among physician attended births. In 1933, it was found that "the number of infant deaths from birth injuries had actually increased by 40 to 50 percent from 1915 to 1929," correlating with an increase in hospital-based and physician attended births.<sup>48</sup>

Not only were midwives not solely responsible for the high mortality rates, but in some cases, they were found safer than physicians, suggesting that these rates were being unfairly attributed to the work of midwives to deflect blame from physicians. Doctors worked to establish the image that midwives were unhygienic, unsafe, and more likely to cause complications or death during childbirth. Evidence supporting the safety and competence of Black midwifery suggests that physicians looked for statistics to support their arguments against midwifery and demonstrates that the fear concerning midwifery was based largely on myths about midwives. The way in which physicians attacked

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<sup>45</sup> Ransom S. Hooker, *Maternal Mortality in New York City: A Study of All Puerperal Deaths, 1930-1932* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 7.

<sup>46</sup> Dr. Ralph Waldo Lobenstine, "The Influence of the Midwife upon Infant and Maternal Morbidity and Mortality," *American Journal of Obstetrics and the Diseases of Women and Children* 63, (1911): 876-880.

<sup>47</sup> J. M. Baldy, "Is the Midwife a Necessity?" *Transactions of the Sixth Annual Meeting, American Association for Study and Prevention of Infant Mortality*, (1915): 107.

<sup>48</sup> Wertz, *Lying-in*, 161.

Black midwives for being unhygienic, dangerous, and incompetent was rooted in racism and contributed to the marginalization of Black midwives.

The choice of physicians to blame “granny” midwives for mortality rates and accuse them of being unhygienic and dangerous spread from the medical community to the general public.

Negative stories about midwives spread through newspapers, reaching a wider audience than the anti-midwife sentiments expressed in medical journals. *The Prescott Daily News* published a story in 1911 titled “Coroner to Investigate Cause of Demise of Mother Following Visit of Midwife,” in which a midwife is blamed for causing the death of patient Julia Muhr during childbirth.<sup>49</sup> The fact that this story was reported in a newspaper suggests that the public, outside of the medical community, was beginning to question the competence of midwives. A *Society and Home Topics for Women* article titled the “Midwife Should Be Eliminated” stated that “the midwife should be eliminated and her work should be taken over by physicians and nurses... the speaker blamed the public for the midwife's existence.”<sup>50</sup> This article reveals that anti-midwife sentiments appeared in newspapers geared towards middle to upper class white women. The author emphasizes the power that women have to end the practice of midwifery by employing a doctor instead of a midwife. In an article titled “Health and Wealth,” the author stated that “one in every 29 deaths among white women between 10 and 20 were due to puerperal septicemia, or childbed fever, in Georgia last year. The filthy midwife or a dirty nurse is to blame for a majority of these deaths.”<sup>51</sup> Similarly, *The Atlanta Georgian And News* stated that “in the United States in 1910 there were 154,373 babies who

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<sup>49</sup> “Coroner to Investigate Cause of Demise of Mother Following Visit of Midwife,” *The Prescott Daily News*, 9 June 1911, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress.

<sup>50</sup> “Midwife Should Be Eliminated,” *The Birmingham Age-Herald*, 18 September 1915, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress.

<sup>51</sup> “Health and Wealth,” *Americus times-recorder*, 27 August 1921, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress.

died before they were one year old... 50 percent of all the births are attended by a class of untaught and untrained women, who, as a rule, are densely ignorant and unspeakably dirty,” implying that the unhygienic nature of midwives results in higher rates of infant mortality.<sup>52</sup> The fact that newspaper articles criticized midwives and pushed for their elimination suggests that the “midwife problem” had become a public discussion rather than one existing solely in the medical community.

The public perception of “granny” midwives within white communities shifted as a result of biased, racist, sexist ideology expressed by physicians against midwives and later, anti-midwife sentiments found in local newspapers. The use of midwives declined among many southern white, well-off families as a result of racist ideology and the belief that white physicians were superior, safer, and of higher status than Black midwives. These families began to believe that midwives were dirty, untrained, and for the lower classes. Logan remembers how “my patients have come and told me what the doctors said. Said we didn’t know what we was doin. We was black. We was ignorant. Because we’re black we’re ignorant,” revealing not only the racism of the white medical community but how these sentiments reached patients.<sup>53</sup>

In 1925, a survey was conducted across different counties in Texas to examine how many births were being attended by midwives. The study shows that the rate of midwifery among white families had declined by the mid-1920s, with Black midwives in Smith County, Texas delivering 31 white babies and 276 Black babies. In Cameron County, Black midwives attended 28 white births opposed to 198 Black births, and in Bastrop County, midwives delivered 53 white babies and 213 Black babies, demonstrating a dramatic difference in the use of midwives among

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<sup>52</sup> “Importance of Midwife,” *Atlanta Georgian*, 30 September 1912, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress.

<sup>53</sup> Logan, *Motherwit*, 167.

white and Black southern families.<sup>54</sup> The survey also reveals that many white patients hired doctors because they believed them to be safer than midwives. When asked why she chose a doctor to attend her birth, one woman stated that “I was young and wanted best care” while another woman said that “lives safer in hands of doctor,” suggesting that it had become a common belief that doctors were superior to, and safer than, midwives. Another woman surveyed said that she chose a doctor because “I know midwives are uneducated and dangerous,” revealing how the arguments made by the white medical community negatively affected how patients saw midwives.

Fear over the safety and hygiene practices of midwives combined with racist and sexist beliefs about Black women called the practice of midwifery into question. Physicians were seen as more qualified, safer, and superior because of required training, standard hygiene practices, and status. Middle to upper class white families began to choose physicians as birth attendants over midwives, and hospital births increased in the early 20th century. However, it is important to note that white patients’ preference for obstetricians over midwives was not mirrored amongst Black families. One Black woman surveyed said that she “had to have midwife. All we colored folks need,” while another said “Mother is a granny that’s why I like grannies,” demonstrating the continued use of midwives within southern Black families in the mid-1920s.<sup>55</sup> The Texas survey reveals that Black midwives continued to practice care in the South during the 1920s, but mainly for Black families. The white community had begun to view Black midwives as inferior to, and less safe than, white physicians.

Black midwifery was accepted among Black families in the South even following the arguments made against “granny” midwives. During the initial debates surrounding midwifery in the early 20th century, midwives and physicians attended about an

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<sup>54</sup> “Report on the Midwife Survey in Texas,” Bureau of Child Hygiene, Texas State Board of Health, 1924. Manuscript in the possession of the Texas State Board of Health.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

equal number of births, demonstrating that midwives were still used widely by women of all races.<sup>56</sup> In 1918, 87.9 percent of all Black births in Mississippi were still attended by midwives<sup>57</sup> and as late as 1940, while the widespread use of midwives had declined, the Children's Bureau published that “midwives attend more than two-thirds of the negro births in Mississippi, South Carolina, Arkansas, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, and Louisiana. They attend from one-third to two-thirds of Negro births in North Carolina, Virginia, Delaware, Texas, and Oklahoma.”<sup>58</sup> It is evident that midwifery thrived in the South well into the 20th century, specifically among Black communities.

Black midwifery survived in the South for a variety of reasons. Southern physicians usually lived in towns and cities, far from many rural families. Margaret Smith, a Black midwife in the 1940s, stated that “poor rural counties with large black populations typically had few physicians,” including where she lived in Green County, Alabama.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, midwives were more prominent throughout rural areas; in rural Mississippi, “no family lived more than 2 or 3 miles” from a midwife.<sup>60</sup> For many poor women, it was financially impossible to afford a physician, especially if they lived in a rural area. In 1916 rural Mississippi, fees for midwives ranged from \$5 to \$10 while physicians charged anywhere from \$10 to \$15 plus additional travel fees.<sup>61</sup> In many cases, midwives accepted informal payments for their labor such as “chickens, pigs, grain, or a neighborly give-and-take-basis,” making midwives much more affordable than physicians.<sup>62</sup> Logan writes that her

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<sup>56</sup> Judy Barrett Litoff, *American Midwives: 1860 to the Present* (Westport & London: Greenwood Press, 1978), 27.

<sup>57</sup> Helen M. Dart, *Maternity and Child Care in Selected Rural Areas of Mississippi*, United States Department of Labor, Children's Bureau Publication, No. 88 (Washington, D.C., 1921), 27.

<sup>58</sup> Thompson, *A History of Midwifery in the United States*, 10.

<sup>59</sup> Smith, *Listen to Me Good*, 85.

<sup>60</sup> Dart, *Maternity and Child Care in Selected Rural Areas of Mississippi*, 27.

<sup>61</sup> Litoff, *American Midwives*, 28.

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

mother was rarely paid for her work as a midwife, and when she was, it was in the form of “co’n, chicken, greens.”<sup>63</sup> Smith remembers that there were many times when “Mama ain’t never paid me, Daddy ain’t never paid me” after her work as a midwife for families.<sup>64</sup> Claudine Smith, a midwife in Virginia in the mid-1900s, explains “I didn’t keep a billing system... most of them that did owe they would kind of stop by,” again demonstrating the ways in which midwives served poor, Black women in the South.<sup>65</sup>

“Grannies” were not only cheaper than physicians, but performed more services for pregnant women as well. Black midwives often cared for mothers and newborn babies, cleaned houses, prepared meals, and looked after other children in the family in addition to delivering babies.<sup>66</sup> Logan recalls that her mother and grandmother did more than deliver babies; “they do the cookin and the washin” as well.<sup>67</sup> Black women also preferred to employ Black midwives rather than white doctors because of the racism they experienced from white physicians. Before desegregation, many doctors refused to deliver babies for Black women, leaving these women with few birthing options.<sup>68</sup> Professor Valerie Lee writes that while hospitals became desirable birthing locations for wealthier white women in the 20th century, Black women were placed in basement wards or segregated wings with inferior treatment.<sup>69</sup> Logan writes that “black people would always prefer a midwife... black people was afraid of white doctors...they knew how they was gonna be treated...like they wasn’t a human bein.”<sup>70</sup> This perspective reveals that Black

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<sup>63</sup> Logan, *Motherwit*, 52.

<sup>64</sup> Smith, *Listen to Me Good*, 76.

<sup>65</sup> Claudine Curry Smith, *Memories of a Black Lay Midwife from Northern Neck Virginia* (Lisle, IL: Tucker Publications, 1994), 80.

<sup>66</sup> Litoff, *American Midwives*, 28.

<sup>67</sup> Logan, *Motherwit*, 52.

<sup>68</sup> Smith, *Listen to Me Good*, 88.

<sup>69</sup> Valerie Lee, *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers Double-Dutched Readings* (New York & London: Routledge, 1996), 42.

<sup>70</sup> Logan, *Motherwit*, 52.

women chose to employ midwives in order to avoid the racism they experienced from white doctors and the healthcare system. As midwives, Black women had the unique power to positively impact the treatment of Black women during childbirth and shield them from the racism present in healthcare. For Black women in the South, calling a midwife was safer, cheaper, and more comfortable than being faced with racism and expensive fees at the hands of white doctors during childbirth.

However, changes in the Black medical community during the 1930s-1940s resulted in Black physicians echoing the arguments made against “granny” midwives by the white medical community. As Black medical professionals sought respect and validation, they sided with the white medical community over the “midwife problem,” criticizing “granny” midwives so that the Black medical community would gain approval from white society. While previous arguments made by white physicians did not largely affect how Black patients saw midwives, the criticism of “granny” midwives by Black physicians decreased the Black community’s support of midwives. Black physicians played an important role in the eventual diminishment of Black midwifery within Black communities by shunning them from the medical field. In order to understand the motivation of Black physicians to attack “granny” midwives, it is imperative to recognize the unique struggles of Black doctors in the preceding decades.

Black physicians struggled to establish legitimate careers in the 19th and 20th centuries. In order to practice in hospitals, doctors had to be members of the American Medical Association (AMA), an organization founded in 1847 to establish standards for medical education. Membership decisions were left up to local chapters, and many southern chapters rejected Black doctors, preventing them from practicing in the field. Black physicians also struggled to establish practices because patients saw white physicians as more professional, choosing to employ white doctors instead. Additionally, many Black patients were unable to pay for doctor visits, leaving Black physicians with few patients. Black



doctors also often struggled to obtain office spaces due to racism, poverty, segregation, and debt.<sup>71</sup>

In response to this discrimination, Black doctors founded the National Medical Association (NMA) in 1895 and some Black physicians, including surgeon Daniel Hale Williams, opened hospitals in their own homes.<sup>72</sup> Unfortunately for Black physicians, the Flexner Report was issued in 1910. This report imposed new standards on medical colleges that the majority of Black medical schools could not meet. For example, the report required all medical schools to be affiliated with both a university and a hospital, have adequate clinical training, and retain full time faculty. These new standards resulted in the closure of at least four Black medical schools, reducing the number of Black doctors in the early 20th century. In 1900, only 1.3% of doctors in the U.S were Black.<sup>73</sup>

In the 1940s, southern medical schools began to desegregate, opening up new opportunities for Black physicians. The desire to be accepted by the white medical community influenced the way Black physicians viewed the “midwife problem.” Black doctors knew that in order to establish themselves as respected practitioners in the eyes of the white community, they needed to adhere to the medical beliefs of white physicians. One Black physician who spoke about the role of midwives was John A. Kenney Sr., a Black surgeon who served as the medical director of the John A. Andrew Memorial Hospital at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. He agreed with many white physicians about the fact that midwives were often the cause of high mortality rates and birth complications. As editor-in-chief of the *Journal of the National Medical Association*, he published an article in 1932

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<sup>71</sup> Thomas J. Ward, *Black Physicians in the Jim Crow South* (University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 110-124.

<sup>72</sup> Vanessa Northington Gamble, *Making a Place for Ourselves: The Black Hospital Movement, 1920-1945* (London: Oxford University Press, 1995), 21.

<sup>73</sup> Dan P. Ly, “Historical Trends in the Representativeness and Incomes of Black Physicians, 1900–2018,” *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, (2021).

stating that “it is unfortunate but true that ‘meddlesome midwives’ are the cause of disorders.”<sup>74</sup> In the same article, he argues that while statistics show that physicians cause more maternal and infant deaths than midwives, it is only because midwives attend simpler births while physicians treat more complicated deliveries.<sup>75</sup> This argument reveals both Kenney’s bias as a male physician and his opposition to Black midwives, even as a Black doctor. Ten years later, Kenney had more forceful things to say about midwives who still practiced in the South. He wrote that mortality rates are higher in “rural areas where ignorant, I won’t say untrained, but at least unlettered midwives” are responsible and that “much damage has been done by meddlesome midwifery, by grannies, by midwives.”<sup>76</sup>

Kenney, along with other Black physicians, sought to adhere to the standards of white physicians to elevate their own status in the medical field. By agreeing that midwives were ignorant, dangerous, and incompetent, Black doctors were able to establish more legitimacy. They desired for the Black medical community as a whole to be seen as professional and congruent with the standards of the white medical community. In order for this to happen, Black midwives had to be accepted by white doctors. To accomplish this goal, Black physicians pushed for the reform of midwifery to better standardize the Black medical community.

The opposition of Black midwifery from both white and Black medical communities increased licensing requirements for midwives. The racialization of midwifery contributed to increased regulations for midwives, even for southern midwives that were deemed necessary in rural areas. States that previously had no licensing requirements for midwives began establishing standards

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<sup>74</sup> J. A. Kenney, “Preventive and Reparative Surgery Before, During and After Delivery, in the Interest of Maternal and Child Welfare,” *Journal of the National Medical Association* 24, no. 1 (1932): 2.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> J. A. Kenney, “The First Graduating Class of the Tuskegee School of Midwifery,” *Journal of the National Medical Association* 34, no. 3 (1942): 108.

for midwifery. In the early 20th century, midwives could freely practice with no formal training or education. A 1912 *Birmingham Age Herald* article complained that there were no laws restricting midwifery in 31 states and that in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, midwives were legally allowed to practice without regulation, allowing midwives to “follow their calling unsupervised and unrestricted. . . midwives are actually allowed by law to practice unrestricted.”<sup>77</sup> However, a couple of years later, a Mississippi Health Bulletin stated that “it is imperative that a state law be passed requiring each midwife to stand an examination and hold a license,” illustrating that even in the South, demand for the regulation of midwifery was developing.<sup>78</sup> *The Southern Herald* stated that the Mississippi State Board of Health required the Midwife Association to meet to go over hygiene and safety practices.<sup>79</sup> The 1921 Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Protection Act provided federal funding with the purpose of “promoting the care of maternity and infancy in rural districts,” increasing the amount of education and training available to midwives in southern, rural areas.<sup>80</sup> The meetings and funds directed solely for the development of midwifery meant that southern midwives were encouraged to attend trainings about hygiene and birthing practices. While midwives were not legally restricted if they did not attend these meetings, the existence of such opportunities suggests that the medical community was focusing its attention on standardizing midwifery.

By the 1930s and 40s, midwives in most southern states were required to obtain licensure in order to practice. In 1937, a midwife meeting in Key West taught midwives new techniques in order to

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<sup>77</sup> Carolyn C. Van Blarcom, “Saving Mothers and Babies,” *The Birmingham Age-Herald*, 26 May 1912, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress.

<sup>78</sup> “U.D.C Notes,” *The City Itemizer*, 15 January 1914, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress.

<sup>79</sup> “Notice to Midwives,” *The Southern Herald*, 25 June 1920, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress.

<sup>80</sup> H.R. 12634, *A Bill to Encourage Instruction in the Hygiene of Maternity and Infancy*, 1 July 1918.

reduce the maternal and infant mortality rate.<sup>81</sup> *The Skyland Post* published an article stating that “all practicing midwives, as well as those wishing to secure permits to practice, are required to attend” at least one of the classes being offered in North Carolina.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, *The Roanoke Rapids Herald* revealed that the Halifax County Health Department was holding its annual midwife meeting; all midwives were required to “attend this meeting to obtain license to practice midwifery during 1947,” demonstrating that licensure was necessary by the mid-20th century, even for southern midwives.<sup>83</sup> During the 20th century, midwifery transitioned from a largely unregulated practice to one that required licensing. Different counties and states in the South varied in terms of licensing requirements, but in general, requirements for midwives increased throughout the 20th century through classes, programs, meetings, and permits.

Southern midwives responded to the increased regulations imposed on them by state and local governments, along with pressure from both white and Black medical communities to standardize the field of midwifery, with compliance. Before formal training was required of midwives, many joined associations that emphasized hygiene and safety practices, demonstrating a willingness to meet the rising standards of the medical community. A 1919 copy of *The Advertiser* included a notice for a meeting of the Tehula Midwife Association, where members were required, and other midwives were invited, to listen to Dr. Rosamond’s lecture.<sup>84</sup> This requirement for Tehula Midwife Association members suggests that midwives were acting in accordance with the increasing standards placed on them, seeking adequate training

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<sup>81</sup> “Director Of Midwife Assn. Confers With Local Units,” *The Key West Citizen*, 2 March 1937, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress.

<sup>82</sup> “Midwife School Schedule Is To Open On Friday,” *The Skyland post*, 20 August, 1942, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress.

<sup>83</sup> “Annual Midwife Meeting Feb. 26,” *Roanoke Rapids Herald*, 13 February 1947, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress.

<sup>84</sup> “Midwife Meeting,” *The Lexington Advertiser*, 29 August 1919, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress.

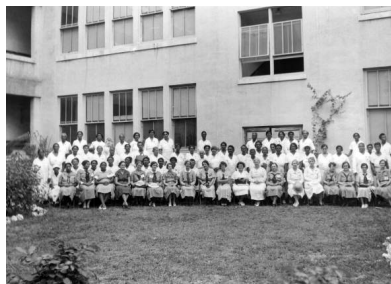
and collaboration with physicians to continue to practice with the approval of the larger medical community. Once licenses were required of midwives, midwife institutions were held regionally across the South with the goal of educating practicing midwives on up-to-date hygiene and medical practices. A certificate of fitness was awarded to midwives who completed the course, allowing midwives to continue practicing. The images below depict classes of midwives:



*Class of Midwives in Bainbridge, Georgia in 1934.*



*Midwife Institute in St. Augustine in 1934.*



*Midwife Institute in Tampa in 1935.*

Many of the women pictured had practiced as traditional lay midwives, or “grannies,” for decades before being required to obtain licensure. The fact that these women attended midwife institutes shows how Black women fought to remain in the field of midwifery. These women, many of whom were from poor and rural areas of the South, dedicated their time and energy to these programs in order to continue to practice as midwives. Midwife institutes played a large role in the professionalization of midwifery. Within these institutes, there were standardized uniforms, including the midwife bags pictured. In order to successfully graduate, students had to meet requirements such as witnessing live births under the supervision of physicians. Midwife institutes altered the field of midwifery in the 1930s and 1940s as midwifery education transitioned from informal training to regulated educational programs.

