

WOMEN, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Editorial Advisors:

Susan K. Cahn

Wanda A. Hendricks

Deborah Gray White

Anne Firor Scott, Founding Editor Emerita

A list of books in the series appears at the end of this book.

Colored No More

Reinventing Black Womanhood
in Washington, D.C.

TREVA B. LINDSEY

 **UNIVERSITY OF
ILLINOIS PRESS**
Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield

Conclusion

The New Negro experience in Washington black beauty culture was not monolithic. Bodily/beauty aesthetics were intensely political. African American women maintained a wide array of perspectives on the appropriate means and ends for presenting and representing themselves and for self-care. While no aesthetics “core principle” existed per se, the understanding of appearance as meaningful underpinned New Negro womanhood. Examining

the black beauty industry in Washington during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reveals ideas about racial pride, racial separatism, assimilation, integration, and intraracial gender, class, and color politics that propelled the New Negro movement. The bodies and representations of the bodies of black women in Washington were a terrain in which the socio-cultural dynamics and competing notions of a New Negro women’s ethos magnified. Black beauty culture during this era had far-reaching implications and effects for black women’s culture and, more broadly, American culture.

Through beauty culture, African American women both upended and accepted white constructions of feminine beauty, created a multimillion dollar industry in which women made up the majority of proprietors and consumers, constructed a space for self-care through adornment and artifice, and situated themselves at the center of a public discourse of political, economic, social, and cultural significance. Many communities of women, including African American women, experienced black beauty culture as a means to political, social, economic, and cultural freedom. Additionally, beauty culture provided a space in which black women could connect with other black women through the experience of “fashioning self.” Many black women in Washington entered into the beauty industry with the hope of transforming themselves and the collective image of African Americans. Imagining new ways of living in the urban, modern world, New Negro women in Washington refused to surrender control of their bodies and images of their bodies to a white cultural imaginary, intraracial gender and class politics, and an increasingly service-based urban economy that ignored the predilections of African American women.

Black women manufacturers, intellectuals, sellers, advertisers, and consumers configured an arena for self-determination. Myths, stereotypes, and derogatory images of black women continued to circulate during the early twentieth century. African American women in Washington found a way, through the black press, to challenge beliefs and products that devalued black womanhood. Politics of respectability, black Victorian femininity, “New Woman” ideology, race enterprise, popular culture, and ideas about individual and collective subjectivity and autonomy intersected in New Negro women’s beauty culture. In Washington, black beauty culture functioned as one of the few domains in which contestation and transformation prospered. Some African American women in Washington used the hairstyles of well-recognized black women as inspiration for their styling preferences. Increasingly, black beauty culture discourse became less overtly reliant on

the preferences and ideals articulated by dominant beauty culture and more focused on self-care, black feminine artifice, and adornment. African American women could not fully usurp dominant culture's images of black women but did create alternative aesthetic discourses for New Negro women to participate in that reflected race-, culture-, and gender-specific penchants and ideals.

As an industry predominated by women, beauty culture functioned primarily as a gender-specific site for self-definition, self-actualization, and contestation. Competing politics of appearance inscribed the New Negro women's era and tapped into contemporaneous discussions about what it meant to be Colored or Negro. Beauty culture also revealed the gendered nature of these monikers typically used to identify a person's race. Both "Colored" and "Negro" resonated in particular ways within the black beauty industry and more specifically among African American women. To dismiss the investment black women made in beauty culture during the New Negro era risks erasing a distinct history of black women's creativity, innovation, and desire. Beyond the multimillion-dollar industry black women's beauty culture became, this industry also flourished as a unique site of pleasure, ingenuity, and agency for African American women. "[From] a business enterprise based on something as seemingly frivolous as hairstyling," as Tiffany Gill explicates, "there emerged a platform through which black women could escape economic limitations imposed by racism and its enduring legacies and, in turn, build enduring institutions that challenged not only the social discourse of their respective communities but also the larger political arena."⁶⁹ Although this industry could perpetuate narrow, restrictive, racist, and hegemonic beauty ideals for women, black women invested in beauty culture as a conduit toward modern womanhood.