Despite the willingness of midwives to comply with licensure, attending lectures and training courses organized by midwives themselves were soon no longer seen as adequate midwifery preparation. Public health officials turned to nurses to train and oversee the work of midwives and to elevate the field. For example, in Indiana, the Public Health Nursing Association provided training courses for midwives in rural areas.<sup>85</sup> In *A Manual of Public Health Nursing* in 1949, the Texas State Department of Health instructed that:

Each public health nurse should plan to visit regularly the active midwives who reside in her district...the nurse should endeavor to see that the midwife understands the principles of good hygiene, both in her own living, and in the instructions she gives to her patients...the nurse may also assist the midwife to understand the importance of eye prophylaxis for the newborn infant, and of birth

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<sup>85</sup> “Nursing Association Will Offer Course,” *The Indianapolis times*, 15 December 1928, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress.

registration...the nurse should examine closely the superstitious practices of midwives.<sup>86</sup>

Nurses were expected to critique, oversee, and instruct midwives. Nurses were seen as superior in terms of education and hygiene while midwives occupied the lowest rung of the healthcare field. Many of the nurses placed in charge of regulating “granny” midwives were white, and they were instructed to monitor the “superstitious practices” of Black midwives. This illustrates the role that racism played in the regulation of “granny” midwives; white nurses were seen as superior, cleaner, and more competent than Black midwives. Many health professionals wanted nurses to replace midwives as birth attendants altogether. In the South Carolina *Hospital Herald*, doctors wrote that “we hope to see some reform...but we cannot hope for this until we have competent nurses to take the places of those now holding in their possession authority to practice midwifery and kill as many babies as they please.”<sup>87</sup> This preference for nurses over midwives soon resulted in the creation of the nurse-midwife, a nursing graduate specializing in obstetrics. New programs were created for nurses wishing to practice as nurse-midwives, marking the beginning of the end for traditional lay midwives.

Black health professionals also supported the creation of the nurse-midwife. Kenney wrote that “with the passing of the granny, intelligent, competent, young women, trained according to modern methods, must take their places.”<sup>88</sup> Aline Vance, a Black nurse, reported in the *Jackson Advocate*, a Black newspaper, that “the work of Negro nurses in the city and county during the last 40 years has wiped out the midwifery trade among Negroes... the chief accomplishments of the Negro public health nurses has been their participation in the elimination of the ignorant Negro

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<sup>86</sup> *A Manual of Public Health Nursing*, (Austin: Public Health Nursing Division, Texas State Department of Health, 1949), 165.

<sup>87</sup> A. C. McClennan, *Hospital Herald* 2, no. 2 (January 1899).

<sup>88</sup> Kenney, “The First Graduating Class of the Tuskegee School of Midwifery,” 109.

midwife,” suggesting that the replacement of traditional midwives with nurses was supported by Black health professionals.<sup>89</sup> By elevating Black nurses over “granny” midwives, the Black medical community mirrored the medical standards of the white medical community that valued nurses over midwives. Additionally, the Tuskegee School of Nurse-Midwifery, the first Black nurse-midwifery program, opened in 1943, suggesting that Black physicians supported the creation of the nurse-midwife and the replacement of “granny” midwives. The program was created with funds provided by organizations including the Children’s Bureau and the Maternity Center Association. The opening of a Black nurse-midwifery school in the South demonstrated that Black midwives were being regulated by both the white and Black medical communities. Black physicians, in addition to white doctors, believed that southern Black midwives needed to be regulated and reformed. Traditional lay midwives were being replaced by nurses trained as nurse-midwives.

The development of nurse-midwifery, while intended to give Black nurses the opportunity to take over the midwifery field, actually resulted in the eventual exclusion of Black women from obstetrics. The new nurse-midwifery schools came with stricter requirements for potential applicants. Even the Tuskegee School of Nurse-Midwifery, while specifically for Black students, created additional barriers that made it difficult for many Black women to enter the field of nurse-midwifery. In order to gain acceptance into the nurse-midwifery program, applicants had to meet specific standards. According to the “Bulletin of The Tuskegee School of Nurse-Midwifery,” the requirements for admission into the nurse-midwifery program included that “applicants must be graduates of an accredited nursing school...should be between 25 and 40 years of age, and in good health.”<sup>90</sup> In the late 1930s, Florida A&M was

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<sup>89</sup> “Negro Nurses Wipe Out Midwifery in Memphis Area,” *Jackson Advocate*, 27 January 1951, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress.

<sup>90</sup> “Bulletin of the Tuskegee School of Nurse-Midwifery, 1945,” *Alabama Tuskegee Institute*, Smith Libraries Exhibit, 5.



the only Black college that offered a bachelor's nursing program, making it unlikely that many Black women were nursing college graduates.<sup>91</sup> It was also a requirement that applicants be graduates of an accredited nursing program, yet there were only 26 accredited nursing training programs offered to Black nurses in the United States.<sup>92</sup> Additionally, the page below, taken from the bulletin, lists the tuition and fees for the Tuskegee School of Nurse-Midwifery:

FEES AND ESTIMATED EXPENSES	
Tuition .....	\$200.00
Field Practice .....	150.00
Registration fee, Tuskegee Institute.....	5.00
Recreation activities fee—Tuskegee Institute	
Health Services .....	10.00
Library—Laboratory fees .....	10.00
Educational supplies .....	7.00
Certificate .....	1.50
Maintenance:	
Board, Room, and laundry .....	270.00
	\$653.50
Clothing, travel, and recreation expenses are not included in these estimates.	

*Bulletin of the Tuskegee School of Nurse-Midwifery*

The listed cost of the program, not including clothing, travel, and other expenses, is equivalent to around \$10,000 today.<sup>93</sup> Many women, including those already practicing as “granny” midwives before the creation of nurse-midwifery, would have been unable to afford the program. The requirements and tuition for this program excluded many older, poor, rural Black women who had been working as midwives for most of their lives. These standards also lessened the number of Black women qualified to enter the field of nurse-midwifery. Black women had to be college educated, young, and wealthy enough to afford the program.

Even Black women who successfully gained entry and graduated from nurse-midwifery programs faced exclusion based on their race. In the 1940s, the American Association of Nurse-Midwives did not permit Black nurse-midwives to join.<sup>94</sup> The

<sup>91</sup> Jenny M. Luke, *Delivered by Midwives: African American Midwifery in the Twentieth-Century South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), 76.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>93</sup> “Calculate the Value of \$700 in 1946,” *DollarTimes*.

<sup>94</sup> Luke, *Delivered by Midwives*, 91.

Tuskegee School of Nurse-Midwifery closed in 1946 after only 5 years due to a lack of funding. In 1943, the state of Alabama withdrew its funding and in 1946, the Children's Bureau program did the same.<sup>95</sup> Even though traditional midwifery decreased nationally, white women were still able to enter the new field of nurse-midwifery through educational programs. The closure of the only nurse-midwifery program for Black women marked a shift in the field of midwifery from a predominantly Black profession to a white woman's domain. White women dominate the smaller field of nurse-midwifery while Black women make up the minority.

Midwives who were not eligible for nurse-midwifery programs were directly excluded from the field. In *Talk to Me Good*, it is revealed that in 1976, "more than 150 Alabama midwives, all black, abruptly received letters and visits from physicians and nurses informing them that they could no longer work."<sup>96</sup> Licensed midwife Mary Beth Chambers, when interviewed in 1983, recalls that she did not choose to retire; instead, one day the public health nurse asked her "you about ready to retire?" and when it came time for her midwife license to be renewed, it simply was not.<sup>97</sup> Even though she had complied with licensing and regulations, Chambers was still pushed out of the field because she was not a nurse-midwife. In Alabama, no county health department issued permits to lay midwives after 1977.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, in Florida, a public health nurse stated that she "couldn't sign another license. Wouldn't be capable for her to sign another license" for any midwife, reflecting the changes made in state health departments in the late 20th century.<sup>99</sup> Traditional southern lay midwives were unable to resist exclusion from the field. These women, typically Black, older, and rural, had no organization to

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>96</sup> Smith, *Listen to Me Good*, 135.

<sup>97</sup> Susie, *In the Way of Our Grandmothers*, 139.

<sup>98</sup> Smith, *Listen to Me Good*, 135.

<sup>99</sup> Susie, *In the Way of Our Grandmothers*, 144-145.

advocate for their rights.<sup>100</sup> They were quietly dismissed from midwifery without being given the opportunity to fight for their profession.

Through the professionalization of white obstetricians, the struggles of Black health professionals to standardize the Black medical community, and the intersectionality of racism, sexism, and poverty, Black women were excluded from the field of midwifery during the 20th century. Midwives were oftentimes unfairly blamed for maternal and infant mortality rates and accused of being unhygienic. The intelligence and abilities of midwives were questioned, especially due to their race and gender. Many midwives were left without access to the necessary training and education required to practice in the later 20th century.

The effects of the exclusion of Black, southern midwives are continually felt, with Black women making up a minority of nurse-midwives today. The work of “granny” midwives in earlier centuries is important to remember and honor because they provided childbirth services to many Black, rural, and poor southern families that did not have alternative access to medical care or the desire to experience racism during childbirth. Many Black patients benefited from the work of “granny” midwives that was rooted in trust, respect, community, and support. With the decline of traditional lay midwives, Black communities in the South lost valuable members of the healthcare field that served their needs. Today, Black women going into labor are still faced with the difficult fact that most obstetricians and nurse-midwives are white, reflecting how Black women were pushed out of obstetrics in the 20th century.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

## ***The Infamous Rosalie:* Infanticide as Female Slave Resistance\***

**Lili Tavlan**

The gendered history of female slave resistance in pre-revolutionary Saint Domingue struggles against the sparsity of primary source material. Contemporary historiography both before and after the Haitian Revolution reveals the dominance of white, colonial narratives that seek either to explain the causes for insurrection, or else, to sensationalize the atrocities committed. Évelyne Trouillot, sister to scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot and niece of leading Haitian historians Hénock and Ernst Trouillot, seeks to remedy this problem of Haitian source material by expanding into the realm of factual historical fiction. In *The Infamous Rosalie* (“Rosalie l’Infame”), Trouillot chronicles a slice of life from female slaves prior to the revolution, and in doing so, prioritizes their voices over dominant colonial narratives to engage with an underrepresented part of history. Dealing with slavery, oppression, sexuality, death, liberation, and perhaps most notably, infanticide, Trouillot’s *The Infamous Rosalie* enters “the *chambres interdites* of Haiti’s past— places that have remained closed, hidden, or merely overlooked” and offers fresh perspective into the plight of gendered slave resistance.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, Trouillot allows the historian to empathize more fully with the infamous acts of slave resistance so often condemned by colonists who could not understand their suffering.

Infanticide — often seen as a moral affront, economic injustice for plantation owners, and a most notorious crime against

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\* Lili Tavlan’s “*The Infamous Rosalie: Infanticide as Female Slave Resistance*” won the Nina Leibman Prize from the Santa Clara University Women and Genders Studies department. This prize is awarded to projects that critically examine creative expression or representations of gender and/or sexuality.

<sup>1</sup> Jason Herbeck, “History, Humanity, and the Literary Construction of Haiti in Évelyne Trouillot’s Works,” *Palimpsest*, vol. 8:1 (2019). p. 7.

humanity— is portrayed throughout *The Infamous Rosalie* as a means for furthering the collective spirit of resistance and liberation within the female slave populace. Trouillot does not question the ethicality of infanticide— the predominant form of female slave resistance throughout the text— but instead, raises questions that relate simply to the human condition, the cost of liberation, and the indomitable resilience of humanity. Not only does Trouillot offer a solution to the problem of Haitian historiography, inasmuch as that semi fictional literature can fill the void of lost experiences, but also, Trouillot’s work reveals that the memory of freedom and trauma often provided an impetus for slave resistance that is largely disregarded by dominant colonial narratives.

If the dominant narratives from pre-revolutionary Saint Domingue fail to illuminate the plight of female slaves, and the many acts of resistance they engaged with, Trouillot’s novel serves to shed light on such lost experiences and the emotionality that accompanied them. According to the author herself, *The Infamous Rosalie* is a “direct, fact-inspired narrative,” that seeks only to “acknowledge [the] characters’ humanity,” rather than strictly conforming to the genre of historical fiction.<sup>2</sup> Building upon the work of her family, Trouillot attempts to “reverse<sup>2</sup> the archival silences” identified by her brother Michel-Rolph Trouillot in his *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995), as well as the work of her aunt and uncle published in *Revue de la Société Haïtienne et de Géographie*.<sup>3</sup> scholars have tried to circumvent the<sup>3</sup> issue of colonial-dominated source material through an intense examination of white sources, ascertaining bias and hyperbole (Popkin 2003); while others expound upon the “unthinkability” of the Haitian Revolution as the reason for such

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<sup>2</sup> Évelyne Trouillot, *The Infamous Rosalie*. trans., M. A. Salvodon (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), viii, 132.

<sup>3</sup> Alyssa G. Sepinwall, “If This Is A Woman: Evelyne Trouillot’s *The Infamous Rosalie* and the Lost Stories of New-World Slavery,” *Fiction and Film for French Historians*, vol. 1.8 (2015).

imbalanced source material and slight coverage on slave resistance being relatively impossible for the whites to conceive amidst scientific racism and selfish colonial interests (Michel-Rolph Trouillot 1995).

As a semi-fictional memoir, sometimes termed a “neoslave narrative,”<sup>4</sup> or else, a “captivity narrative,”<sup>5</sup> Trouillot’s novel seeks to avoid dependence on white colonial voices and their interpretations of female slave resistance, while still maintaining authenticity through authoritative sources. . Most are aware that Saint Domingue was home to the “first black republic in the Western Hemisphere,” and yet, as Trouillot is at literary pains to emphasize, “few people know what it meant for these eventual victors, or their parents and grandparents, to have survived the specific route of the Middle Passage,” nor what daily life was like for female slaves, the acts of resistance they often employed, and the emotional cost of such continual suffering.<sup>6</sup> Though *The Infamous Rosalie* is <sup>6</sup> hardly an authentic primary source such as the *La Révolution aux Caraïbes*, from which the story pulls its most prominent source material, nonetheless, Trouillot’s work fills the archival silences identified by Michel-Rolph and other historians, through her amplification of semi-fictional female slave voices.

Trouillot’s *The Infamous Rosalie* discusses female slave resistance, especially in the form of infanticide, but begins prior to the revolution in 1750, following the life of Lisette, a young Creole slave woman, who recovers her strength as well as her cultural identity through the many stories shared by her relatives— most notably, through the story of her great-aunt Brigitte’s infamous infanticidal resistance. Lisette knows little about her ancestry, and views herself as little more than:

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<sup>4</sup> Sepinwall, “If This Is A Woman.”

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, “Facing Racial Revolution: Captivity Narratives and Identity in the Saint-Domingue Insurrection,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 36:4, (2003): 511.

<sup>6</sup> Trouillot. *The Infamous Rosalie*, vii.

Mademoiselle Sarah's Negress, always ensconced in the masters' room, with my mistress's perfume on my skin, traces of her powder on my fingers, and the imprint of her hand on my cheek. I carry the weight of her son's hands in my sex and the brunt of the whip on my back and thighs.<sup>7</sup>

Through the story-telling of relatives around her, Lisette learns that she is an "Arada woman," who, allegedly, "belong[s] to no one," and even "have the power to foresee misfortune."<sup>8</sup> Her father was a "Nago man" killed with other maroons, and her great-aunt Brigitte, tried for infanticide.<sup>9</sup> Her longing for freedom, her inability to cope with the confines of slavery, and her resilient rebellious streak, then, seem to run in Lisette's family—a family she never knew, but must recollect the fragments thereof through tales shared. Lisette learns about her traumatic family history through the stories of Grandmother Charlotte and Ma Augustine, who tell of the terrible Middle Passage and the Barracoons, preparing Lisette for the "day when you'll need wings to carry yourself beyond the present moment."<sup>10</sup> Alyssa G. Sepinwall notes that "the word *barracon* has disappeared from French dictionaries," which Trouillot reclaims in her work, "thus restoring the side of the slave experience to our consciousness" with their very rhetoric.<sup>11</sup> For Lisette, as well as many other slaves, Saint-Domingue was a "land that seem[ed] to bear the mark of our pain— Creoles, Aradas, Congos, Nagos, Ibos, newly arrived Negroes, forever *bossales*, confronting our chains."<sup>12</sup> But the pain is seen not only in the land, but in their very persons, as "each of these nations carries its scars not only on their bodies and faces but

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7 Trouillot, *The Infamous Rosalie*, 51.

8 *ibid*, 4, 39-40.

9 *ibid*, 31.

10 *Ibid*, 25.

11 Alyssa G. Sepinwall. "If This Is A Woman."

12 Trouillot, *The Infamous Rosalie*, 12.

in people's gait, in the cadence of their words, in their ways of resisting slavery."<sup>13</sup> Much of *The Infamous Rosalie* is spent emphasizing the nature of trauma, embedded in the very bodies of these slaves, from scars to pregnancies, and the way in which trauma persists so as to afford resilience, and to provide reasons for resistance in itself. Through the painful stories shared, Lisette recovers not only her cultural and ancestral identity, but also, regains the strength needed for resistance and eventual rebellion.

For the record of mass infanticide, Trouillot found her primary source material in Descourtilz's *La Révolution aux Caraïbes*, citing an Arada midwife who claimed to have killed seventy children.<sup>14</sup> However, Popkin writes that M. E. Descourtilz's work is "the most extensive captivity narrative other than Gros's *Historick Recital*," but reflects only a one-sided perspective of Saint-Domingue's chaotic climate between 1799 to 1803, where "Descourtilz could give free reign to the bitterness engendered by this overturning of the racial hierarchy."<sup>15</sup> Decourtilz's voice, then, should not be prioritized as accurate nor authentic, since not only was he not a slave, nor a black woman, and evidently bitter.

Slavery offers, perhaps, the most extreme example of archival silences, since, in the case of the Haitian Revolution, "virtually all former slaves in Saint-Domingue were illiterate," leaving the victors unable to memorialize their triumphs in written form.<sup>16</sup> While the "whites comprised fewer than 10 percent of the colony's population— 40,000 [whites] versus approximately 500,000 slaves and 30,000 free people of color," their views predominate in colonial source material, ultimately silencing the voices of slave women who, most certainly, had much to say

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13 *ibid*, 15.

14 M. E. Descourtilz, *La Révolution aux Caraïbes*.

15 Popkin, "Facing Racial Revolution: Captivity Narratives and Identity in the Saint-Domingue Insurrection," 524.

16 Philippe Girard, "Rebelle With A Cause: Women in the Haitian War of Independence, 1802-04," *Gender & History*, vol. 21:1 (2009): 63.



during this time of such suffering and oppression.<sup>17</sup> Lamenting this historiographic imbalance, Trouillot notes that “the emphasis was always put on the great figures, the heroes, and not the mass of enslaved and of newly freed slaves,” and continues to make her remarkable claim that “if the slaves had not fought for their dignity, if they had not managed to maintain some dignity amid the most inhuman system, the Haitian Revolution would not have been possible.”<sup>18</sup> With the novels’ emphasis on oral storytelling, Trouillot offers another explanation for slave women’s silence on the subject, as Grandma Charlotte says that “the alphabet will always embody the character of hell,” forever stamped, burned and branded onto the skins of so many slaves.<sup>19</sup> *The Infamous Rosalie*, then, portrays story-telling as slave resistance—and one which rebels against the dominant form for communication (i.e.: the written word)—without which, the impetus for resistance would perhaps have remained dormant, and even the notion of infanticide would, most likely, have been inconceivable for young Lisette.

Female slave resistance took shape in a variety of forms, both throughout the Haitian Revolution and within *The Infamous Rosalie*, but the most powerful and provocative acts occur through infanticide. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes, “resistance did not exist as a global phenomenon,” but instead, was formulated according to each individual slave’s cultural background, hierarchical rank, and ultimately, their capacity for resistance and resilience.<sup>20</sup> Not every slave, though suffering greatly, was prepared to sacrifice a child for the revolutionary cause, let alone for sheer resistance. The culmination of *The Infamous Rosalie* is when Lisette, having heard the horrible tales of the Middle Passage

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17 Sepinwall, “From Saint-Domingue To Haiti,” *Haitian History: New Perspectives* (Routledge: Taylor & Francis 2013): 14.

18 Trouillot, *The Infamous Rosalie*, viii.

19 *ibid*, 80.