Some African American women rejected historically rooted and deeply entrenched racialized gender stereotypes about black women and created subcultures within the broader beauty industry that catered to an emergent sense of possibility for fashioning the New Negro woman. "Black working-class women," Davarian Baldwin explains "inserted their own visions and desires into beauty culture to enact a gendered politics of black re-creation."⁷⁰ The beauty culture created by local beauty culturists and manufacturers in Washington opened the door to a New Negro women's politics, which began to emerge toward the end of the nineteenth century. When Mary Church Terrell noted the practice of black women using "false hair" to achieve the latest, "in vogue" styles in her 1940 autobiography, she offered a different temporal lens through which to consider when New Negro womanhood, and more specifi-

cally New Negro women's beauty culture, emerged. Black women in growing urban centers such as Washington began crafting a black-women-centered public sphere in which their voices, images, tastes, and perspectives thrived almost immediately after Emancipation.⁷¹

Despite the continued devaluation and dehumanization of black women, the beauty culture created by black women in Washington served as a powerful and multifaceted site for black women demanding autonomy and the right to self-determination. While not inextricable from or unaffected by the imperious power of a racist, classist, and sexist U.S. cultural imaginary rooted in white cultural hegemony, heteropatriarchy, and global white supremacy, black beauty culture from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century offered a dynamic and unique space for resistance, innovation, self-care, and creativity. Bodily adornment for New Negro women of Washington was not simply a mundane practice aimed at combatting myths of inferiority and ugliness, it signaled the importance of self-care within a society that repeatedly denied the humanity of black women. Black beauty culture was political discourse pivoting around the physical presence of black women's bodies; it thrived because of black women's investment in authoring new realities and visions of self.

Conclusion

Based on their particular experiences with prevailing racial and gender ideologies as well as existing political and cultural currents, black women developed a distinct political culture. Working within the parameters of a black women's culture of respectability, these women strategically invested in a politics of appearance that connected to their public political behavior.⁷⁸ New Negro women suffragists addressed the social conditions that African Americans confronted, but they also wanted to have their own voice as African American women, within the national body politic. With greater access to mass media outlets such as newspapers and other periodicals, New Negro suffragists capitalized upon a longstanding strategy in black women's activism to situate themselves as modern activists. In the October 24, 1915, edition of the *Afro-American*, Lucy Diggs Slowe publicly commented on the connections between the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the suffrage movement. Slowe proclaimed, "[The NAACP] was in favor of universal suffrage because it could not support the one without supporting the other. It knows only too well that the voteless group in any republic is a helpless one. To a large extent the Negro in this republic is voteless, and therefore helpless."⁷⁹ Slowe, although not at Howard when she made this statement, echoed the widespread sentiment of the Howard women who marched in the suffrage parade in Washington. When she arrived at Howard in 1922 as the dean of women, Slowe walked

into a campus greatly affected by the historic act of Terrell and the twenty-two founders of Delta Sigma Theta. The desire of Nellie Quander to have Howard women such as members of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority participate in the march, in spite of Paul's evasiveness and potential harm, mirrored a fearlessness entrenched in a strategic performance of feminine propriety.

Noting the utility of the politics of respectability as they pertained to personal aesthetics, black women marching in the March 1913 suffrage parade used aesthetic tropes of respectable femininity to insert themselves into political activism. Although their white women counterparts engaged in theatrics and other forms of pageantry to make themselves more visible in the national political arena, black women performed respectability to attain greater visibility through embodying the antithesis of myths about their character and lack of political savvy. Existing stereotypes about black women positioned their bodies, their expressive practices, and their styling choices within the realm of spectacle without having to employ theatrics. Whereas white women suffragists moved more toward the use of spectacle in the early twentieth century, African American women suffragists in Washington chose to perform ladyhood to claim a distinct space within the twentieth century women's suffrage movement.⁸⁰ White women suffragists, particularly those inspired by New Woman cultural currents, embraced the use of spectacle and theatrics to visualize a burgeoning political consciousness that began to think of ladyhood as restrictive and oppressive.⁸¹ For white women, the Washington suffrage march represented a departure from ladyhood and a rejection of feminine propriety. Christine Stansell, in *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860*, thoroughly discusses how white women mobilized around rejecting “bourgeois female decorum” using dress and manner. This new era of white women's suffrage activism tapped into this legacy of women decidedly existing outside of ladyhood. Conversely, black women lacked access to the protected status of ladyhood and its accompanying privileges. Ladyhood had racially specific meanings. For white women suffragists and women's rights activists, ladyhood signaled the policing of their bodies and the relegation of their bodies to private and semi-private spheres. African American women suffragists from Howard University in 1913, however, claimed and inhabited ladyhood. They recognized ladyhood as a powerful performative strategy that could transform public perceptions of black women's political capital. These women did not have white or male privilege. They confronted the harsh historical reality of exclusion from discourses of ladyhood. The performance and articulation of female decorum served a similar purpose to that of white women suffragists rejecting what they viewed as a protected/regulated/policed status.