20 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “An Unthinkable History,” *Haitian History: New Perspectives*. Ed. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, (New York: Routledge, 2013). p. 39.

and the Barracoons, learns of her great aunt Brigitte's talisman, which Lisette has kept daily wrapped around her waist. In Descourtilz's primary account and Fick's analysis, "one slave woman from the Rossignol-Desdunes plantation"<sup>21</sup> is quoted as saying that "to remove these young creatures from the shameful institution of slavery, I inserted a needle in their brain through the fontanel at the moment of their birth, [and] the result was trismus, so deadly on the island, and whose cause you now know."<sup>22</sup> Like Descourtilz account, Lisette learns that her great-aunt committed seventy acts of infanticide, and left behind a cord with "seventy knots, one for each baby that [she] saved from slavery," and which Lisette has worn around her waist without knowing the history that quite literally entwines the talisman.<sup>23</sup> But Brigitte never regretted the measures she had to take to ensure children would never be born into such a brute system of slavery: "'Better dead than slaves,' she would often say. And her voice, so proud, gave us back our strength and dignity."<sup>24</sup> Through the revelation of Brigitte's story, Lisette is given the strength and spirit for slave resistance, and so she escapes to the hills, ready to join the maroons, and prepares to give birth to a daughter:

Aunt Brigitte's cord reminds me of the promise of love and dignity I made in her honor as well. I must wrap myself in passion and light so I don't fear the emptiness and so I can teach my daughter to confront the barracoons and soar to the stars. [...] May I find the courage to honor my promise: Creole child who still lives in me, you will be born free and rebellious, or *you will not be born at all*.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Carolyn E. Fick, "Slave Resistance," *Haitian History: New Perspectives*. Ed. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, (New York: Routledge, 2013). 56.

<sup>22</sup> M. E. Descourtilz, *La Révolution aux Caraïbes*.

<sup>23</sup> Trouillot, *The Infamous Rosalie*, 120.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>25</sup> Trouillot, *The Infamous Rosalie*, 129.

Without the stories of Ma Augustine and Grandma Charlotte, Lisette would not have had the ‘courage to honor’ the ‘promise’ she makes, nor would she have known the spirit of resistance that, quite literally, runs throughout her family.

Though her final statement is somewhat sinister inasmuch as her child will be born free, or not at all, Lisette resembles many slave women who suffered through similar experiences in longing for liberty and, weary with shame, resorted to infanticide rather than to see their children share in such an awful existence. Trouillot’s emphasis on infanticide as female slave resistance is not necessarily unique, but her treatment of infanticide as external to the plane of morality most certainly is. Haitian historiography abounds with atrocities, from slave resistance to full-fledged revolution, but the act of infanticide is often seen as “gynecological resistance,” rather than outright murder or moral deviancy.<sup>26</sup> Historically, slave midwives were knowledgeable about plants, “such as the leaves of the avocado tree [which] could bring on an abortion,” leading Demer to claim that “the abortive powers of enslaved women formed the liberating potential that was further realized through their infanticidal might.”<sup>27</sup> Trouillot’s *The Infamous Rosalie* embodies Demer’s claim, inasmuch as that the story of Brigette inspires Lisette not only to escape towards freedom, but to promise her child either liberty or death—much like the contemporary motto of slaves in Saint Domingue, crying “*la liberté ou la mort*,” freedom or death.<sup>28</sup> Throughout *The Infamous Rosalie*, Trouillot does not question the ethicality of infanticide any more than raising universal questions such as: “do we have the right to sacrifice our companions in misery in order to

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<sup>26</sup> Anonymous, “Infanticide as Slave Resistance: Evidence from Barbados, Jamaica, and Saint-Domingue,” *Inquiries Journal*, vol. 6:4 (2014).

<sup>27</sup> Stephane M. Demers, “Contemplating The Afterlife of Slavery: Gynecological Resistance, Marronage, and Revolution in Late Eighteenth-Century Saint-Domingue,” *Caribbean Quilt*, vol. 6:2 (2021): 34.

<sup>28</sup> Jayne Boisvert, “Colonial Hell and Female Slave Resistance in Saint-Domingue.” *Journal of Haitian Studies*, vol. 7:1 (2001).

be free?”<sup>29</sup> and “is it preferable to die at ten years old than at birth? will I be so reckless as to judge slaves who have claimed the right to look at themselves in the river’s water without stumbling in shame?”<sup>30</sup> The latter question is particularly relevant, since Trouillot seems to be saying, through the literary vessel of *The Infamous Rosalie*, that modern society is in no more of a position to judge these women than the white colonial sources, like Gros and Descourtilz, that Trouillot sought to avoid. Female slave resistance, like the act of infanticide, varied widely, and often depended on the individual slave herself, whose emotionality is intricately connected to the experience so as to make it a personal, contextual decision that historiography cannot divine.

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<sup>29</sup> Trouillot, *The Infamous Rosalie*, 126.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 122.

## The National Association of Colored Women: Pioneering Black Female Activism in the Suffrage Movement and Beyond

Claire Marsden

Mainstream education has long centered the Progressive Era (1896-1916) suffrage movement narrative around the efforts of middle-class white women like Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucy Stone.<sup>1</sup> Though their achievements are inspiring and notable, the legacy of African American women's suffrage efforts remains less told in the shadow of white suffragists. Excluded from the white women's movement and organizations, like the National American Women's Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and the National Women's Party (NWP), their stories were long undervalued in history, despite the immense progress the community made from the Civil War to the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> The National Association of Colored Women (NACW) was one of the largest and most effective organizations in the efforts of African American women to achieve suffrage. Prior scholars acknowledge the NACW's feminist approach to uplift communities, their exclusion from the mainstream suffrage fight, and the continued struggle of African American women's suffrage.<sup>3</sup> These historians, however,

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Church Terrell, "The Progress of Colored Women," in *The Progress of Colored Women: An Address Delivered Before the National American Women's Suffrage Association, at the Columbia Theater, Washington, D.C., February 19, 1908, on the Occasion of Its Fiftieth Anniversary*, ed. Richard T. Greener and Charles R. Douglass (Glen Rock, New Jersey: Microfilming Corporation of American, 1898): 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Megan Bailey, "Between Two Worlds: Black Women and the Fight for Voting Rights," National Park Service, National Park Service U.S. Department of the Interior, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/black-women-and-the-fight-for-voting-rights.htm>; Judge Willie J. Epps Jr. and Jonathan M. Warren, "Sheroes: The Struggles of Black Suffragists," *Judges' Journal* 59, no. 3 (2020): 10–15, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.libproxy.scu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=145220727&site=eds-live>; Stephanie J. Shaw, "Black Club Women and the Creation of the National Association of Coloured Women," *Journal of Women's History* 3, no. 2 (1991); Shavonne R. Shorter,

focus little on the specific strategies and contributions the NACW made to the suffrage movement. Under their motto “lifting as we climb,” the NACW utilized suffrage as a means to an end of thoroughgoing reforms to improve all aspects of life for African Americans.<sup>4</sup> They focused on race and gender’s close relationship in their fight for suffrage, which came about largely due to the exclusion from the purely gender driven goals of white women organizations. Their broad suffrage strategies included unifying black women, using feminine stereotypes of women in the private sphere, prioritizing child rearing, and fighting for racial equality. The NACW was a crucial asset for African American women to participate in the suffrage movement due to the organizations’ holistic approach to voting equality in addressing the intersectionality of race and gender. The NACW gave black women a voice and a platform for unity that amplified their distinctive suffrage movement to aid in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, guaranteeing women’s right to vote and starting their long fight for equality. The NACW, therefore, allowed African American women to realize their power and potential for activism that continues to inspire justice efforts today.

In the late nineteenth century, a lack of solidarity in women’s defiance of their second-class status in formal politics and society led to exclusion and racial division within the suffrage movement, inspiring the formation of the NACW.<sup>5</sup> The ideal woman stayed in the private sphere of the home while men handled the public sphere of politics. Many black women, therefore, sought to collaborate with white women due to their common identity as American women fighting for the same rights and to break down

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“Thank You, Foremothers; Thank You, Sisters: A Celebration of Black Women’s Work in the Suffrage Movement and Beyond,” *Women & Language* 44, no. 2 (2021).

<sup>4</sup> Addie Waits Hunton, “The National Association of Colored Women: Its Real Significance,” *The Color American Magazine*, July 1908, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Evans, “Women in American Politics in the Twentieth Century,” Gilder Lehrman, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed January 12, 2022, <http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/womens-history/essays/women-american-politics-twentieth-century>.

the same gender norms; they believed that success would come from unity across races and dispelling ignorance of racial prejudice between them.<sup>6</sup> This was easier said than done, as racial bias and stereotypes were the main obstacles to unity. Black women were stereotyped as “prostitutes,” “liars,” and “thieves,” and being “devoid of morality.”<sup>7</sup> White women could not see past race to respect black women enough to include them and did not want to be associated with these labels in their suffrage battle. Stanton further argued, “If people were enfranchised by car-loads at the Capitol of the nation, it might be a question who should go first.”<sup>8</sup>

Many white suffragists felt it just to solely focus on their suffrage plight as they believed their needs were more urgent and they did not want to overcrowd the movement with black women. Moreover, after the Civil War, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments formally granted equal citizenship and voting rights to all men, regardless of race. This meant that former male slaves got the right to vote before white women, which insulted them and sparked bitter sentiments towards a bi-racial suffrage movement.<sup>9</sup> Stanton asked: “What will we and our daughters suffer if these degraded black men are allowed to have the rights that would make them even worse than our Saxon fathers?”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, white women were increasingly hostile towards the black community and focused exclusively on their own discrimination. White suffragists

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<sup>6</sup> Adella Hunt Logan, “Why the National Association of Colored Women Should Become Part of the National Council of Women of the United States,” *The National Association Notes* 3, no. 8 (December 1988): 1.

<sup>7</sup> Einav Rabinovitch-Fox et al., “Lifting as We Climb: The National Association of Colored Women,” *Scalar*, Scalar, accessed February 10, 2022, <https://scalar.case.edu/19th-at-100/the-national-association-of-colored-women-not-just-suffrage>.

<sup>8</sup> Jen McDanel, “White Suffragist Dis/Entitlement: The *Revolution* and the Rhetoric of Racism,” *Legacy* 30, no. 2 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.5250/legacy.30.2.0243>, 249.

<sup>9</sup> Epps and Warren, “Shereoes.”

<sup>10</sup> “For Stanton, All Women Were Not Created Equal,” *NPR* online, July 13, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/2011/07/13/137681070/for-stanton-all-women-were-not-created-equal>.

did not want to risk attention on gender being shifted towards racial equality, fearing their oppression would be dismissed.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, they wanted to maintain good relations with southern suffragists and legislators by removing race from suffrage discussions, especially during the Jim Crow era (1877-1964) of segregation and continued racism.<sup>12</sup> The mainstream women's suffrage organizations, like NAWSA and NWP, ostracized black women and fought narrowly for white women. They held white-only conventions and segregated events to ensure support from racist legislators. The NWP, for example, limited and destroyed photo evidence of black picketers at their White House protests for suffrage in 1917.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Ida B. Wells, a founding member of the NACW, participated as the only black woman at the 1913 NAWSA suffrage parade in Washington D.C., but was forced to march in the back, to ensure a white centered narrative.<sup>14</sup> White women went along with racial resistances to strategically advance their own rights, "but justified prejudice in the meantime."<sup>15</sup>

In response to racism and the need for more cohesion among black female activism, the NACW was created in 1896. Through the unity of the D.C. National Federation of Afro-American Women and the National League of Colored Women, the NACW emerged as "one of the largest and most significant organizations of women in the world."<sup>16</sup> By 1902, the association had 125

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<sup>11</sup> Evans, "Women in American Politics in the Twentieth Century."

<sup>12</sup> Epps and Warren, "Shereoes."

<sup>13</sup> Logan, "Why the National Association of Colored Women."

<sup>14</sup> "Ida B. Wells: A Suffrage Activist for the History Books," AAUW, American Association of University Women, accessed on January 10, 2022. <https://www.aauw.org/resources/article/initiatives/2020-convening/ida-b-wells-a-suffrage-activist-for-the-history-books/>.

<sup>15</sup> Mary B. Talbert, "Women and Colored Women," *The Crisis*, August 1915, <https://archive.org/details/crisis910dubo/page/n55/mode/2up?q=august+1915>.

<sup>16</sup> "'National Association of Colored Women,' The Woman's Era, III: 3" in *What Gender Perspectives Shaped the Emergence of the National Association of Colored Women, 1895-1920?*, eds. Thomas Dublin, Franchesca Arias and Debora Carreras (Binghamton, NY: State University of New York at Binghamton, 2000), 2.



branches with over 8,000 members in 26 states.<sup>17</sup> The founders of this nationwide community included Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, Frances E.W. Harper, and Harriet Tubman.<sup>18</sup> As Terrell, the first president of NACW, stated: “not only are colored women with ambition and aspiration handicapped on account of their sex, but they are everywhere baffled and mocked on account of their race.”<sup>19</sup> Women of color naturally had a different suffrage fight based on their low societal status that legally took away their right to education, property, and ownership of their own body, even after emancipation, as “nothing...that could degrade or brutalize the womanhood of the race was lacking in [the U.S.] system.”<sup>20</sup> This automatically made their fight one of intersectional oppression. White women could not relate to these obstacles and, therefore, did not want to risk fighting for it, fearing their suffrage campaign would be radicalized or jeopardized. Besides common womanhood, educated white women and working-class African American women had vastly different struggles and diverse suffrage agendas, proving the need for a separate national organization, like the NACW, to address black women’s unique adversities.

The NACW was founded as a widely accessible organization to uplift black women and the broader black community through a vast range of programs to fight for suffrage within a larger civil rights mission, which included economic equality, educational opportunities, and racial justice. The organization’s Constitution states it was formed to help, “furnish evidence of moral, mental and material progress made by [black] people.”<sup>21</sup> The

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Ida Husted Harper, and Susan B. Anthony, “Description of National Association of Colored Women, *History of Woman Suffrage* 4 (2013), [https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic\\_entity%7Cbibliographic\\_details%7C2770800](https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C2770800), 1051.

<sup>18</sup> “National Association of Colored Women,” 2.

<sup>19</sup> Terrell, “The Progress of Colored Women,” 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> National Association of Colored Women, “Constitution of the N.A. of C.W. 1906, Papers of Margaret Murray Washington” in *What Gender Perspectives Shaped the*

organization's purpose was to fight against sexism and racism by proving African Americans', especially women's, worth to the nation. The motto "lifting as we climb," embodies the sentiment that the NACW was a turning point for black women to uplift their race through realizing their full potential in organizing, developing, and managing public activism.<sup>22</sup> It is a testament to the unity among black women and the holistic, forward-thinking approach that the NACW members' took in their suffrage fight as a step toward full equality. As long as black women's clubs had at least ten members, a similar constitution to the NACW, and paid ten cent dues per person, they could join the Association.<sup>23</sup> These local clubs met together biennially to discuss progress and host elections for leadership roles.<sup>24</sup>

As a part of their holistic mission, the NACW created a plethora of welfare departments, including "social science, literature, young women's work, domestic science, evangelistic art, humane, mothers' clubs, parliamentary law, rescue work, music, kindergarten, business, professional, juvenile court, forestry, suffrage, church club, and religious work."<sup>25</sup> For the purpose of suffrage, "young women's work, domestic science," "mothers' club," and "kindergarten" were particularly important as they uplifted black women within the stereotypical female sphere of motherhood and social work. Anti-racism campaigns and the anti-lynching movement also intersected effectively with suffrage because of the importance the NACW placed on recognizing intersectionality.

The NACW Equal Suffrage League mobilized clubs country-wide to support suffrage and officially passed a resolution in 1916

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*Emergence of the National Association of Colored Women, 1895-1920?*, eds. Thomas Dublin, Franchesca Arias and Debora Carreras (Binghamton, NY: State University of New York at Binghamton, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> "The National Association of Colored Women's Clubs," *The Colored American Magazine* 14, 1908, 497.

<sup>23</sup> National Association of Colored Women, "Constitution."

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> "The National Association of Colored Women's Clubs," 504.

supporting the Nineteenth Amendment, along with the aforementioned department outreach.<sup>26</sup> Through conventions, speaking tours, magazine articles, and newspaper interviews, NACW members wanted to show the nation that they could be helpful citizens in forming the most perfect government, appealing for suffrage rights through welfare action and community uplift.<sup>27</sup> Wells, speaking on the impact of the organization, exclaimed, “If this work can contribute in any way toward [arousing] the conscience of the American people to demand justice for every citizen...I have done my race a service.”<sup>28</sup> The NACW knew their fight would not be easy, but did what they could to lay a foundation for future black women activists, planting ideas of equality and suffrage into the nation’s consciousness. NACW women therefore believed the best avenues for suffrage included unity, uplifting black women’s self-worth, promoting black motherhood, and ending racism.

The NACW contributed to the suffrage movement by uniting and uplifting black women on a national level to help them recognize their worth in the generation after emancipation. Post-slavery, many black women faced an extreme transition in understanding who they were as free individuals and identifying their ambitions. The NACW provided a space to uplift these women in cultivating their “domestic virtues, moral impulses and standards of family and social life.”<sup>29</sup> The goal was to strategically portray black suffragists as true American mothers and house-makers, worthy of the vote. The organization inspired black women as part of a community mission and a suffrage tactic to

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<sup>26</sup> Edith Mayo, “African American Women Leaders in the Suffrage Movement,” Turning Point Suffragist Memorial: Education, Turning Point Suffragist Memorial, accessed January 11, 2022, <https://suffragistmemorial.org/african-american-women-leaders-in-the-suffrage-movement/>.

<sup>27</sup> Talbert, “Women and Colored Women.”

<sup>28</sup> “Ida B. Wells: A Suffrage Activist for the History Books.”

<sup>29</sup> Fannie Barrier Williams, “The Club Movement Among Colored Women of America,” in *A New Negro for a New Century*, ed. J.E. MacBready, ed. (Chicago: American Publishing House, 1900).

prove to the white population that black women could meet white society's standards of purity, refinement, and character.<sup>30</sup> These women, under the NACW, became a unit of womanhood, greater than their ex-slave status. Working together to share love and sympathy among one another in the arduous times of the Jim Crow era gave these women the motivation to complete their work for emancipation in gaining citizenship through the vote. "A united sisterhood has become a beautiful reality," Terrell said in relation to the formation of the NACW.<sup>31</sup> In being such a widespread national organization, the NACW helped, "give respect and character to a race of women who had no place in the classification of progressive womanhood in America."<sup>32</sup>

By giving these women a platform to identify their needs and command attention, the Association made room for black feminists to be a part of "progressive womanhood." Since white women did not consider the needs of others in their conventions and campaigns, organization among black women was necessary in order to gain "respect" and visibility. Solidarity under the NACW stood as a symbol of strength and progress, where black women gained self-respect and respect for their race.<sup>33</sup> By learning their own value first and realizing their potential through the NACW, these women hoped the nation would follow in acknowledging their worth. That is why uplift was key to their suffrage movement and gave them the will to believe in the power of their activism. The NACW provided African American women a safe haven and protection of their political and social goals through the power of unity. The symbolic effect of uplifting not only increased black women's visibility in the 1900s suffrage movement but also created a long-lasting impact on the strength of black female activism.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Church Terrell, "A Few Possibilities of the National Association of Colored Women," *AME Church Review*, 1896, 220.

<sup>32</sup> Williams, "The Club Movement."

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

Using the private sphere of African American motherhood and child rearing as key advocacy points for suffrage, the NACW fought for the equality of future generations and proved black women's importance to the nation.<sup>34</sup> Since women were limited to the private sphere of household duties during the Progressive Era, the NACW strategically used the stereotypical ideals of motherhood and the value placed on children to propel them into the political sphere. The NACW promoted the idea that black women were creating, "more homes, better homes, purer homes" in order to positively contribute to the nation's future.<sup>35</sup>

Mothers' clubs were a special segment of the NACW's domestic science program where women were taught to sweep, cook, dust, and wash.<sup>36</sup> These clubs provided an outlet for poor and ignorant women to learn how to perfect housekeeping according to socially appropriate standards. Social purity and gender norms at the time could have served as barriers to black women's acceptance into politics, but they instead utilized these standards as an opportunity to demonstrate the quality of their homes and high-class. They attempted to portray themselves as equals of white women. They used a similar appeal to the mainstream movement by claiming that they needed access to democratic rights in order to purify society and properly maintain the home. The home was a source of strength as it remained the female dominated space and therefore the space that they needed to protect by having the vote.<sup>37</sup> NACW activists believed that going through the home was the most promising way of obtaining rights, arguing for suffrage on the basis of female loyalty to the sacred home and bringing justice to children; this paralleled the rhetoric of white women on motherhood as a basis for rights.<sup>38</sup> NACW women sought to

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<sup>34</sup> Terrell, "The Progress of Colored Women," 8.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Mary Church Terrell, "First Presidential Address to the National Association of Colored Women," Nashville, Tennessee, September 15, 1897, From Library of Congress, *Mary Church Terrell Papers*.

<sup>37</sup> Hunton, "The National Association of Colored Women," 4.

<sup>38</sup> Terrell, "First Presidential Address."

engage intellectually with the morality of government lawmakers in order to demand aid, which included equal rights, for all people to maintain a decent, civilized society. “Protection and sympathy of good women” became the main suffrage strategy as women were the center of child rearing and societal values; if the government wanted to maintain female purity, they needed to allow *all* women a space in democracy.<sup>39</sup>

The NACW advocated for suffrage on the basis of mothers’ need to protect children and raise future generations in a nation of equality. Kindergartens and day cares were central parts of the organization’s attempt to bring justice to black children. These institutions helped women in three key ways. First, they encouraged education among younger generations, teaching black children their potential and setting them up for greater success.<sup>40</sup> Second, working mothers were provided a space to leave their children for the day, empowering mothers to earn an income while their children were being safely cared for.<sup>41</sup> Third, and most important, they demonstrated the emphasis the NACW placed on the future generation. The NACW wanted black children to be seen as fully human, so they fought for suffrage on the basis of justice for basic respect. Fearing that future children would be raised in an environment of hate and racism, the NACW sought suffrage as a way to protect children and rear them in a purified society, one of equality and love.<sup>42</sup> The Association was devoted to teaching integrity, morals, and strength, the kind of uplift only possible in a nation with equal suffrage.<sup>43</sup> “In the name of the innocence and helplessness of children,” the NACW appealed for the nation to recognize their need for suffrage in order to protect the freedom and future of every American child.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Mary Eliza Church Terrell, “The Duty of the National Association of Colored Women,” *AME Church Review* 16, no. 3 (1900): 342.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>42</sup> Terrell, “First Presidential Address.”

<sup>43</sup> Terrell, “The Duty of the National Association of Colored Women,” 345.

<sup>44</sup> Terrell, “First Presidential Address.”

They also stressed the economic and social differences between white and black motherhood and, therefore, the need for all women to receive equal justice for the sake of future generations. Middle- and upper-class white women had optimism in knowing their children had the privileged access to resources, such as education and employment opportunities, and would go on to do great things whereas black women feared doors would be closed on their children due to prejudice, no matter how great they were.<sup>45</sup> Understanding this difference explains why both white and black women needed the vote as white women could not relate to the complexities of black motherhood. The NACW pleaded for access to the political sphere on the basis of their need to defend their intersectional status as mothers in society and raise their children right. Women had the most sway over the upkeep of the private sphere, therefore domestic duties and child care remained essential to the strategy of the NACW's suffrage efforts.<sup>46</sup>

In a nation ruled by racism, the NACW's suffrage efforts were guided by the sentiments of anti-Jim Crow and anti-lynching campaigns. Racism created a major hurdle for black women's suffrage as they needed to gain respect for their race and humanity before fighting for gender rights. The abolition of slavery in conjunction with the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, originally brought widespread hope for African American women's potential freedom and citizenship status; however, the emergence of Jim Crow laws segregating black and white individuals, make a mockery of this progress and "An absolute dead letter in the Constitution of the United States."<sup>47</sup> One-third of states implemented these laws disregarding black citizens' rights

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 349; 351.

<sup>46</sup> Hunton, "The National Association of Colored Women," 4.

<sup>47</sup> Ida B. Wells, *How Enfranchisement Stops Lynchings*. Manuscript. From Library of Congress, *NAACP Papers*, May 1910.

[https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic\\_entity%7Cbibliographic\\_details%7C2561784, 2](https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C2561784, 2).

and equal protection under the law, justifying racism and violence toward the African American community.<sup>48</sup>

Appealing to morality and social justice, the NACW sought to correct the government's mistakes by pleading for suffrage as a way to weaken prejudice and demonstrate to the nation the capabilities of the black community, especially black women. This was in direct response to individuals, like South Carolina Senator Benjamin Tillman, encouraging white citizens to "shoot negroes to death to keep them from voting."<sup>49</sup> Violence, brought about by the Klu Klux Klan among others, was a major form of suppressing black rights. According to Wells, there were 52 lynchings in 1882, which rapidly increased to 250 in 1892, demonstrating the barbaric racism and cruelty that the black community encountered after slavery as white supremacy was still strongly embedded in the nation.<sup>50</sup> The NACW created petitions for southern state legislatures to repeal Jim Crow laws due to the barriers segregation placed on their ability to politically and socially participate.<sup>51</sup> The ballot is key to recognition of full human life and democratic power, and without it, black individuals were treated like animals.<sup>52</sup>

Without the vote, white supremacists had no reason to find black women or men equal, giving them "free reign to...lynch, hang, burn" whenever they pleased.<sup>53</sup> Law enforcement did nothing to protect black men's rights or black women's activism, often siding with these vicious mobs.<sup>54</sup> Thus, the organization made anti-lynching campaigns a major component of their suffrage movement. The NACW amplified the need to address the multi-

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>51</sup> Mary Church Terrell, "Greetings From the National Association of Colored Women to The National Council of Women," 1900, From Library of Congress, *Mary Church Terrell Papers*.

<sup>52</sup> Wells, "How Enfranchisement Stops Lynchings," 5.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 16.



leveled oppression black women faced and continued to be outspoken in their extreme campaign for racial and gender equality. Although this fight did little to change many minds at the time, it established ideas for future activism and gave rise to moral arguments of equality in post-emancipation America.

Through these strategies, the NACW gave black women a voice and platform for intersectional activism, providing them influence over the success of the Nineteenth Amendment, despite continued inequality. Never before had black women formed such a unified nationwide community in which they fought not only for themselves, but for the rights of all black Americans. NACW women “tirelessly rallied for the right to vote for decades ...[solidifying] the notion that women of color deserved more ...[and] could be the norm rather than the exception.”<sup>55</sup> They strove to prove that black women were capable of representing the same values, being just as good mothers, and being just as capable of running the house as white women. The plea for suffrage equality was heard loud and clear but was outright ignored by white women suffragists and white politicians.

In a time of Jim Crow segregation and racist violence, black women’s intersectional identity greatly limited their ability to appeal for rights in a white supremacist nation that was not ready for them to be free, let alone equal. So, when the Nineteenth Amendment passed in 1920, it recognized the right to vote to all citizens regardless of gender, except for women of color.<sup>56</sup> They were ultimately excluded from both the mainstream suffrage movement and the implementation of the suffrage Amendment. Many states also passed discriminatory laws furthering efforts to keep black women out of politics.<sup>57</sup> Whites-only primaries, poll taxes, and literacy tests all continued to be implemented within Jim Crow society.<sup>58</sup> However, that did not mean that these women did

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<sup>55</sup> Epps and Warren, “Sheroes.”

<sup>56</sup> Epps and Warren, “Sheroes.”

<sup>57</sup> Bailey, “Between Two Worlds.”

<sup>58</sup> Shorter, “Thank You, Foremothers,” 328.

not make a difference. The NACW supported and united black women in a contentious time of post-emancipation, helping them learn how to identify as free American women. Instilling values in these women and the greater population through widespread feminist activism, the NACW uplifted the entire black community through their suffrage strategies of raising child rearing consciousness and promoting anti-racism campaigns, as well as their many other non-suffrage related departments. Though their impact was less seen on the legal level, NACW suffragists planted seeds of progress in a symbolic effort to slowly change the nation's sentiments towards women of color.

With limited access to suffrage under the Nineteenth Amendment and continued racial inequality, the NACW's efforts in the Progressive Era were only the beginning of African American women's fight for civil rights, as seen through the Civil Rights Movement and present-day voting barriers. It took another 45 years for the Voting Rights Act (1965) to pass, which finally attempted to fully allow black women and men the right to vote.<sup>59</sup> Even still, women of color today are largely disadvantaged by states' voting restriction laws and efforts to suppress this right, such as limitations on mail-in ballots and obstructive registration requirements.<sup>60</sup> The work to gain full equal suffrage is still largely unfinished, but black female activism continues to remain strong. In 1996, on the NACW's 100-year anniversary, they had over 20,000 members and a total of 698 chapters in 32 states.<sup>61</sup> The NACW represented "a new national voice through which black club women could continue the struggle to improve their personal lives and the general standard of life."<sup>62</sup> The NACW is the nation's oldest and longest lasting black women's organization, still going strong today in raising awareness for black women's rights and

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<sup>59</sup> "Ida B. Wells: A Suffrage Activist for the History Books."

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Richette L. Haywood, "Still Lifting and Climbing." *Ebony* 51, no. 12 (1996): 101.

<sup>62</sup> Shaw, "Black Club Women," 20.

self-improvement as well as the greater mission of raising moral and civic standards.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Haywood, "Still Lifting," 101.

## Medicalization of Sex in the Cold War

Adelaide Vergnolle

What does it mean to be an American? After World War II, all of society was focused on answering this question. Not only were government officials working towards a clear definition, but medical professionals were also attempting to medicalize what it meant to be a model citizen. This medicalization of heterosexuality had a wide range of effects on citizens across the US including the LGBTQ+ community.

According to Williams, “To be truly American in the early Cold War, one had to be married, properly adjusted masculine man or feminine woman.”<sup>1</sup> Deviating from the predetermined gender roles implied not only trouble for yourself but also for your entire family and national security. The picture painted of being an American was one that was middle-class, suburban, heterosexual, and fulfilling the defined sex roles, and popular media emphasized this standard. In a 1960 publication of TIME magazine, the cover article discussed suburbia, and it emphasized the heterosexual family, with the article describing how “the keeper of the suburban dream is the suburban housewife.”<sup>2</sup> The magazine emphasized the roles that women and men should play in the idealistic view of what it meant to be a “typical” American.

These societal notions were supported by laws and executive orders enacted by the United States Government. President Dwight D. Eisenhower through Executive Order 10450 expanded the previously established mandated Loyalty Oaths which “signaled a change in the emphasis from issues of political loyalty to broader

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<sup>1</sup>Deborah Maureen Williams, “Building the Perfect Citizen: Gender and Patriotism in Early Cold War America.” (*Dissertation Abstracts International, Section A: The Humanities and Social Sciences*. Temple University UMI; ProQuest Ebrary, 2008), iii.

<sup>2</sup> “Suburbia USA” *Time Magazine* 1960, 16.

notions of general characters and suitability.”<sup>3</sup> These notions were to be the model of US citizenship that was not just encouraged but was now legally enforced as well. Executive Order 10450 affected sex and the family by describing legal and illegal sexuality. The order states “Any criminal, infamous, dishonest, immoral, or notoriously disgraceful conduct, habitual use of intoxicants to excess, drug addiction, sexual perversion” is banned from holding a government position.<sup>4</sup> Homosexuality or sexual perversion was one of the behaviors that was deemed unsuitable for federal employment. Homosexuality officially became a national security threat just as severe as communism.

These normative roles were not only enforced through politics but also through medicine. In 1950, during Congressional hearings surrounding the “homosexual problem” the government linked the issues facing the nation with homosexuality.<sup>5</sup> In medical journals across the US medical professionals were publishing articles about the practice and appropriate appearance that “typical” relationships should practice. Medical professionals “sought to establish guidelines for behavior that they considered emblematic of true sexual normalcy” rather than simply labeling dysfunction.<sup>6</sup> The medical society saw themselves as another institution to prevent communist infiltration of the “American way of life.” An arena that should have been objective was poisoned with political motivations leading to a wide array of consequences<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas M. Group and Joan I. Roberts, *Nursing, Physician Control, and the Medical Monopoly: Historical Perspectives on Gendered Inequality in Roles, Rights, and Range of Practice* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 149.

<sup>4</sup> President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Executive Order 10450, (1953).

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Herbst Lewis, “Walking Sleeping Beauty: The Premarital Pelvic Exam and Heterosexuality during the Cold War” *Journal of Women’s History* (2005): 86-102.

<sup>6</sup> Carolyn Frances Lewis “The Medicalization of Heterosexuality in the Cold War United States.” (Dissertation for the University of California, Santa Barbara, December 2007) viii.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

In 1966, in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Daniel Brown and David Lynn published on the meaning of sexuality. They stated that there was some gender plasticity in childhood but after early childhood the role of feminine or masculine is set in stone and that all people fell into one category or the other. The article argued that “The standard outcome is heterosexuality. More specifically, the prescribed outcome in our society is monogamous heterosexuality<sup>8</sup>”. It then emphasizes that heterosexuality is the basis of society, and that any other outcome is a biological defect and should be treated as such. The article medicalized heterosexuality as the norm and enforced it as the standard for American culture. Not only did it define heterosexuality as the standard, but it also defined any other sexuality as defective. The language of this article is critical and detrimental to people who may not identify as strictly heterosexual and is the foundation of what many medical professionals were publishing at the time.

Medical professionals argued that healthy sexuality in a heterosexual marriage encouraged “consideration, devotion, responsibility, and loyalty” in husbands which promoted the foundations of a moral nation.<sup>9</sup> The health of the people was equated to the health of the nation.

In the mid-1950s, physicians went beyond just defining who people should be having sex with, but also described how sex should be evoking pleasure. Medical professionals “argued that how a woman climaxed sexually was a significant marker of her gender and sexual well-being.”<sup>10</sup> It was defined that the only appropriate orgasm occurred from deep penile penetration which

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<sup>8</sup> Daniel G., Brown and David B. Lynn, “Human Sexual Development: An Outline of Components and Concepts.” *Journal of Marriage & Family* 28:2, 1966, 161.

<sup>9</sup> Nadina R. Kavinoky, M.D., “Medical Problems of Family Life: Outline of Lectures, Delivered at the School of Medical Evangelists to Senior Medical Students,” Louise M. Darling Biomedical Library, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California, 1929-1943.

<sup>10</sup> Carolyn Frances Lewis "The Medicalization of Heterosexuality in the Cold War United States." (Dissertation for the University of California, Santa Barbara, December 2007), 99.

further reinforced the ideas of passive femininity and women's reliance on men. Science declared that the man was in charge of all areas of a woman's life, including the bedroom. Doctors stipulated that a healthy relationship is with both partners fulfilling their gender roles and orgasming on a regular basis. Doctors continued to reenforce the idea that sexual relationships, the family, and the home were the best tool against communism.<sup>11</sup>

As mentioned before, doctors stated that a "true orgasm" could only be achieved through deep penile penetration rather than other types of stimulation. Although Alfred Kinsey in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953) published that the clitoris was the site for female pleasure doctors still insisted that the vagina was the primary organ for female pleasure<sup>12</sup>. Physicians said that women who did not experience this vaginal pleasure would later in life suffered from a psychological neurosis.<sup>13</sup>

The vaginal orgasm became the building block for a stable, healthy, and happy marital relationship and family. Furthermore, the sex lives of Americans became a crucial factor in the stability of the nation. Medical professionals took it upon themselves to ensure that women were having vaginal orgasms in order to protect the nation, meaning that their goals were no longer scientific but patriotic in nature. The focus and importance placed on the vaginal orgasm emphasized heterosexual relationships and female passivity. The family structure then became not only a social idea but also an idea that was promoted as healthy and natural.

As a part of associating the ills of society to sex, doctors linked the rising divorce rate to female sexual maladjustment caused by fear and ignorance. Physician Nadina Kavinsky stated that the bleeding and pain caused during intercourse would cause trauma that would, in turn, lead to unhappy marriages and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Alfred Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (New York: Grune & Stratton, 1954).

<sup>13</sup> William S. Kroger and S. Charles Freed, "Psychosomatic Aspects of Frigidity," *JAMA* 143 (10 June 1950), 528.

divorce.<sup>14</sup> This led to an emphasis on eradicating ignorance about sex before marriage and preparing women for marriage.

The linkage of the vaginal orgasm to marital stability inspired physicians to take measurable action into monitoring women's response to penetration. During premarital consultations physicians would attempt to ensure the stability of their patients' marriages and their psychosexual adjustment. Physicians believed that they were the best guides for couples seeking a healthy marriage rather than parents or ministers, or for that matter, the couple themselves. The physician emphasized the treatment of the family alongside the individual. Psychologists' responsibility expanded, and they began to not be concerned with "curing the insane, but tending to [the] maladjusted as well," which included sexual behavior at the time.<sup>15</sup>

Doctors enforced many of these ideals in the required premarital examination. The premarital exam legislation had been in effect for about a decade since the end of the Second World War. Some states as early as 1913 though required a physical examination certificate before marriage. As physicians became more professionalized the less likely it was for politicians to be able to interfere in the contents of these examinations and the more physicians began lobbying the government for more public health policy. Most state laws only required blood tests and venereal disease screenings, but in fifteen states there was also a premarital consultation.<sup>16</sup> Physicians believed that "the clear objective (of the premarital consultation was) to foster and preserve a sound family unit, a happy marriage, and healthy children."<sup>17</sup> This exhibits medical professionals' desire to ensure the health of the family rather than the health of the individual and was enforced through the premarital examination.

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<sup>14</sup> Kavinoky, "Premarital Medical Examination," 692.

<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Herbst Lewis, "Walking Sleeping Beauty: The Premarital Pelvic Exam and Heterosexuality during the Cold War" *Journal of Women's History*, 2005, 86-102.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, "Walking Sleeping Beauty."

<sup>17</sup> Editorial, "Premarital Laws," *JAMA* 187 (March 1964): 948.



During the premarital exam physicians centered their attention around the pelvic exam. The obstetrician-gynecologist Nadina Kavinoky said that after inspecting the female genitalia physicians should discuss sexual adjustment. She suggested this because “a fearful virgin must first be taught to cooperate and relax” in order to allow her “to cooperate and develop a more spontaneous rhythm.” After this she suggests that the physicians should then insert a lubricated instrument into the patient’s vagina in order for the patient to “realize that there is a normal opening in the hymen that leads into a deep vaginal canal.” After the initial insertion of the instrument the physician should then insert it deeper into the vaginal canal. Nadina Kavinoky then instructs the physicians to monitor the patient’s reaction and see her anxiety reducing, this, she states, “convinces the physicians of the therapeutic value of this simple procedure.”<sup>18</sup>

At this time, many misconceptions about the hymen plagued the medical community and society. Some doctors would not carry out an examination if the hymen was already ruptured assuming that the exam would provide useless information. Physicians were also considered male and female anxieties surrounding the rupturing of the hymen so to avoid this, doctors did a “premarital dilation of the hymen.”<sup>19</sup> Doctors did disagree about whose responsibility it was to rupture the hymen. Some doctors claimed that the hymen breaking provided husbands a lesson on how to be considerate of their wives. Other doctors argued that the breaking of the hymen provoked more anxiety than consideration.

All of these steps of the premarital examination ensured that physicians played a key role in the development of a healthy relationship and family. Therefore, doctors felt as if they were protecting the nation through ensuring that the most important building block of society, the family, was secure.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Kavinoky, “Premarital Medical Examination,” 692-95.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> During the Cold War, national security was defined as the defense of the nation against the communist threat. This security went beyond just military defense and expanded to

Doctors not only enforced heterosexuality, but they also actively denied homosexual individuals their experience and tried to “convert” them. Martin Duberman in his autobiography, “Cures: A Gay Man’s Odyssey” is a personal study of what it was like to be gay during the Cold War in the United States. Outwardly, Duberman appears to be a great success but internally, he is a lonely and distressed man who struggles with coming to terms with himself.

Duberman throughout his life spoke to several therapists in order to try to solve the “problem” of his homosexuality. His autobiography discusses his encounters with these therapists, stating that one, Dr. Igen, encouraged him to change his sexual orientation, saying that “the ultimate rewards will be great.” Not only did this doctor place a mental burden on Duberman, he also placed a financial burden by requiring Duberman to have “three sessions a week, at twenty dollars a session.” Duberman suffered tremendously from this intensive therapy and notes that this caused mental suffering throughout his life. Although Duberman appears successful he recounts living a life filled with mental turmoil and torture fueled by the medical community.<sup>21</sup>

Not only was the anti-gay rhetoric enclosed in the therapist’s office, but it was also published and spread throughout popular media. A 1969 issue of *Time Magazine* in an issue on “The Homosexual in America,” stated that people who were homosexual presented a danger to society and were deviants from the traditional values of American society. The article says that the ethics of LGBT people were against those of the straight world and were therefore un-American. During the Cold War, to be an American meant to fit into the mold set by the society and culture and deviancy from that was not only seen as socially incorrect but also as a threat to the nation. It also discusses how LGBT people

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the personal lives of all the people of the nation. Not only was capacity for security in the nation’s military but within all the people, and the threat of communism was seen as not towards just the United States government but also towards individual’s minds.

<sup>21</sup> Martin B. Duberman, *Cures: A Gay Man’s Odyssey*. (Boulder, CO: Westview), 2002.

are unsure of their position and status in society but find comfort that society is also unsure about their position and status as well. The medicalization of homosexuals was also emphasized by some posing questions like “are homosexuals sick.”<sup>22</sup> The discourse of medical journals was not confined to the doctors office but also pervaded society.

The enforcement of heterosexuality led, paradoxically, to the birth of a thriving counterculture that still affects us today. This counterculture directly opposed the society that the government and medical community was attempting to create. This counterculture was in the name of a new society based on alternative values and institutions. Several important movements emerged from the counter-culture to the enforced conformity of the Cold War, including the civil rights movement, the women’s and gay liberation movements, Red and Black Power, the New Left, and environmentalism. This culture emerged in response to a society that repressed individual expression with the goals of creating a new and improved environment where people could be themselves.<sup>23</sup>

The definition of the American citizen was very narrow during the Cold War Era. Not only was this enforced through law, political discourse, and societal expectations but it was also medicalized and encouraged by the medical community. The family unit had become the building block of the nation and the tool to leading to a free world. Conforming to this model was seen as ensuring a free world and those who fell out of line with this definition were seen as a danger to the American way of life.