The political articulations of black women such as the founding members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority who participated in the suffrage parade also garnered the support of leading African American political outlets. African American male editors of the premier newspapers of Washington such as the *Colored American* trumpeted the arrival of a modern black political woman and presented this political ideal as a “splendid representation” of African American progress.⁸² In Washington the African American media placed Terrell at the center of New Negro women's political culture. Her national and emergent international status bolstered their positioning of her as one of the most important black women political celebrities. Her words, fashion, and hairstyles coexisted as integral components to her success as a black woman political activist. In Terrell, black women in Washington had a prototype for a modern “political” woman; they, along with Slowe, recognized the importance of performing ladyhood both as a liberatory act and as a strategy for distinguishing themselves from their New Woman counterparts and for solidifying alliances with New Negro men.⁸³

Whereas the black press honed in on “respectable” black political women as representatives of this new era of political activism, white press outlets such as the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Washington Herald* reported on the pageantry and spectacular political performances of white women suffragists during large-scale protests such as the suffrage parade. The *New York Times*' description of the parade as “one of the most impressively beautiful spectacles staged in this country” failed to capture the marked exclusion of black women or the nonspectacle of the small delegation of African American women marching. The *Washington Herald*, although also reporting on injured marchers, spoke of the use of pageantry and spectacle as well. The white press viewed the theatrics of white women suffragists as attempts to reinvigorate a fledgling national movement. White newspapers acknowledged a distinct shift in the strategies of white women suffragists. Similar to the black press's coverage of women's suffrage activism of the early twentieth century, white newspapers proclaimed a new era in women's political activism.

This new era became evident through the fashion, styling, and politics of appearance women suffragists adopted. Both black and white women created political cultures in which aesthetics and representational politics were integral. For New Negro women in Washington, the ability to present themselves as cultured, fashionable, and respectable through their dress and hairstyle choices carried significant political weight. Politicizing respectability had a history in African American women's activism prior to the New Negro era but became solidified as a primary tactic during the late nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries.⁸⁴ The demand for respect for women's broadened influence in the public sphere propelled black women's use of the performative feminine propriety during the New Negro era. Black clubwomen also used politics of respectability to counter prevailing racialized gender stereotypes of black women; New Negro women employed these politics to embed themselves more fully in contemporaneous political movements. Performing "ladyhood" offered an aesthetic path to becoming visible and viable within New Negro political culture. As "splendid" representations of themselves, New Negro women in Washington both contributed to an evolving political discourse and created a localized political culture authored by black women, one that connected them to a national vision of equality for African American women.