Physicians attempted to protect the ideals of the nation through premarital examinations and changing those who were did not fit into the established model of conformity. After states

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<sup>22</sup>“ The Homosexual in America,” *TIME Magazine* 87, 1966, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Damon Bach, “Imprisoned in the American Dream: Cold War America and the Origins of the Counterculture, 1945 to 1965” in *The American Counterculture: A History of Hippies and Cultural Dissidents*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2021).

mandated premarital medical examinations, physicians believed that it was their role to offer this advice and expertise to patients.

Oftentimes medicine is received as the truth. During the Cold War, people had a blind faith in science and equated science with the unequivocal truth while trusting in the strange ideologies that doctors were proposing even if it seemed to extend beyond logic. This trust in science gave doctors significant power in society. Science had many limitations, but American society put science at the same level as truth. This was dangerous because science and politics were deeply intertwined and interconnected during the Cold War. At the time, science was used as a tool to enforce established political beliefs surrounding conformity and the importance of the traditional family unit. This then became the truth and those who did not fall in line were poisoning the well and out of place. Science wielded such great power and influence over society and many people saw it as the truth rather than recognized its connections to politics which caused many abuses and wrongdoings to occur.

## **Swapping Supers: Analyzing Gender Swapped Superheroes in American Comic Books**

**Damian Fong**

Since Superman's debut in *Action Comics* #1 in 1938, white, male superheroes have dominated the comic book landscape and further codified male-centric values like power, physicality, and honor. Women were often relegated to love interests of the heroes, an accessory that could motivate the male hero. While female superheroes have always existed in comic books, for example Wonder Woman or Supergirl, they never garnered the same attention as their male compatriots and were always seen as secondary to other heroes. However, in recent years there has been a much greater push to expand the standard hero to better reflect our world. This expansion led to the creation of a much more diverse range of heroes, including people of color, LGBTQ+ heroes, and female heroes. Heroes such as Captain Marvel and She-Hulk are now receiving both comic book recognition and the chance to star in and headline their own film and television series.

Another, much more conspicuous, method of adding female superheroes into the mix has been gender swapping established, male superheroes. While this has upset some fans, as most comic book changes do, the vast majority of readers have enjoyed these new takes on classic heroes such as Thor or Spider-Man. In many ways, and for many reasons, gender swapping these heroes proved an effective way of amplifying the visibility of women in comic books and gave them the platform upon which they can flourish. Gender swapping in comic books serves as an example of third wave feminism's permeation in media and pop culture, further amplifying the voices of traditionally marginalized communities and groups.

This paper focuses on two examples of gender swapped superheroes from Marvel Comics: Carol Danvers, also known as Captain Marvel, and Jane Foster, also known as The Mighty Thor.

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These characters have long-standing histories in the Marvel Comics Universe and demonstrate different approaches to gender swapping, further revealing the roles of women in comic books.

### **Third Wave Feminism and Gender Swapping**

To better situate these new heroes in the context of society, we will begin with a discussion of third wave feminism. The factors that have most influenced third wave feminism include globalization of markets, environmental concerns, changes in demographics, sexuality, and an overall decline in economic vitality.<sup>1</sup> Third wave feminism has also been influenced by and incorporated into “the proliferation of a visual culture and the circulation of media representations of femininity.”<sup>2</sup> As a result of this change in culture, comic books are now a well-suited medium for creators of all backgrounds and identities to further explore these marginalized voices and to amplify them as a means of better representing the diversity of the real world. Moreover, comic books have become much more accessible in recent years with the advent of digital comic readers online, such as ComiXology.

Another important characteristic of third wave feminism is the multiplicity of indefinites that can be associated with feminism as a means to incorporate intersectionality as a main tenant. Addressing this intersectionality has led to “increased awareness and recognition” of the feminist identities now being practiced.<sup>3</sup> By allowing for these different identities, they can be better represented and are also afforded a platform upon which they can self-advocate for what they need as individuals and as part of marginalized groups and communities. This subjective multiplicity is important as it gives women the further latitude to relate to feminism in a way that fits them as an individual rather than as a monolithic entity. The different experiences of individual women

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<sup>1</sup> Shelley Budgeon, “The Contradictions of Successful Femininity: Third-Wave Feminism, Postfeminism and ‘New’ Femininities.” *New Femininities* (May 2013): 280.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 280

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 282.

from diverse backgrounds are “central to third-wave feminism.”<sup>4</sup> In the context of the comic book industry, this individuality and intersectionality allows for both creators and fans of the medium to find community amongst each other as a means of empowerment. Thus, third wave feminism is a part of a broader engagement with intersectionality that allows for comic books to showcase innovative representations of women.<sup>5</sup>

With that understanding of feminism, we can turn to defining gender swapping as it relates to comic book characters. Gender swapping, in its most basic form, is when a character of one particular gender is portrayed by a different character of a different gender. One example of this can be seen in Reginald Hudlin’s *Black Panther #1* (2008) where Shuri, the sister of T’Challa, King of Wakanda and the Black Panther, takes on the role and costume of the Black Panther. A more prominent example, which will be discussed further, is when Jane Foster, Thor’s former girlfriend, started to wield Mjölnir, the mythical hammer of Thor, and became the Mighty Thor herself. Jennifer Walters, also known as the hero She-Hulk, is a gender swapped version of Bruce Banner’s alter ego the Hulk, although with a “she” prefix attached to her name. In summary, one form of gender swapping occurs when one character takes the mantle of another character or superhero of a differing gender.

### **Women’s Treatment in Comics**

In order to understand the impact of gender swapping in modern comic books, it is important to understand how women in comics, both superheroes and regular citizens, have been treated since Superman’s debut in 1938. While there have been many female superheroes in comic books since the early 1940’s, the most notable of them being Wonder Woman, they have often been

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<sup>4</sup> Neal Curtis and Valentina Cardo, “Superheroes and Third-Wave Feminism.” *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 3 (2017): 382.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 383.

relegated to secondary characters in other heroes' series, and usually play the love interest of the male hero.

One way the progression of women in comic book history can be tracked is through the character Gwen Stacy, the girlfriend of Peter Parker, also known as Spider-Man, from 1965. She was first introduced as Peter Parker's love interest and was portrayed as an all-around perfect girlfriend, but she would soon be killed by the Green Goblin after Spider-Man fails to save her in time and inadvertently snaps her neck. Her death prompts Spider-Man to mature and is one example of how the comic book industry treated women at the time: as plot devices to enhance the stories and development of the male superheroes. This trope meant "reducing a major female supporting character's story options to either marriage or death is misogynistic in the way it limits a woman's potential."<sup>6</sup> Gwen's death was the catalyst in comic books that led to a maturing of readers and the medium. It also started a trend in comics known as fridging, in which superheroes would have their girlfriends or wives murdered as a way to push the hero further. For the term to have arisen demonstrates how frequently women in comics are used as a mere plot device, devoid of character, only to spur the hero to seek justice. That gendering of justice and revenge also reveals how ingrained the gender norms of the warrior and the mother are in society. Men must always be prepared to fight as it prevents any inference of undesirable femininity. Thus, with women, especially those who are love interests, treated only as plot devices, gender swapping those women into the role of the hero breaks that dynamic and offers a new interpretation of the superhero genre.

## **Comic Book Analysis**

### *Carol Danvers: Captain Marvel*

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<sup>6</sup> Gabriel Gianola, and Janine Coleman, "The Gwenaissance: Gwen Stacy and the Progression of Women in Comics," *Gender and the Superhero Narrative*. (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), 256.



Carol Danvers is one of the oldest instances of a gender swapped superhero, however the swap did not occur all at once. First introduced in 1968, Carol Danvers was the girlfriend of Mar-Vell, the original Captain Marvel, a Kree warrior from the planet Hala. Following a heroic final act of the original Captain Marvel, Carol Danvers absorbs Mar-Vell's genetics, giving her all of his powers and becoming Ms. Marvel. She then went on to headline her own monthly comic book series, *Ms. Marvel* (1977), which lasted for twenty-three issues. Ms. Marvel would later become an Avenger and have several series over the years. Her change from Ms. Marvel to Captain Marvel, however, did not occur until 2012 in Kelly Sue DeConnick's series, *Captain Marvel*, where Carol Danvers opts to take the mantle as a way of commemorating the passing of her former boyfriend, Mar-Vell.

What is interesting to note about Carol and her Captain Marvel persona is that she, in many ways, demonstrates the fundamentals of third wave feminism. Within the context of the issue, Carol is first offered the title of "Captain" by Captain America following a battle against the Absorbing Man. At first, she is unsure if she should take the mantle before proudly proclaiming that she would "take the damn name."<sup>7</sup> At first, this seemingly puts Carol in a position wherein she would be embracing the mantle with permission from a male authority figure, in this case one that also embodies the ideal American in Captain America, thus legitimizing that power and the woman herself. However, the phrasing of her acceptance reveals that she seizes the opportunity herself, as if to say that she does not need anyone other than herself to give her that power. She is able to recognize "the conferring of the title but simultaneously declares it irrelevant."<sup>8</sup> This makes for a dynamic in which Carol finds her own way of empowerment and individuality, a previously mentioned key value of third wave feminism. Giving her the

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<sup>7</sup> Kelly Sue DeConnick, *Captain Marvel* (2012), no. 1. New York: Marvel Comics, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Curtis, 389.

agency to take on her new title, finally completing the gender swapping of Captain Marvel, turns a moment in which a male gives power into a situation where a woman takes that power for herself. That moment of self-doubt leads into the notion of self-as-project, a postfeminist idea and major trope in the realm of superhero media.<sup>9</sup> It adds on to the ways in which Carol can find her own path as a hero without being beholden to anyone. She has the capacity to look inward and become a better hero based on this notion.

That shift from “girlfriend of a superhero” to “superhero” can also be seen in the outfits worn in the different eras of Carol Danvers’s life. Her original Ms. Marvel costume is similar to a bathing suit and serves to accentuate the breasts and overall figure, adorning them in a bright red suit with a bright yellow star, as seen in Figure 1. However, in terms of bathing suits, the Ms. Marvel costume is extremely revealing, showing her navel and bare legs from the ankle up to her short bikini bottom. This outfit is representative of the blatant and over the top sexualization female superheroes face in comics. It also represents how women in this era were often used as objects to draw in the comic book reader which, at the time, was overwhelmingly male. It serves in stark contrast to the original Captain Marvel’s suit which had almost no skin showing whatsoever. This difference reveals how the comic book medium had been centered on the male gaze and appealing to male fantasies of power, making large, imposing bodies as the ideal for strength. Furthermore, the male gaze taints the perception of women as well, seeking to objectify them into the ideal body shape for men. We see this with various other male heroes such as Captain America, Iron Man, and Superman: “[They] demonstrate how superheroes perpetuate a pre-existing script for ideal masculinity. This construction is based on the elimination of the feminine, which includes anything... that is soft, weak, connected

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

to nature, biology, and the domestic sphere.”<sup>10</sup> As a result, Ms. Marvel is then made to be inferior to men on the basis that she embodies femininity, from the revealing outfit to the prefix of “Ms.” attached to her superhero title. With this idea of eliminating the feminine, gender swapping can be seen as a way to add back some of those male characteristics in an attempt to make female heroes more well-suited for the comic book genre. We begin to see that shift, that addition of less feminine elements with the cover of *Captain Marvel #1* in 2012 from DeConnick (Figure 2). As Captain Marvel, Carol Danvers no longer wears revealing clothes, but a flight suit designed for her powers. While still skintight, it retains some level of femininity that allows for an identifiably female frame while not overtly sexualizing her as with the 1977 comic costume. This further demonstrates the impact of third wave feminism on comic book culture as women have become more involved in the world of comic books, both as creators in the case of DeConnick and as part of the overall readership.<sup>11</sup>

Captain Marvel’s gender swapping from the original male to Carol Danvers demonstrates how women have become a much more prominent component of the comic book industry, an effect of third wave feminism, which can be seen through her actions, her attitudes to powers and titles, and through her costumes.



<sup>10</sup> Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books* (United States: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 59.

<sup>11</sup> David Barnett, “Kapow! The Unstoppable Rise of Female Comic Readers,” *The Guardian*, 18 Sep. 2015, (29 Oct. 2022).

### *Jane Foster: The Mighty Thor*

Another example is the case of Jane Foster adopting the persona of the Mighty Thor. For distinction purposes, the original Thor will be referred to as Thor Odinson while Jane Foster's version of the hero will be referred to as the Mighty Thor. Jane Foster previously occupied a similar role to Carol Danvers as the love interest of Donald Blake, the human form of Thor Odinson. They fell in love but were forced apart by Odin. Many years later, Jane Foster was diagnosed with breast cancer, and Thor Odinson lost his worthiness and thus his powers and the ability to wield his hammer, Mjöllnir. In proclaiming, "There must always be a Thor," Jane Foster picks up the hammer and becomes the Mighty Thor.<sup>12</sup>

Similar to Captain Marvel, Thor's gender swapping occurs when his girlfriend obtains his powers. Unlike Captain Marvel, Jane Foster did not have nearly forty years as her own superhero before taking on the mantle of Thor though, and the swap was much more immediate. This may be due to the prevalence of third wave feminism at this point in comic book history. By 2014, Captain Marvel had already been a prominent fixture in the Avengers, and comic books were gaining popularity with the rise of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. All of these factors, along with the ever-growing female readership, allowed for Jane Foster to become her own superhero.<sup>13</sup> It also served a narrative purpose to further underscore Thor Odinson's personal struggles of godhood.



<sup>12</sup> Jason Aaron, *Thor* (2014), no. 1. New York: Marvel Comics, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Barnett, "Kapow! The Unstoppable Rise of Female Comic Readers."

Specifically, the removal of Odinson's powers set him on a quest to rediscover how he may once again be worthy, another instance of the "self-as-project" notion mentioned before, however, in this case it is the original male hero that must now reflect and improve. Meanwhile, Jane Foster does not need to reflect on her own heroics as evident by how easily she can wield Mjölnir and how confident she is in taking on the mantle of Thor. This dynamic reframes the idea of doubt by positioning the female and gender swapped version of the hero as the confident and powerful one, however, this still happens with the transfer of power from man to woman, and it requires that Thor Odinson lose his powers in order for Jane Foster to gain hers. This supposes that "there is only room in the universe for masculine power, regardless of which gender embodies it."<sup>14</sup> The seemingly finite amount of masculine power available demonstrates how masculinity is meant to be guarded from those who do not already possess it. Similar to Captain Marvel, power seemingly emanates from men and is only transferred to women when the men can no longer use it. In terms of third wave feminism and relating it to more individual experiences, the Mighty Thor embodies a sense of duty and urgency that comes with power. The Mighty Thor embodies the independence of finding one's own way of expressing feminism. Once again, like Captain Marvel, the Mighty Thor willingly and actively seizes the opportunity to gain power herself with no need for male validation.

Once again turning to the suits worn by the heroes, we see a similar but different occurrence with the Mighty Thor's outfit, as seen in Figure 3, compared to Captain Marvel's. The Mighty Thor is not as sexualized as Ms. Marvel's costume as there is significantly less bare skin in the outfit. The chest plate, however, still accentuates the breasts in a way that appeals more to the male gaze. This specific pose is meant to imply power, with Mjölnir

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<sup>14</sup> Amanda Rose Loeffert. "The Changing Roles of Women in American Comic Books." PhD diss., The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 2017, 58.

carried high above, almost revering it for its power. While not completely desexualized, there is still a semblance of femininity that has not been erased with the acquisition of the new powers. From this suit we can infer that she has agency as a feminist hero because it does not shy away from the feminine features. This calls into question the balance between overt sexualization of women and the defeminization of women.



Figure 3: The Mighty Thor from Thor #1 (2014)

Unlike Captain Marvel's swap, the Mighty Thor saw a much larger social response from critical comic book readers. A vocal minority online on social media platforms expressed dismay at the swap, with many calling the move pandering, stupid, and unnecessary.<sup>15</sup> Similar sentiment has been seen among critics of the swapped hero when it was announced that Natalie Portman would portray this version of the Mighty Thor in the 2022 film, *Thor: Love and Thunder*. Many of the comments were similar in nature, this time taking aim at Marvel Studios and their apparent insistence on "identity politics instead of good story."<sup>16</sup> The criticisms of the Mighty Thor, no matter the medium, always focus on how her existence as a hero is unnecessary and serves no reason other than to pander to new audiences as a marketing ploy.

The Mighty Thor is also representative of the wider shift Marvel underwent in the mid-2010's where diversity and representation were the goals of this new era. This push for

<sup>15</sup> John Boone. "This Response to the Backlash against Marvel Making Thor a Woman Is Just Plain Awesome." *E! Online*, 17 Jul. 2014, (29 Oct. 2022).

<sup>16</sup> Shaurya Thapa. "A Thor Is Born! the Controversy around Marvel's Lady Thor Explained." *India Today*, 7 Jul. 2022, (29 Oct. 2022).

representation started with G. Willow Wilson's 2014 series, *Ms. Marvel*, in which a Pakistani teenager, Kamala Khan, becomes a hero and takes on the previous mantle of her hero, Carol Danvers. The first issue of *Ms. Marvel* sold approximately 75,000 physical issues, going through seven printings, and consistently being one of Marvel's bestsellers in digital storefronts.<sup>17</sup> The success of Kamala Khan's *Ms. Marvel* demonstrated that there was success to be had in a cast of characters and heroes that did not conform to the typical white male superhero.

Her success led to Marvel's 2015 revamp of their comic books called "All-New, All-Different." This revamp had two main goals: to grab a new audience that had not previously read comic books; and to diversify the heroes of the Marvel Universe. Both were achieved by introducing new takes on existing heroes which included Jane Foster's *Mighty Thor* and Sam Wilson, a Black man and previous partner to Steve Rogers' *Captain America*, taking the mantle of *Captain America*. The criticisms that the *Mighty Thor* saw upon her debut were echoed across the other new heroes, such as Sam Wilson's *Captain America*. Many saw these moves as further evidence that Marvel was trying to pander to audiences without any real substance for actual stories. The conceit of their complaints was, as mentioned previously, that the identity politics involved in giving these heroic mantles to new, diverse characters would impact the quality of comic books released from Marvel. Often these sentiments are charged by bigotry and intolerance, but their position begs the question as to whether or not the changing of characters to fit different identities is ultimately a move in the right direction for diversity in comics.

## Conclusion

Gender swapping heroes is an interesting method of increasing the visibility of women in comic books for both the

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<sup>17</sup> Alex Abad-Santos. "How *Ms. Marvel* Became Marvel's Most Important Superhero." *Vox*. *Vox*, 7 Jan. 2020 (29 Oct. 2022).

creators and the readers. It allows them to explore new paths to power and acceptance in a world and medium largely dominated by men. However, while these superheroes may be able to fight for themselves and better defend what they represent, it begs the question of if these gender swaps are truly effective in increasing female representation in comic books. The primary issue with these swaps is that they are ultimately limited by the fact that the female hero's powers originate from their male counterparts. In that sense, the creators of these new heroes imply that the power and potential of these women are derived from men who have an almost inherent superiority over them in terms of ability. With these implications in mind, gender swapping is hardly a way to push through the landscape for female representation by the tenants of third wave feminism. It turns out to be a faulty marketing stunt by publishers and creators that ultimately hurt the women and communities they claimed to want to amplify. It would make sense, then, that gender swapping would be detrimental to diversity, representation, and inclusion as their heroism is predicated on the fact that they must first usurp their power from their male predecessor. Men being the locus of power refutes the idea that women can have their own strength and power as individuals. In that vein, in order to increase female representation, new superheroes ought to be created that serve the role of the gender swapped heroes. Moreover, taking powers from male heroes and awarding them to women devalues that power for women as it could only be obtained by a man in the first place. In order to better represent women in comic books, new heroes like Gwen Stacy's Spider-Woman should be created that embrace femininity in a similar way to how male heroes embrace hulking frames and overt shows of strength. Third wave feminism being prominent in visual mediums allow for new ways to communicate these ideals such that people feel well represented by the media they consume.



## **A Lost Generation of Women: The Female Perpetrators that Propelled the Nazi Regime\***

**Claire Murphy**

Substantial research efforts and scholarly discourse has been conducted to investigate the lasting repercussions of what is historically considered one of the world's worst genocides - the Holocaust. While information exists pertaining to the perpetrators of these horrific crimes, prior examinations have largely been centered around the male aggressor. Gendered connotations of genocidal violence seem to reinforce the narrative that women were not a part of these efforts. However, recent explorations into the past reveal that German women were directly involved in instances of "mass murder," and assisted in the Nazi party's attempt to exterminate an entire population of innocent civilians. While these women perhaps comprised "a minority of the perpetrators involved," their participation ultimately fueled the initial success of the party, simultaneously defying previous conceptions of both femininity and gender.<sup>1</sup> Their contributions remain essential in understanding the cultural, social, and political standards at the time, in addition to discerning how a nation could justify an attempted annihilation of a community.<sup>2</sup> Historical documentation provides reference to a handful of German women who were remembered for their participation in the Holocaust, but the majority of female perpetrators were not members of the elite

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\* Claire Murphy's "A Lost Generation of Women: The Female Perpetrators that Propelled the Nazi Regime" won the McPhee Prize from the Santa Clara University History department. This prize is awarded to the student whose history seminar paper demonstrates the most outstanding use of research methodology as determined by the faculty of the Department of History.

<sup>1</sup> Elissa Bemporad, Joyce W. Warren, and Wendy Lower, "German Women and the Holocaust in the Nazi East," in *Women and Genocide: Survivors, Victims, Perpetrators* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), pp. 111-130.

<sup>2</sup> Wendy Lower, "Introduction," in *Hitler's Furies* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2013), p. 4.

class. Instead, they composed “ordinary” positions within the regime, continuously carrying out atrocities, all the while defying the masculine-oriented ideology of the party. Participation supplied these women with a sense of purpose, identity, and unification against a common enemy. These elements provide reasoning as to why female perpetrators could ultimately justify committing such unimaginable genocidal crimes.

Prior to their transition into the “killing fields” of Germany during World War II, German women were primarily confined to the constrictions of National Socialism, the accepted political ideology of Nazi party.<sup>3</sup> This nationalist framework, although advertised by authority figures as being inclusive and politically compelling, placed women in “subservient roles.” Their primary purpose was to birth Aryan children and become “breeders for the Nazi war machine.”<sup>4</sup> Party leaders argued that these positions, while inferior, gave women a chance to play a crucial role within the state, acting as “defenders of the homeland,” all while serving their country’s national agenda.<sup>5</sup> Hitler’s propagation of the medieval conception of women needing to embody the maxim of ‘*Kinder, Küche und Kirche* (‘children, kitchen and church)’ was widely accepted at the time, presumably because promotion of these discriminatory roles was framed through the perception that they were respectable, important, and highly valued positions.<sup>6</sup> Under this conception, women were encouraged to find empowerment in their duties to the regime, with some even misled to believe that if they completed their tasks with dignity and acceptance, they would later be welcomed into various party organizations and other levels of the public sphere as an “ultimate

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<sup>3</sup> Wendy Adele-Marie, “Introduction,” in *Women as Nazis: Female Perpetrators of the Holocaust* (Independently Published, 2019), pp. 1-9.

<sup>4</sup> Wendy Adele-Marie, “Why National Socialism Appealed to Women,” in *Women as Nazis: Female Perpetrators of the Holocaust* (Independently Published, 2019), p. 17

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 16

<sup>6</sup> Paul Roland, “Hitler’s Women,” in *Nazi Women: The Attraction of Evil* (London, U.K.: Arcturus Publishing, Ltd, 2016), pp. 9-10.

avocation of personal sacrifice for Hitler.”<sup>7</sup> The term *Volksgemeinschaft* (the people’s community) was originally created with the intention to incentivize women to accept their second-class citizenship and proclaim the benefits of fulfilling their roles as wives, mothers and primary caregivers. As Hitler declared to an audience of almost 700,000 during a Nuremberg Party Rally in 1934:

What man offers in heroism on the field of battle, women equals with unending perseverance and sacrifice, with unending pain and suffering. Every child she brings into the world is a battle, a battle she wages for the existence of her people, for the National Socialist...Volksgemeinschaft was established...because millions of women became our most loyal, fanatical fellow combatants.<sup>8</sup>

Astonishingly, females continued to support the movement and its insinuated oppression of women.<sup>9</sup> Despite a repressive and totalitarian regime, National Socialism appealed to millions of German women. They showcased their support through ongoing attendance at Nazi rallies and their adoption of Nazi-oriented propaganda.<sup>10</sup> Defying both gender and historical expectations, these women embraced backward-looking policy changes. When the Nazi party set out to abolish the female vote in 1933 (originally awarded in January 1919), women rejected the “oppressive male” as their primary enemy. Instead, they championed Nazi agendas, urging that “the Jew, the asocial, the Bolshevik, and the feminist”

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<sup>7</sup> Adele-Marie, “Why National Socialism Appealed to Women,” p. 16

<sup>8</sup> Adolf Hitler, “Nuremberg Rally,” *Nuremberg Rally* (September 6, 1934).

<sup>9</sup> Bemporad, et al, “German Women and the Holocaust in the Nazi East,” p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> Adele-Marie, “Why National Socialism Appealed to Women,” p. 16

were the true enemies of the state, propelling the advancement of these ideologies within the country.<sup>11</sup>

For many scholars, the question remains as to why German women would unquestionably submit themselves to Nazi ideology and later become complicit and responsible for the genocidal violence that occurred during the Holocaust. As evident in the primary testimony of Ellen Frey, a German woman who grew up during Nazi rule, patriotism played a substantial role in the acceptance of racial prejudice. “It was sort of a slogan of the Nazis. ‘The German woman brings children into the world,’” she said in an interview. “Hitler understood how to fascinate women. I was born in 1915 and I was *very* patriotic. In our generation there is nothing going on with heroes and nothing going on that one can really stand up for. And then came Hitler.”<sup>12</sup> Additional motivations are revealed in the entries submitted to the Columbia University essay contest on the subject, “Why I Became a Nazi,” organized by sociologist Theodore Abel in 1936. Of the 581 evaluated entries, the dominant theme articulated was the “desire to be part of an ethnic community spirit, the compulsion to conform, and the interest in finding like-minded individuals or risk being outcast from a popular movement.”<sup>13</sup> In these findings, Abel also concluded that twenty three percent of the women’s submissions addressed a “lightened patriotism and a distrust of foreigners as their prime motivation,” for participating in genocidal campaigns. All essays spoke of traumatization and great loss following in the wake of World War I, in addition to articulating personal losses (such as the death of a father, brother or son). In this way, dedicating oneself to a political regime as publicized as the Nazi party, provided a sense of belonging, kinship, and

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<sup>11</sup> Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2013, p. 24

<sup>12</sup> Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich, *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich*, February 1, 1993, pp. 173-174.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Roland, “Women in the Fatherland,” in *Nazi Women: The Attraction of Evil* (London, U.K.: Arcturus Publishing, Ltd, 2016), p. 79.

community. Abel's findings suggest that through this commitment, "the Party became their substitute family and the Führer their father figure."<sup>14</sup>

Given their steadfast and devoted faithfulness to the Nazi dictatorship, when it came time for women to join the movement through more regulated positions, they did. Despite previous Nazi ideologies denouncing female involvement and discouraging active participation on the warfront, women showed up in unprecedented numbers to show their support, in some cases upholding positions that involved carrying out death orders and other forms of genocidal killing.<sup>15</sup> Although domesticity was publicly endorsed as the primary sphere for women to exercise their support, the outpouring of male populations onto the battlefield as the war progressed resulted in women joining the workforce, even on initially small scales.<sup>16</sup> By the early 1940s "hundreds of thousands of young single women" were drafted "like soldiers" into various military positions within the regime, enduring considerable amounts of "physical and ideological training" to solidify their places as nurses, secretaries, auxiliaries, camp/prison guards, and factory workers.<sup>17</sup> These positions awarded women with a level of political status they had never previously been allowed to acquire. Subsequently, many felt empowered and invigorated by their improved social standing. A formal job brought with it the chance of an income, an opportunity for career advancement, greater social mobility, and ultimately a better life. The promise of breaking the gender barriers that historically prohibited female advancement within the workforce appealed to many German women and was therefore almost impossible to resist.<sup>18</sup>

Female enthusiasm surrounding their involvement in the Party can be seen in numerous primary source accounts. The

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>15</sup> Bemporad, et al, "German Women and the Holocaust in the Nazi East."

<sup>16</sup> Adele-Marie, "Why National Socialism Appealed to Women," p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> Bemporad, et al, "German Women and the Holocaust in the Nazi East," p. 115.

<sup>18</sup> Adele-Marie, "Why National Socialism Appealed to Women," p. 31.

published letters of a Red Cross nurse in Germany, recently evaluated by German historian, Marita Krauss, provides evidence to the assertion that these roles, although lacking in formal recognition, encouraged patriotism and liberation. Brigitte Penkert expresses in her journal writings that, “training as a nurse and taking an oath to the Führer as a member of the German Red Cross,” provided her with a “manly” sense of honor. As Krauss analyzes, Penkert “enthused over the chance to stand guard just like a man with a weapon in her hand,” as it supplied her with a brief moment of equality or as “in the Nazi ideology of racial unity, a comradeship of Aryan men and women.”<sup>19</sup> Her position allowed her to leave an unfulfilling marriage and life at home to feel accepted and appreciated as a member of the Führer. Other accounts demonstrate similar feelings of nationalism and support. Irmgard Reichenau, the primary editor of *Deutsche Frauen an Adolf Hitler (German Women to Adolf Hitler)*, a collection of open letters produced by Nazi women, writes about her devotion to the country in an effort to advance the female position within the Third Reich. “Our love for Germany gives us the right and makes it our duty to say below a few things that German women have to say to the German man,” she writes. “A Volksgemeinschaft [community] of Germanic blood cannot in the long run be led and controlled only by men. The three generations now living are directed by the will of the creator to the third stage: to the social order of the two-unified...”<sup>20</sup> If the Nazi party was to be successful, Reichenau argued, Germany needed sizable contributions from female supporters. These women, estimated to total around 500,000, flocked to join the Eastern Campaign. While still being considered the “gentler sex,” they participated in numerous acts of genocidal

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<sup>19</sup> Brigitte Penkert and Wendy Lower, “Letter from German Red Cross Nurse in German Women and the Holocaust in the Nazi East,” in *Women and Genocide: Survivors, Victims, and Perpetrators*, trans. Marita Krauss (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), p. 115.

<sup>20</sup> Irmgard Reichenau (Nuremberg, Germany, n.d.).

violence through their supportive roles, working to fulfill Hitler's mission of the Final Solution.<sup>21</sup>

One of the most common positions for women to uphold within Nazi Germany was that of a secretary or clerical worker. Despite little attention paid to these duties (as they remained outside of the formal camp system), the positions were vital to the initial success of the Party. Thousands of German women took on these administrative roles, in some cases assigned to type up specific orders for "mobile killing units," like the *Einsatzgruppen*.<sup>22</sup> These positions were often exploited by high-ranking bureaucratic party members, with employees having to devote a substantial number of hours to their work and being paid little in return. Still, females increasingly sought out these positions, and by the late 1930s, the number of women occupying these roles tripled.<sup>23</sup> Long-standing gender stereotypes however allowed for many to be taken advantage of and used as cheap labor sources. If a woman proved her devotion and loyalty to the regime through increased hours and little protest, she had the ability to advance within her placement, working for station headquarters like Nazi leader, Heinrich Himmler's, *Einsatzgruppe A*. A position of this stature required women to produce "thousands of pages of reports and orders on mass shootings," in addition to typing out and discharging death orders to concentration camps and assisting with the distribution of murder tallies to report back to Nazi bases like the Berlin headquarters.<sup>24</sup> Traudl Junge, one of Hitler's principal secretaries, later recalled her experiences in her memoir, *Until the Final Hour: Hitler's Last Secretary*. The book is an attempt by Junge to reconcile her actions and complicity in genocidal violence:

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<sup>21</sup> Bemporad, et al, "German Women and the Holocaust in the Nazi East," pp. 116-117.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 117.

<sup>23</sup> Wendy Lower, "The East Needs You," in *Hitler's Furies* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2013), p. 53.

<sup>24</sup> Bemporad, et al, "German Women and the Holocaust in the Nazi East," p. 117.

I was Hitler's secretary for two and a half years... At this period we were all looking to the future and trying - with remarkable success, incidentally - to repress and play down our past experiences. I set about writing my memoirs objectively.. I read my manuscript again several decades later. I was horrified by my uncritical failure to distance myself from my subject at the time, and ashamed of it. How could I have been so naive and unthinking?<sup>25</sup>

Junge's expressions reflect an unpopular theme among female perpetrators in the post-genocidal period following the war. Notable court documents and public testimonies pertaining to the Nazi perpetrators in Galicia, suggest that many were unremorseful about their involvement in the Holocaust. In the 1949 trial of a married couple who shot and killed Jewish civilians on their SS agricultural estate, the wife defended her involvement in the genocide, claiming it awarded her with gender allowances and political acknowledgement she could have never dreamed of.<sup>26</sup> Although Junge articulated repentance and shame in her memoir, historical scholars have since argued that this was in relation to her personal effort to be exonerated by the de-Nazification court and avoid potential criminal charges. Her ignorance, they assert, was both calculated and deliberate. She was not, as she later argued, "unaware of the nature of the regime she served or its policies towards those it considered 'undesirables' and enemies of the state."<sup>27</sup>

German women were also employed as camp/prison SS guards during the war, although these positions were much more

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<sup>25</sup> Traudl Junge and Müller Melissa, "Introduction," in *Until the Final Hour: Hitler's Last Secretary* (New York, NY: Arcade Publishing, 2004), pp. 1-2.

<sup>26</sup> Wendy Lower, "Male and Female Holocaust Perpetrators and the East German Approach to Justice, 1949-1963," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 24, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): pp. 56-84, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/dcq003>.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Roland, "The Gentle Sex?," in *Nazi Women: The Attraction of Evil* (London, U.K.: Arcturus Publishing, Ltd, 2016), p. 210.



infrequent, as they denoted a social and political status that was primarily reserved for men. Historical estimates determine that there were upwards of 5,000 German women employed as female guards by the end of the war and their role provided compensations that were only present through positions of this nature, such as educational training, a decent salary, housing, and community involvement.<sup>28</sup> These forms of employment offered many benefits, but they came at a price. Training and guard instruction was oftentimes long and invasive for female guards. Most women additionally had little control over their hours or pay. The required labor was repeatedly physically grueling and personal recognition was only awarded by members of authority to women who exercised increased “brutality” in their actions towards prisoners.<sup>29</sup> As intrusive as it was, employment in these camps was a choice - one many German women decided to make. If hired as an SS guard, it was impossible to take no notice of the barbarity and violence that occurred at these “concentration and extermination camps.” Similar to the men employed by the SS, several women agreed that the “camp structure was a necessary part of the National Socialist policy,” and that “in order for Germany to survive, all perceived enemies of the state, especially the Jews, had to be destroyed.”<sup>30</sup> Records indicate that numerous amounts of public humiliation, beating, and other forms of cruelty were exercised by female guards at the expense of many prisoners. This was especially true at Ravensbrück, the first and only death camp built in 1938, designed and reserved entirely for women.<sup>31</sup>

Johanna Langefeld, a former head guard at the Ravensbrück camp, was popularly known for her brutality towards female prisoners. As one former Ravensbrück prisoner recalled in 1957,

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<sup>28</sup> Wendy Adele-Marie, “Die Schutzstaffel, The SS,” in *Women as Nazis: Female Perpetrators of the Holocaust* (Independently Published, 2019), p. 43.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>31</sup> Sarah Helm, *Ravensbrück: Life and Death in Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2016).

Langefeld resembled the qualities of a “steel-hardened man.” Despite having no official title, badge, or rank within the SS system, Langefeld “believed she could run a women’s concentration camp better than any man” in the hopes of restoring a sense of patriotism and order to the Third Reich. Although the former prisoner expressed that Langefeld “would pray to God for strength to stop the evil happening,” her cultural attitude resembled the stance of the party in her abhorrence towards Jews. “If a Jewish woman came into her office,” she expressed, “her face would fill with hatred...”<sup>32</sup> Many female guards, like Emma Zimmer, demonstrated a sense of enjoyment in their authoritative stature, notably in the power and influence it awarded them. Trained in the “use of straightjackets and water dousing,” Zimmer often referred to prisoners as “bitches” and “dirty cows” who needed to be put into their place. She utilized her “loose wrist” in the form of frequent acts of corporal punishment. “She liked to slap,” one prisoner wrote, “walked up and down the ranks carrying a large document file, with which she would beat inmates about the head at the slightest movement of sound...she lashed out with her jackboots too.”<sup>33</sup> These accounts work to challenge previous gender conceptions held at the time. Women were not - as they were so often understood to be - weak or ignorant participants. Their complicity, or rather direct involvement in instances of genocidal violence and murder was *a choice* on their part, although likely the product of years’ worth of gender discrimination and subordination. With the allure of equality that these kinds of positions could potentially provide, German women found it almost impossible to resist, astonishingly even when it required partaking in intended extermination.<sup>34</sup>

Of all the forms of employment that women could uphold as part of the Nazi war effort, the largest involvement came from staffed nursing positions. Through this role, German women were

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<sup>32</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, pp.3-4.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 27

<sup>34</sup> Helm, p 27.

responsible for many deaths, as members of the Third Reich staffed women with significant responsibilities in the Nazi euthanasia campaign.<sup>35</sup> An estimated 200,000 deaths occurred in Nazi controlled “asylums, hospitals, and other medical factories.” German women were accountable for “assisting in racial screening and selection, mass sterilization, starvation, gassing, and lethal injections of those deemed ‘unworthy of life.’”<sup>36</sup> Counselled in discriminatory “racial hygiene and hereditary disease” education, nurses were in charge of evaluating prisoners for potential physical and mental handicaps, leading them into asylums and gas chambers, and even “administering” the lethal injections to end their life.<sup>37</sup> After the killing concluded, nurses were often tasked with typing up the “death notices” to be processed by campaign leaders and monitoring the shipment of millions of pounds of ashes to be dumped overseas. Upon hiring, it was required that female employees took an oath of secrecy in relation the Führer’s “mercy killing” program, and some were sent on to work at the “Osteinsatz with the Organization Todt” in 1942, a government-controlled agency responsible for organizing medical experiments for prisoners of war.<sup>38</sup>

Nazi leaders propagated the importance of nursing positions, claiming they aided the “fighting power of the German military” to help eradicate Jews and simultaneously improve the morale, attitude, and health of the soldier. In these ways, German women felt that their involvement was essential to the success of the movement. The ability to kill or commit acts of genocide however, was “directed less by their professional training than by simple

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<sup>35</sup> Bemporad, et al, “German Women and the Holocaust in the Nazi East,” p. 117.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2013, p. 43.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Roberts Baer, Myrna Goldenberg, and Susan Benedict, “Caring While Killing: Nurses in the 'Euthanasia Centers',” in *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, vol. 1 (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2003), pp. 59-79.

opportunity, individual character, and proximity to power.”<sup>39</sup> Nurses had the ability to control how evil or sadistic they wished to be towards their patients. As past historical documentation suggests, violence was a prominent feature exercised by female perpetrators. Women held the capacity to commit inhumane acts of murder on their own volition, and they often chose to comply with a system of rule that was both dehumanizing and abominable in nature.<sup>40</sup>

The continued denial and suppression of involvement by female perpetrators following the war furthers the argument against women’s lack of awareness in relation to genocidal violence. Unsurprisingly, women have been accused and tried for their participation in the Holocaust on a miniscule level in comparison to male perpetrators. During the infamous 1945-46 Nuremberg Trials, a meager 200 defendants were tried, 161 of whom were convicted. None of the “serious criminals” accused were women. Of the twelve subsequent trials conducted by the Allied Forces following World War II, only “two women figure among the hundreds accused” in trials relating to medical roles, agencies, and other “purification” programs.<sup>41</sup> The women that were convicted for their involvement primarily reflected positions of political power and status, a standing that little to none of the average female perpetrator obtained within the Nazi party. Gender stereotypes and attitudes inflated these post-war trial results, with public testimonies aimed at reinforcing the narrative that women were naive to explicit violence given their sex, and following this argument, would be incapable of facilitating mass murder on a scale as large as the Holocaust. Erna Petri, one of the few female perpetrators accused and convicted for genocidal participation and intent, defied public understanding in relation to a woman’s

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<sup>39</sup> Lower, “The East Needs You,” p. 52.

<sup>40</sup> Bemporad, et al, “German Women and the Holocaust in the Nazi East,” pp. 118-119.