Class, race, religion, urbanity, domesticity, labor, gender, sex, sexuality, and political and organizational affiliations were instrumental in the lives and rhetoric of black women during the Jim Crow era. Late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Washington played a significant role in an evolving New Negro womanhood because of the city's abundant political activities, educational and professional opportunities, and cultural and expressive practices that flourished among black women in this urban space. Washington's New Negro women are important to our understanding of how ideas about how political, economic, social, and cultural agency for black women challenged New Negro's ideological focus on black men and New Woman's ideological focus on white women. Furthermore, black women of this era functioned as colored subjects, and they therefore should compel scholars who study this era to engage Colored not only as a racial category but as a gender-racial category that also encompassed class-specific and sexuality-specific implications for New Negro women and men. Notably, most of the women documented in *Colored No More* occupied elite statuses in Washington. Because of my emphasis on discourses of New Negro womanhood, I chose to focus on the archived, audible, and accessible voices of African American women in Washington. Considerable work remains with regard to excavating the stories of working-class and poor black women in Washington during the New Negro era. Allusions to and rhetoric about working-class and poor black women in Washington presented in my book should not stand as indicative of how these women conceived of themselves. I would argue, however, that the discourse of New Negro womanhood and the understanding of Colored as a gendered category of identity becomes more visible through engaging the voices of Washington women such as Terrell, Cooper, Slowe, Johnson, Burrill, and Grimké. Through their words, we arrive at new understandings of New Negro womanhood as a classed site of negotiation of intersecting identities and possibilities for African American women.

Gender, as black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins explicates, "has a racial face, whereby African American women, African American men, White

women, and White men occupied distinct race/gender categories within an overarching social structure that proscribed their prescribed place."² For black women during the New Negro era, black men's experiences and perspectives were privileged and positioned as synonymous with the African American experience. Black masculinism prevailed, often with the support of black women.³ New Negro scholars, however, must resist replicating this masculinism when chronicling this era in African American freedom and equality struggles. Beyond adding women and stirring, as warned against by historian Alice Kessler-Harris, refuting a black masculinist framing of this era means reconsidering how we periodize the New Negro era, whom we identify as New Negroes, and which arenas we explore to excavate New Negro activity. The re-periodization of the New Negro era accounts for how black women began to see themselves and how they viewed the world they navigated. By identifying the commencement of the New Negro era in the last decade of the nineteenth century, a New Negro city such as Washington becomes visible. Washington's significant influx of black migrants occurred during and after the Civil War, which meant that the seismic shifts often associated with the Great Migration and the interwar period began in Washington as early as the 1870s. By the 1890s, and more specifically by 1893 when those six black women took center stage at the Columbia Exposition, more than forty thousand black women resided in the nation's capital. The institutions, communities, organizations, and networks that arose in other New Negro cities in the early twentieth century emerged in Washington in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

New Negro women of Washington were turn-of-the-century women. The ideologies of the "New Woman" paralleled the evolution of New Negro womanhood ideologies but presumed that all women were white. In "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham discusses the unstated premise of racial homogeneity (whiteness) and the subsequent universalizing of women's culture and oppression as well as the investment and complicity of white women in the oppression of African Americans, specifically African American women.⁴ This presumption led to the limited visibility of racial oppression and racial particularities on the New Woman agendas. White women's neglect of their respective complicity in the oppression of black women limited the liberatory potential of New Woman ideals.⁵

From the seemingly mundane realm of hairstyles to the suffrage campaigns organized by African American women, New Negro womanhood thrived as a space in which black women could envision and create modern black womanhood at the turn of twentieth century. While still combating prevailing racist, sexist, and classist notions, New Negro women in D.C. trumpeted the importance of individual and collective affirmation and fulfillment. Their social networks, political organizations, hair salons, and leisure activities became as significant as their occupations and families in how these women perceived and identified themselves. The physical emancipation of black women from slavery did not eradicate the psychological and emotional scars of enslavement or liberate these women from the racial caste system or the gender hierarchy of the Jim Crow era. New Negro womanhood discourse strategically intervened in how black women sought to cope with Jim Crow, antiblack racial violence, black patriarchy, and the perpetuation of white cultural hegemony.

Black women in D.C. participated in institutions, movements, and daily activities that explored this newfound sense of autonomy, however limited. The realities of Jim Crow and black masculinism challenged this autonomy. Relationships between black men and black women are particularly intriguing in the context of examining black women's investment in New Negro womanhood during an era in which the plight of black men became practically synonymous with the plight of African America in its entirety. Although many black women in D.C. did not reject the idea that race trumped gender in the larger context of fighting for equality, many Washington black women vehemently fought for gender equality with comparable tenacity. These women refused silence, invisibility, and marginalization. They contested the inferiority of their racial and gender identities alike.