<sup>41</sup> Annette Wieviorka, “Women and the Post-War Nazi Trials,” trans. Jeanne Armstrong, *Clio: Women, Gender, History* 2, no. 39 (April 10, 2015): pp. 146-151, <https://doi.org/10.4000/cliowgh.527>.

capacity to commit acts of great brutality in her 1961 trial. During her interrogation by the East German court, Petri admitted to shooting and killing “6 Jewish children with (her) own hands.” In defense of her actions, Petri stated:

I was only 23 years olds, still young and inexperienced. I lived only among men, who were in the SS and carried out shootings of Jewish persons. I seldom had contact with other women, so in the course of time I became more hardened. Not wanting to stand behind the SS men, I wanted to show them that I, as a woman, could conduct myself like a man. So I shot 4 Jews and 6 Jewish children. I wanted to prove myself to the men.<sup>42</sup>

These articulations speak to the commonly experienced desire for women at this time to be valued as equal in relation to their male peers. The lack of remorse, guilt, or regret expressed by Petri symbolizes the prominence and respect towards a masculinized identity in Nazi politics and nationalism. Women who demonstrated attitudes and beliefs in line with the accepted characteristics of the party were more likely to acquire positions within the regime, even if they were of a lower status. Having their participation valued and recognized (oftentimes for the first time in their lives) by the political elite, female perpetrators took gratification in this new sense of belonging. The belief that their contributions mattered and played a role in catapulting the Third Reich’s success, led to an unconscionable justification by women to commit great acts of violence and co-operate in assisting one of the most lethal and devastating genocides in all of history.

Previous discourses and historical examinations of Nazi Germany have largely ignored the role of female perpetrators during World War II. These German women's contributions,

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<sup>42</sup>“Interrogation of Erna Petri,” n.d..

involvement, and participation, however, remain essential in understanding the ways in which gender and nationhood can reinforce complicity and violence during a genocide. Although originally told to remain at the home front and rejoice in a domestic lifestyle, German women increasingly entered into more formal positions within the Nazi regime as the war progressed. These roles awarded them with new forms of responsibility and acknowledgment they had never before experienced. Working primarily as secretaries, nurses, and SS prison guards, German women accelerated the progress of the party, fulfilling Hitler's wishes of exterminating a population in the hopes of creating a better and more civilized Aryan race. Their genocidal involvement defies previous understandings about femininity and womanhood, demonstrating the power that community and identity have when it comes to justifying murder. Scholars and historians have often rejected categorizing women as "violent criminals," as it connotes a perception that seems fabricated and unprovable. However, as primary evidence from the period suggests, women *are just as capable as men* at committing unspeakable acts of violence. To remove their contributions from history not only obscures the truth, but enables misconceptions about gender, complicity, and the nature of genocide.

## **The Banality of Economic Evil: Gender & Economics in the Rwandan Genocide\***

**Sofia Stechschulte**

In 1963, Hannah Arendt taught the world about her perception of the “banality of evil,” the idea that it is not always an evil person that perpetuates evil, but rather other factors and blind obedience that pushes people to commit unspeakable atrocities.<sup>1</sup> She received a cold reception; critics could not fathom anything other than evil perpetuating evil, adamant about the fact that even mechanical, unthinking obedience would constitute a monster. Arendt wrote of this banality in reference to Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi operative who she deemed extraordinarily ordinary— a bureaucrat caught up in the Final Solution, lacking commitment to the genocidal ideology but instead committed to career advancement. While it became evident later that Eichmann did hold deep anti-semitic beliefs, Arendt’s underlying question still remained: is the presence of pure evil the only explanation for people who commit evil acts? If we are resigned to the idea of evil as the singular motivator, does this not ignore the systematic process of genocide? If we are resigned to this fact, are we not also resigned to inaction? The purpose of this paper is not to debate Arendt’s analysis of Eichmann or silence her critics; instead, this paper attempts to elucidate an answer to this question in the context of the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

It is well understood that the Rwandan genocide did not occur primarily due to differences in culture, race, language or religion. Notably, the Hutus and the Tutsis shared the same language, religion and traditions, and often lived next door to one another. Some have attempted to construct a false narrative of the Rwandan genocide,

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\* Sophia Stechschulte’s “The Banality of Economic Evil: Gender & Economics in the Rwandan Genocide” won the McPhee Prize from the Santa Clara University History department. This prize is awarded to the student whose history seminar paper demonstrates the most outstanding use of research methodology as determined by the faculty of the Santa Clara University Department of History.

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt and Amos Elon, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

portraying it as the boiling over of long-standing tribal hatred, characterized by a chaotic and disorganized period of violence; however, new scholarship has provided a more accurate account of the genocide, characterized not by chaos “from below,” but by methodical manipulation of colonial ethnic ideology from above.<sup>2</sup> Still, even this accepted narrative falls short. It touches on human suffering and ethnic conflict but fails to acknowledge the socioeconomic context that brought Rwanda to the brink. The country’s colonial history, which cemented the racial divide between Hutu and Tutsi, cannot be changed—much less ignored—but understanding the economic origins and transformation of these prescribed identities can provide some clarity. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 was preceded by a period of intense economic turmoil; this turmoil, as well as its gendered implications, requires further investigation in order to assess its role in the genocide and the nature of its transformation in the post-genocidal period. How did economic conditions facilitate the success of mass manipulation and genocide campaigns? By exploring the gendered dimensions of Rwanda’s racialized economic struggles and inequality, this paper illustrates that it was not just the shadow of Belgian colonialism or the presence of pure evil that led the average civilian to kill their neighbors—it was also the economy.

While the Rwanda genocide is often characterized as the product of ethnic tension between the Hutu and Tutsi, at its core, it was the product of pervasive and sustained inequality between the elite and the peasantry. Colonialism was critical in the construction of the Hutu and Tutsi racialized identities. Prior to Belgian occupation, Tutsi and Hutu designation was not necessarily received on the basis of ethnicity. There existed a Tutsi kingdom which reigned over Rwanda, and as this kingdom expanded, they absorbed groups of agriculturalists as Hutu and cattle-herders as Tutsi.<sup>3</sup> At this time, Tutsi dominance was not overtly oppressive.<sup>4</sup> There is evidence that some form of mutually beneficial—or

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<sup>2</sup> Lisa Pine, *Debating Genocide* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 120.

<sup>3</sup> Villia Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards: From Production to Genocide in Rwanda* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 60.

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



at the very least, acceptable— relationship was present. This took the form of clientage systems like ubuhake, a land clientage system where Tutsi could provide Hutu with cattle in exchange for land, or labor, and uburetwa, a clientage system where Hutu received land from Tutsi chiefs in return for labor.<sup>5</sup> Over time, the Tutsi minority consolidated much of the cattle and land, simultaneously consolidating power, constricting Hutu mobility and creating an economic divide between farmers and cattle-herders. Belgian colonizers, upon their arrival, cemented this economic divide and disguised it as an ethnic one.

By 1898, the small group of elite in Rwanda was predominantly Tutsi, who notably viewed themselves as superior to both poor Hutu and poor Tutsi; by 1929, Belgian occupation had constructed and implemented an ethnic hierarchy declaring the Tutsi as the born rulers of Rwanda, heralding their intelligence, European beauty and “capacity for assimilation.”<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the Belgians restricted Hutus in many ways: they were not allowed to receive an education, hold membership in the clergy, participate in the economy or work for the government.<sup>7</sup> The Belgians also fervently implemented policies of compulsory crop cultivation, especially for the production of coffee, further corrupting the uburetwa system to extract what essentially became Hutu slave labor.<sup>8</sup> Still, the Belgian narrative of Tutsi domination did not extend to all Tutsis: both Hutu and Tutsi commoners alike were oppressed based on their socioeconomic status. The Tutsi elite were the primary benefactors of colonial occupation, which not only exacerbated the Rwandan economic divide, but through the extension of the perverted colonial racial logic, it also placed a target on the backs of all Tutsis, regardless of economic position.

The 1950s came with an aggressive emergence of anti-Tutsi and pro-Hutu rhetoric, and a movement to overthrow the oppressive Tutsi elite. As Rwanda moved towards independence, Gregoire Kayibanda

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>7</sup> Isaac A. Kamola, “Coffee and Genocide” *Transition*, no. 99 (2008): 54–72.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20204261>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

capitalized on the ethnic turmoil and began advancing his “Hutu Power” agenda.<sup>9</sup> In 1962, Kayibanda was elected president on the platform of working for the equality of the Hutu people; however, under his regime, the government grew increasingly corrupt, economic inequality deepened, and Kayibanda faced criticism from northern Hutus for favoring the southern Hutu elite.<sup>10</sup> In an attempt to maintain power, Kayibanda drew again on anti-Tutsi rhetoric in an effort to incite ethnic violence and silence Hutu criticism but was unsuccessful.<sup>11</sup> He lost power to Habyarimana through a coup in 1973.<sup>12</sup>

Habyarimana’s regime managed to calm ethnic tensions and reduce government corruption, but it did little for the ever-increasing economic crisis. Notably, Hutu-Tutsi relations were actually quite amicable early in his tenure; class relations, on the other hand, intensified, and so did the problem of the rapidly increasing Rwandan population without land.<sup>13</sup> Habyarimana instead focused on attracting foreign aid for development projects and increasing coffee production and exports. He was successful in attracting foreign investment, but the simultaneous move towards privatization only deepened the trench of economic inequality. The money went straight into the pockets of Hutu elites, who bought up rural businesses and land, leaving many rural peasants landless and far removed from the benefits of development programs.<sup>14</sup> Habyarimana was also successful in increasing coffee output and revenue, but this, too, had its downfalls: the majority of the profits from coffee exports still went directly into the hands of a select few Hutu elites, exacerbating the economic divide; coffee policy reallocated subsistence farmland to coffee production, leaving peasant farmers more dependent on coffee profits to purchase food instead of growing it; and coffee profits were put towards the military, tourism and the material whims of the Hutu elite instead of being put toward the

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<sup>9</sup> Kamola, “Coffee and Genocide.”

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Villia Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards: From Production to Genocide in Rwanda* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Kamola, “Coffee and Genocide.”

<sup>13</sup> Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards*.

<sup>14</sup> Kamola, “Coffee and Genocide.”

insulation of the Rwandan economy.<sup>15</sup> From the outside, these things did not seem to matter. The Rwandan economy was booming—there was both economic and social progress, as evidenced by a rising GDP, increased school enrollment and low inflation—until international coffee prices plummeted, and the whole system collapsed.

When coffee prices fell in 1989, Habyarimanas's regime was already facing intense scrutiny from sectors of the Hutu population, and the resultant recession required a simultaneous restructuring of the economy.<sup>16</sup> The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank played critical roles in this, both providing loans and requiring Rwanda to implement a number of policies and austerity measures to help maintain its export economy and cover the national debt; this program, however, had the opposite effect.<sup>17</sup> Inflation skyrocketed, the food prices rose, salaries and wages decreased substantially, health, education and other public service systems collapsed and the Rwandan franc was hit by a 40% devaluation.<sup>18</sup> Then, adding to the chaos, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) invaded, and the growing population problem came to a head, drastically intensifying the economic and political atmosphere.<sup>19</sup> Even as the civil war took shape, the IMF and the World Bank, operating under the assumption that it would be short-lived, continued funneling millions of dollars in loans to the Rwandan National Bank in an effort to stabilize the economy; however, this money went straight into the purchasing of weapons.<sup>20</sup> Rwanda was preparing for genocide. The evidence is overwhelming: these institutions were not only pivotal in the collapse of the Rwandan economy, they also directly contributed to the genocide. The actions of these institutions resulted in what has been described as “criminal collusion”—the development and implementation of policies that supposedly center human rights, but in practice, focus more on returns to investment with little regard for

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards*.

<sup>17</sup> Chossudovsky, Michel. “Economic Genocide in Rwanda.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 15 (1996): 938. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4404024>.

<sup>18</sup> Villia Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards*.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Kamola, “Coffee and Genocide.”

human life.<sup>21</sup> This is not to say that the collapse of the coffee market or the actions of these institutions caused the Rwandan genocide; rather, their detrimental effects on the Rwandan economy left some people hopeless, afraid and desperate enough to be willing to perpetrate genocidal violence.

In the early 1990s, a host of other economic factors paved the way for a genocidal storm: landlessness, the population problem and economic inequality and corruption. Since the pre-colonial era, the distribution of land had been a primary concern. Rwanda is one of the most densely populated countries in Africa, with over 90% of its people residing in rural areas.<sup>22</sup> Subsistence agriculture was central to Rwandan culture and considered a vital economic and social activity for the majority of the population, and this practice requires land.<sup>23</sup> Prior to the civil war, 93% of the population worked in agriculture, which also requires land.<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that agriculture is part of the formal economy, but most men also worked in the informal sector to make ends meet due to the pervasive economic inequality; a 1990 government assessment estimated that 81% of households were also involved in brick-making, carpentry, sewing and pottery.<sup>25</sup> Leading up to 1994, land had been consolidated and reallocated into the hands of the minority ruling elite, leaving little for most of the peasant population. In 1993, 70% of households in some regions of Rwanda had less than half a hectare of land; 45% had less than one fourth of a hectare.<sup>26</sup> Government policy in the pre-genocidal period was also explicitly anti-urban, restricting much of the population to rural areas with few options for employment and income. It was evident that the economic conditions of most rural households were precarious, as land disputes and poverty were widespread. This was made more precarious by the fact that most

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<sup>21</sup> Rothe, Dawn L., Christopher W. Mullins, and Kent Sandstrom. "The Rwandan Genocide: International Finance Policies and Human Rights." *Social Justice* 35, no. 3 (113) (2008): 66–86.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Rothe, et al "The Rwandan Genocide."

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

economic options available to men were inextricably linked to land.<sup>27</sup> Land was wealth, and the scarcity of it had gendered economic implications. Rwanda was a patriarchal society, where men were in charge of finances, and responsible for the cultivation and marketing of cash crops, house building, and cattle-herding; women were responsible for taking care of the household, which included the management of subsistence crops, food preparation and taking care of the children.<sup>28</sup> Rwanda's dependency on the coffee market and the mandatory allocation of resources to coffee production, however, caused many people to leave subsistence agriculture behind. When the coffee market collapsed, people could not transition quickly enough to grow food themselves again and were instead forced to buy it. This was incredibly problematic, as Rwandan society, and particularly Rwandan women, found that buying food, rather than cultivating it yourself, was shameful and a "public admission of poverty."<sup>29</sup> When the IMF program resulted in high food prices, they could not afford to buy food either, further compounding this problem.

It is also imperative to understand the interconnectedness of land and gender. In the pre-colonial period, women had greater power in Rwandan society and were central to the success of agriculture practices of the nations. They had access to land and land rights; if they never married or left a marriage, women could return to their family and be given a portion of land to cultivate.<sup>30</sup> Colonialism changed this significantly, monetizing the economy and forcing men into cash cropping.<sup>31</sup> The Belgians dictated that all land in Rwanda was to be controlled by men, regardless of economic status. Women could only acquire land rights if they were widowed or unmarried, and even then, it

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<sup>27</sup> Nicole Fox, "Memory in Interaction: Gender-Based Violence, Genocide, and Commemoration," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* Volume 45, Number 1, 123-148.

<sup>28</sup> Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards*.

<sup>29</sup> Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards*.

<sup>30</sup> Jennie E. Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon of Genocide: Gender, Patriarchy, and Sexual Violence in the Rwandan Genocide" (2015), in A. Randall (Ed.). *Genocide and Gender in the Twentieth Century: A Comparative Survey* (London: Bloomsbury Academic), pp. 140–161.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

had to be endorsed and approved by her father or brother.<sup>32</sup> If a woman did have land rights, she would lose them when she got married, as they transfer to her husband. She would also then be expected to tend to this land as a laborer. In this way, women played a critical role in the economic success of men, as men profited off of their practically free labor and the revenue from agriculture. Women had little to no control over the cash surplus, as all income was controlled by her husband.<sup>33</sup> This could vary based on economic status, though: wealthy women did live more comfortable lives because their husbands could afford to hire outside labor.<sup>34</sup> Generally, women were expected to be “virtuous” and submissive to men, and if they were not, the limited power they had would be stripped away.<sup>35</sup> In this system, they were viewed and treated as property, an economic asset, and if productive and obedient, a great source of pride. These attitudes increased women’s vulnerability to sexual violence as well, and this vulnerability increased even more during the genocide.<sup>36</sup> Since Tutsi women were seen as an extension of their husbands, they were specifically targeted for genocidal rape. Alice, a survivor of the genocide, vividly remembers the brutal sexual violence she and many other women faced. Alice was raped every day for 60 days; as a result, she contracted HIV/AIDS.<sup>37</sup> Tragically, this type of violence was widespread. Rwandan culture viewed wife-beating as a sign of power, and it had the ability to bolster a husband’s reputation; sexual violence in genocide was used as a tactic to symbolically overpower and emasculate Tutsi men and rip apart the Tutsi community.<sup>38</sup> Prior to the genocide, women could not escape domestic sexual violence; there was no option to leave an abusive situation and return to their families, as the violence was so normalized.<sup>39</sup> They would rarely be welcomed back by their families, instead being forced to

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<sup>32</sup> Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 84.

<sup>34</sup> Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards*.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 88.

<sup>36</sup> Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon of Genocide," 13.

<sup>37</sup> *This Is the Testimony of Alice, a Survivor of the ... - UN*.

<sup>38</sup> Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon of Genocide."

<sup>39</sup> Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards*.

endure and accept this treatment.<sup>40</sup> In many ways, genocidal rape draws upon this, but instead of being shut out from their families, survivors are rejected from their communities entirely.<sup>41</sup>

In the years before 1994, landlessness heightened tensions in the household and throughout the country. When men were not capable of marrying a woman due to their lack of land and wealth, or simply not able to acquire land at all, it detrimentally impacted their outlook and masculine identity. Landlessness, combined with a crumbling economy, also meant that many men were out of jobs and experiencing the effects of poverty. As women were also deeply involved in the cultivation of agriculture, this took a toll on them as well. Both derived a sense of identity and purpose from the land and their prescribed roles in the household, and the loss of that resulted in a large population of aimless, desperate, and poor people, willing to do practically anything to survive.

The problem of landlessness was compounded by the population explosion: there were too many people on too little land. The population had been rising quickly since the pre-colonial period: from 1980 to 1990, the population increased by more than 2 million people.<sup>42</sup> In 1975, Rwanda's fertility rate was also incredibly high, one of the highest in the world, at 8.37 births per woman.<sup>43</sup> In 1981, this had risen to 8.46.<sup>44</sup> Habyarimana's stance against family planning had done little to quell this impending problem— he had repeatedly stated that children were the wealth of the Rwandan family.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, these children did not receive the support or education required to be able to contribute to the country's development. Even so, Rwanda's infrastructure could not support more people regardless of age. For a community that revolved

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<sup>40</sup> Burnet, "Rape as a Weapon of Genocide".

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> "Population, Total - Rwanda," Data, accessed December 9, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=RW>.

<sup>43</sup> "Fertility Rate, Total (Births per Woman) - Rwanda," Data, accessed December 9, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=RW>.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> D. de Walque and P. Verwimp, "The Demographic and Socio-Economic Distribution of Excess Mortality during the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda," Academic.oup.com, accessed December 9, 2021, <https://academic.oup.com/jae/article/19/2/141/766324?login=true>.

around agriculture but was simultaneously experiencing intense land scarcity, food shortages and unemployment, this spelled disaster. This proved to be particularly problematic in the context of the genocide, as a large population of male and female youth were reaching ages of maturity at the onset of the civil war. Habyarimana's development programs had failed to reach this group— after all, the development aid was being embezzled elsewhere. This left young men and women unemployed and angry with limited mobility and few prospects. Simultaneously, the Anti-Tutsi propaganda campaign was almost impossible to escape. For many disenfranchised people, this narrative provided a scapegoat, and someone else besides the government to blame for their living conditions.<sup>46</sup> It was yet another component of the economic plague— in many cases, young men on the outskirts of development were prone, or could more easily be brought, to commit evil acts of “extreme violence” due to their social and economic positions.<sup>47</sup> This made young men particularly susceptible to militia recruitment— not only could they act out their frustration with their situation, but they were promised money, a job and a community of similar people.

This susceptibility was not isolated to the young population, just as no portion of Rwandan society was isolated from economic strife. Even men who were employed in agriculture but did not find the wages or working conditions to be suitable were convinced to join the killing. As one perpetrator explained, participating in the genocidal killing “promised to spare [them] the labor of one harvest, but not two” with the understanding that, come next harvest they would have to return to the farms again with their machetes for “other, more traditional jobs.”<sup>48</sup> Undoubtedly, this sentiment does not account for the mindsets of each of the countless perpetrators. For example, Jean de Dieu Twarhirwa explained that he did not even know much about the relationship between the Hutu and the Tutsi; he was an orphan with no belongings

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<sup>46</sup> Marc Sommers, “Fearing Africa’s Young Men - World Bank.” *World Bank*, Jan. 2006.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>48</sup> Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak: A Report* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).



who was raised by his grandmother, and all he wanted was a better quality of life.<sup>49</sup> Yet, he was brought into the genocide while working at a hospital in Kiziguro. He described receiving cash from Tutsi in return for not killing them—this was helpful, but the money he had collected did not last long enough for him to escape to Tanzania after the genocide.<sup>50</sup> Another perpetrator, Charles Ndayisaba, came from a single-parent household of farmers.<sup>51</sup> Charles explained that it was not his business to understand what the killing was about and had assumed it was part of some government program—he claimed his participation was an attempt to save his own life.<sup>52</sup> This idea of the presence of a government program is notable, considering the results of a study done on perpetrators in Rwanda: it found that households, on average, only had one male perpetrator.<sup>53</sup> This is interesting because it may suggest that some Hutu households may have seen participation as a government mandate, which could be indicative of lasting impact of the obligatory labor systems that were established earlier in Rwanda’s history. Data from the same study also estimates that a majority of the Hutu perpetrators were educated, and either married or available bachelors.<sup>54</sup> This may speak to a gendered trend where Hutu men, lacking the ability to provide enough for their wives and families to survive, or the ability to find enough money to marry or survive at all, turn to violent means that promise an escape for a bleak existence. Still, not all perpetrators began killing as a direct result of economic turmoil, but to some degree, the dehumanizing nature of poverty, a desire for a better life, lack of mobility, and a sense of direction in times of national chaos seems to have brought many into the fray—and the dehumanizing nature of the violence seems to have kept them there throughout the genocide.

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<sup>49</sup> “A Testimony of Jean De Dieu Twahirwa,” Genocide Archive Rwanda, accessed December 9, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> “A Testimony of Jean De Dieu Twahirwa.”

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Philip Verwimp, “An Economic Profile of Peasant Perpetrators of Genocide: Micro-Level Evidence from Rwanda” *Journal of Development Economics*, North-Holland, 5 May 2005.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Thus far, this paper has illustrated some of the gendered dynamics and genocidal implications of Rwanda's economic upheaval. Almost two years after the RPF invasion and just about a year before the genocidal massacres began, international donors, like the World Bank, threatened to pull their funding from Rwanda if Habyarimana did not sign the Arusha Accords— and so he did, as the country had become entirely dependent on these funds.<sup>55</sup> But, just two days later, Habyarimana's plane was shot down, and he was killed. The threats from these agencies came too late: the preceding civil war had already consumed most of the available economic resources into the purchasing of weapons and the expansion of the military, the economic insecurity and inequality had already wreaked havoc on the hope and prospects of the Rwandan people, and the insidious propaganda had brought the population to the brink. After Habyarimana's death, Rwanda descended into genocide— but not all regions experienced the same level of violence. There was a regional pattern, linked to economic conditions, that determined the severity of the outcome. For example, Habyarimana's regime had consolidated power in the hands of a small group of elite in the Gisenyi and Ruhengeri region; this area had one of the highest population densities in the country and the highest level of land disparity with an ever-increasing landless population. As the genocide took shape, this region proved to be one of the most explosive: most of the Hutu extremists came from this area, fighting in favor of the Hutu elite.<sup>56</sup> It was so explosive that many people from this region were sent to other, less violent regions to help facilitate the genocide.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Kibungo and Bugesera, with high populations of landless and jobless youth and pre-existing Hutu and Tutsi economic tensions, also saw some of the most widespread and violent killing in the genocidal period.<sup>58</sup> The case of Gikongoro also provides evidence that economic hardship and immobility contributed to genocide participation: this region was created by combining Tutsi-dominated areas with Hutu-

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<sup>55</sup> Kamola, "Coffee and Genocide."

<sup>56</sup> Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards*, 115.

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

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

populated highlands that had previously been under the oppressive control of the Belgians and Tutsi elite.<sup>59</sup> On top of this, it was one of the poorest regions in an already poverty-stricken nation, lacking cohesiveness and incredibly volatile.<sup>60</sup> Again, the depth of the economic divides in Rwanda, specifically in these regions, transformed into genocidal violence.

It is evident that the ailing Rwandan economy had disastrous effects on the Rwandan population and facilitated the genocide of almost a million Tutsis. Poverty, land shortages, corruption, and overpopulation tore apart the fabric of the nation and amplified feelings of instability. Placing the Rwandan crisis in its economic context reveals some motivations for the perpetration of the genocide, and it highlights the interactions between money, international players, ethnicity, and class as indicators of genocide, that, if recognized, could be addressed before mass violence ensues. More specifically, is important to see how corrupt government policy forced the population into these economic conditions, characterized by immobility and pervasive poverty. Prior to Belgian colonialism, “Hutu” and “Tutsi” did not even exist, at least not in the way that the Belgians had constructed them; the Belgians perverted their interpretation for the purpose of manipulating the Rwandan people and consolidating economic and social power in a small group of elite. Each following regime perverted them further for the same ends until they were established as truth— a truth that brought Hutu perpetrators to kill one million Tutsi in 100 days. Were each of the killers inherently evil, or were they, too, perverted by a perverted logic, perpetrated by a perverted system? Were they not also exploited by systems that provided limited choices, and limited solutions, to the problems created by a series of corrupt and economically oppressive regimes?

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid, 116.

## The Girl

Sophie Wink

**1938**

The bones of her spine pressed into the back of a hard cedar chair, sharp pain piercing Eloise vertebra by vertebra as she pressed herself hard into her seat as if willing herself to disappear into it. An outsider might have been distracted, might have swiveled her head left and right, taking in Mary, screaming and pulling at her own hair on the floor. The outsider might have seen Andy in tears, pressed up against a wall by Nurse Alba, who was playing a convoluted game of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey with a syringe of clear liquid. She might have registered a little bit of joy in the corner, where Evelyn and Sarah passed a sunshine-colored crayon back and forth as they created a joint masterpiece.

Eloise was not distracted. She had watched these same scenes so often that she was no longer interested. She knew that Mary's world was upside down because the beans on her plate had leaked into the mashed potatoes, leaving them, to her mind, inedible. She knew that when Andy got excited about one thing or another, his hands would flap around him wildly like caged birds, and that the nurses really could not stand this. Eloise also knew that if she tried to stand up for Andy, for whose wispy gray hair and big, yellowed smiles she had a soft spot, the mystery serum would just end up in her own arm, too. She had often watched Evelyn and Sarah playing in the corner on opposite ends of a table, their mirror hunched shoulders and soft leather dimples reflecting joy from some unknown source. It felt very odd to see adult twins. Even odder to see someone happy at Cherryfield.

The hard-backed seat lurched violently as Nurse Alba kicked her hard-toed shoe at its leg, stunning Eloise out of her dissociative trance. She knew what came next and didn't feel like waiting to be told, so she got to her feet and started moving towards the Industrial Room. Eloise and the Industrial Room had a love-hate relationship. On one hand, the work—sewing patches on the boys' trousers or crocheting table covers for sale—gave her something to do with her hands other than bite at the edges of her jagged fingernails or pull apart split ends. She was a bit

conflicted about liking these tasks because she knew that every mended tear or hemmed pillow slip was another penny in the pockets of the fat old Board of Trustees. This was something that, on days when she was feeling fiery, she'd pointed out to the Industrial Room overseer or Superintendent Osborn, but this usually just resulted in her being punished in some way or another. Instead, she'd taken to cutting little holes in the items here and there, her own tiny act of protest.

On the other hand, though, the Industrial Room was a place where the steady drumming of the sewing machine needle or the laser focus required for knitting created a thick haze of inner silence that drew out her internal monologue, a voice she had been working to silence for her own sanity—ironic, considering that in the eyes of the State she had none. It was in these moments that her mind would begin to drift, each stitch drawing her further into the recesses of her own mind.

It was in these moments that, from the haze, the faces would emerge.

The face of Mr. Johnson, the stocky man in Brownsville who had offered a thirteen-year-old Eloise, recently dropped out of school to work and anxious for any chance to help her single mother feed nine mouths, 30 cents an hour to help tidy up his home in the wake of his wife's death. The man who had won her trust and then, by some cruel twist of fate or possibly by her own unintentional signals, stolen her innocence.

The face of her sister Margaret, in whom she had first confided that she had missed her monthly and that Mr. Johnson had been touching her, but that she was afraid to lose her job.

The face of her mother when she found out.

The sweet, tender face of little Benjamin, the only sweet thing to come from her days in the sickly-sweet maplewood cabin that Mr. Johnson had built with his own two hands— something he frequently reminded her of. The little boy's eyes haunted her, their deep hazelnut tint reflecting her own, as he was wrested from her fifteen-year-old arms in the hospital by a woman sent by the State. Eloise didn't remember the woman's face.

And, against the backdrop of pounding sewing machines and clicking knitting needles and Evelyn moaning in the corner, an unbearable avalanche of more faces and memories would rush in,

forcing Eloise to relive The Darkness that followed Benjamin's birth, the bout of influenza that drove her panicky mother to beg Mr. Johnson for a ride to Centerville Hospital as a last resort, the knowing glances exchanged between doctors there who learned from a well-intentioned Margaret that unmarried Eloise had recently given birth. In rushed the memories of confusing paperwork and clandestine car rides and that pudgy old matron who had pulled her from the car at Cherryfield for the first time, of *feeble-minded, immoral*, scrawled on charts and of her first look at the damned superintendent on whom she blamed her life in this hellhole.

### 1999

The chair groaned as it leaned forward, and Eloise's feet hit the floor. She shuffled across the yellow laminate flooring that Henry had painstakingly laid down some twenty years earlier. She had seen it in a catalogue and fallen in love with the bright color but knowing that they could not afford it on the salaries of a schoolteacher and a lumberman, she'd put a slip of paper in between the shiny pages and set the magazine aside. Eloise could never forget the morning of her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, when she'd returned from the field behind their house with a basket of fresh raspberries under her arm to find boxes of that sunshine laminate sitting in boxes in the kitchen. Henry had stood there with one of the boxes tucked between his bare bicep and his white tank top, wearing the goofy grin that had never disappeared, even as his youth tiptoed away.

Now the flooring had faded a bit—it was a natural hazard given the light that shone in at all angles. Eloise couldn't stand darkness, and when they built the little house so many years ago, she had had only one thing on her wish list: as many windows as its walls could hold. The sun still shone in, but the house was almost unbearably quiet. Henry's booming laughter no longer echoed against those pine walls that he had cut and milled with his own two hands, that the two of them, young and full of energy, had sanded and polished for hours as they built their simple dream home. Now there was nothing but the steady symphony of Eloise's labored breathing and shuffling slippers punctuated by the swinging tail of the Kit-Cat Klock that hung on the wall, a relic of days past.

Today she would deliver the socks. At eighty-three years old, her days had gotten less and less busy, something that drove her crazy. She hated sitting still and yearned for the years when she spent her mornings preparing lesson plans and her days in the classroom. She longed for her afternoons in the cafeteria filling State Meal Assistance lunch bags for the next day, her evenings in PTA meetings, for the nights when she could come home into her husband's firm embrace and sit alongside him on the couch reading or tuning in to "Little House on the Prairie" or "Happy Days". When a woman turns eighty, people stop giving her things to do, expecting her to be content sitting alone in a worn living room La-Z-Boy. But Eloise did not do well with silence because it brought back the darker memories, so instead, today she would deliver the socks.

Two hundred and fifteen pairs of stockings were lined up with painstaking precision on the kitchen and dining room tables. The rows of stitches were perfectly aligned, and it was clear that the hands that had knitted them had done so by a muscle memory honed over decades. The first pairs were yellow, Eloise's favorite, and when she had exhausted that first margarine-tinted skein she had moved to a sky blue, then to a deep scarlet that her friend Amelia had gifted her for Christmas. The number of socks that she made necessitated the use of many colors, and the rainbow of gifts gave Eloise the sense of purpose that had so often evaded her since Henry died.

Three hours later, she had painstakingly folded over the tops of each pair of socks so that they were bound together in neat little bundles, her arthritic fingers cramping in a cruel reminder of her age. They could now be delivered to the long list of group homes, pediatric hospitals, and schools in the area that Eloise had compiled over the years. She began packing them into boxes that she would attempt to lug out to Henry's old 1974 F-150 that sat, its now-dull powder blue spotted with rust, sedentary in the dooryard.

As she stood in a staring contest with the heavy boxes, the mechanical trill of the phone interrupted. Eloise hated the damn thing and the telemarketers who rang her at all hours of the day, but Jennifer had begged that she have it installed, "just in case." Though she would insist until the day she died that she didn't need it— "if people want to

call on me, they can come knock on the door like they've always done. And if I drop dead, they'll find me eventually"— the phone did make Eloise feel just a little safer.

"Coming, coming," she muttered, shuffling to the little lieutenant's post on the kitchen wall. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's Jen. Just calling to say hi."

It was almost always Jen.

"Hello, dear. How are you doing? How are John and the kids?"

"Oh, they're good. Abby's got ballet in an hour and Tucker just finished throwing an absolute wailer because his sandwich was cut in triangles. John's at work. What's going on in your neck of the woods today?"

Although she sometimes nagged, Eloise loved her niece. Jen was a good woman, and smart, too. She was an ER nurse at Redding Hospital and, despite the fact that she was constantly so busy with work and the kids, she found time every week to give Eloise a call or swing by to say hello. If she had had children of her own, Eloise would have hoped for them to turn out as good as Jennifer.

"I'm just boxing up stockings. I'm about to take them out—"

"Aunt Ellie. You can't do that again. It's too much."

"Respectfully, dear, I can do whatever I please. I'm not senile yet."

"I know that. Obviously. You're as sharp as a whip. But your eyesight isn't what it used to be and you're going to hurt yourself hauling those boxes around. People love your gifts and they're so grateful for them but give me your list and let me deliver them. I'll bring the kids. It'll be fun."

Eloise's end of the line went silent, the only sound her shallow breathing. Outside the window, she watched as life went on, Eliza Green (a former student) walking her yippy little white dog down the gravel drive, while her son did wheelies on a red bicycle behind her. Eliza, while a little yippy and overenthusiastic herself, was a sweet woman and had often joined Eloise on Friday night PTA meetings and the women's hiking group on Sunday.

"Aunt Ellie?"



Eloise took a breath and turned from the window. “Alright, Jennifer. I’m sure you’re right. Come by when you can and I’ll give you the list and the boxes.”

“Hey, Aunt Ellie, I’ve got to go. I have to take Abby to dance. But I love you, okay?” “I love you too, dear. Bye-bye.”

Eloise clicked the phone into its receiver and set herself into her chair, a deep sigh wracking her body. Now, her to-do list wiped clean by her well-meaning niece, she was faced with the kind of silence she had dreaded since her days at Cherryfield, where she had become accustomed to constant noise. Eloise pressed herself into her chair as if trying to disappear and the memories that she had so long tried to drown out rushed back in.

Her eyes fell on the little keepsakes of her life that were scattered about the house, sweet and painful reminders of a long life: two framed photos on the mantle, one of her and her siblings as children, squished together on the porch of their little home in Brownsville in 1925 and then the same photo recreated fifty years later, short two siblings and a scruffy brown dog. A binder tucked under the coffee table, filled with documents acquired in a fruitless search for the son she would never know. Scotch-taped to the refrigerator, countless cards from students throughout the years.

For a moment, she was no longer the frail old woman whose existence she had denied for as long as she could. For a moment, she was back in that ominous Model T on her way to God-knows where. She was that teenaged girl alone at Cherryfield again, her body strong and her mind sharp but her will wavering.

Then she was that girl again, but a little older, a little more jaded after eight years in Hell. She was a girl condemned as sinful, ruined, for reasons she could not fully understand. A woman, really, but one cheated of all the wonderful parts of becoming a woman. Robbed of her family, her adolescence, her innocence. Her child. Gifted instead with an intimate understanding of the darkest crevices of the world, with knowledge of how easy it was for a poor girl from the sticks to be cast aside by society and of what the State did with the people it deemed unworthy of personhood.

She was that woman, jolting to consciousness on the cold steel of an operating table, an ache below her waist and a desperate lump in her throat. Understanding that her consent to the Operation would allow her at last to go home—where was no longer at the risk of propagating more of her own kind, according to the State—but not quite understanding how much she was giving up.

She was that woman smiling in white on her wedding day, having buried the dark parts of herself down where nobody would find them.

The woman who learned to adopt a polite smile and an ambiguous shrug when people began asking when she would have children, to ignore the whispers about her when it became clear that she would not. Who, on a dark night when the winds howled in agony, finally broke down to Henry—the only person she ever told why she could not bear a child—and set free the thought that haunted her:

*Why did the State take away from me the best years of my life and butcher me, too?*

But she was a woman who counted her blessings every day and, for all the darkness that she had faced, found ways to draw out the sunshine. Who looked back at eighty-three years and did not despair so much at the losses she'd faced in her youth. Instead, she knew now that there were new Best Days after those the State had taken and smiled at memories of little bodies wrapping themselves around her legs at the end of each school day, of building a dream home alongside a man who made her feel safe, of the smell of the pines that embraced her as she knelt in the raspberry fields, of days on the beach with her niece, of the friends she had found and the smiles she had left.

Eloise at eighty-three was a woman who was, all things considered, happy. *Eloise Wilson, 83, died Saturday, January 12, asleep in at her home in Milton.*

*She was born to John and Emily Sinclair in Brownsville on August 16<sup>th</sup>, 1915, and had eight siblings (John, Robert, Margaret, Charles, Mabel, Elizabeth, George, and Ruth).*

*She married Henry Wilson in 1945 and the two lived together happily in the home they built together. Eloise worked for forty years as a schoolteacher and was beloved in her community, by whom she will be dearly missed. She loved children and dedicated her spare time to the*

*school as well as many other children's organizations in the area until her death.*

*Her other hobbies included fishing, exploring the woods, crochet, and collecting raspberries to make her famous raspberry jam.*

*Eloise and Henry had no children, but she leaves to her family and all those who knew and loved her an example of tireless love, indomitable strength, courage, hard work, and a spirit of adventure. She is predeceased by her husband, Henry Wilson, her parents, and her siblings. She leaves behind her beloved niece, Jennifer Taft, and her grandniece and nephew, Abby and Tucker.*

*Eloise knitted hundreds of pairs of socks each year to be delivered to local schools, community centers, and hospitals, and this year's were just finished. They will be delivered to the community in the coming weeks.*

**Shedding Light on Hidden Histories:  
A Review of Rodger Streitmatter's *Outlaw Marriages: The Hidden Histories of Fifteen Extraordinary Same-Sex Couples***

**Caroline Rule**

Rodger Streitmatter's *Outlaw Marriages: The Hidden Histories of Fifteen Extraordinary Same-Sex Couples* is a refreshingly honest account of the lives and accomplishments of fifteen same-sex couples who had a great impact on American and world history. These partners made strides in a variety of fields, including journalism, social justice, poetry, and music. The title, *Outlaw Marriages*, emphasizes the groundbreaking nature of these couple's unions, all without the support of church, state, or society. Streitmatter does not brush over the more difficult aspects of the couple's relationships, making the book realistic and forthright.

Streitmatter himself has been with his partner, Thomas Grooms, for over 35 years, and he is one of American University's most popular professors in the School of Communications. As a former journalist, he uses his experience to encourage students with a passion for writing to enter the field. He has written nine academic books, and American University even has named an award, "The Rodger Streitmatter Journalism Award for Excellence," after him. As a well-respected academic who is in a long term same-sex relationship, he is able to analyze the relationships in his book through a lens of personal experience that many scholars could not.

The book consists of fifteen biographies of influential same-sex couples with a short introduction and afterword from the author. The thesis of his book is unclear until the afterword, where Streitmatter delves into his own "outlaw marriage" to his husband, until the afterword. He tells the story of his partner encouraging him to do research, which Streitmatter adamantly opposes doing, for the sake of becoming a tenured professor. His partner puts the situation into perspective. In order to maintain his position and pursue his passion of teaching, he has to complete this task. In the end, he becomes as passionate about doing research as he is about his teaching and credits

these academic achievements to Grooms for giving him the motivation that he needed. He tells this story to illustrate the similarities between his own relationship and the ones in his book. For 28 years of his life, he and his partner—his greatest motivation and closest friend—were unable to legally marry under the laws of their country. The outlaw marriages and relationships that Streitmatter recounts were each met with similar institutionalized resistance and roadblocks to happiness. Many of the couples in the book had to keep their relationship a secret to the public for fear that it would destroy their reputation and career. Streitmatter's thesis and purpose in writing this book and researching the couples within it is to educate the public about influential relationships that were forced into the shadows despite being just as beautiful and valid as heterosexual relationships. This unique contribution to gay history emphasizes the prevalence of same-sex relationships in a time before they were societally acceptable and the accomplishments and works of art which came out of them.

Streitmatter utilizes a myriad of sources to supplement his research, which he organizes into sections at the end of the book based upon which couple the source addresses. Each of his sources are historical accounts or biographies of the couple's relationship or a biography of the more well-known partner's life and accomplishments. He also uses transcriptions of letters written by partners at the time of their relationship for several of the sections of his book. Altogether, I thought that Streitmatter's book was incredible. Throughout high school, I studied Walt Whitman's poetry in English classes, but we never discussed his sexuality or relationships. This continual erasure of homosexuality and queerness from history stems from deep-seeded discrimination, which can only be remedied if there is a concerted effort within the school system and our country as a whole to educate the public about relationships that do not fit the societal norm of heterosexuality. Streitmatter's book does a great job of informing readers about the value of same-sex relationships within the lives of figures throughout American history. The way that he organizes his book and the length of each section makes it easy to read, even if a reader is not particularly interested in history.