Thoroughly Modern: African American Women's Dress and the Culture of Consumption in Cleveland, Ohio 1890-1940

Deanda Marie Johnson

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Thoroughly Modern: African American Women’s Dress and the Culture of Consumption in Cleveland, Ohio, 1890-1940

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ABSTRACT

African American women have been absent from much of the writing on consumption and the making of modernity. This dissertation responds to these absences, using dress, a highly visible form of consumption, to examine how African American women in Cleveland, Ohio experienced modernity through the culture of consumption from 1890-1940, in the context of urbanization, migration, and the Great Depression.

In looking at African American women’s dress during this period, this dissertation will explore the clothed body not simply as a theoretical abstraction, but part of a lived experience in which production and consumption are not mutually exclusive. This will help illuminate the ability of African American women to find a sense of affirmation within oppressive systems.

African American women in Cleveland seized on the opportunities provided by dress and its related consumption to construct a modern black female identity that simultaneously accepted and contested dominant culture’s notions of femininity. However, African American women were not a monolithic group, so these constructions differed across geographic origins, class, and religious lines. African American’s women’s consumption also provided them with avenues for developing a sense of community that led to the creation of autonomous black spaces centered around dress and consumption. These spaces were essential to the self-definition and self-sufficiency that defined the New Negro.
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This dissertation has been a long time coming and I am so happy to see it finally completed. Hollywood writer/director Nora Ephron once said, "The hardest thing about writing is writing." As far as I am concerned, no words have ever proved truer. Writing this dissertation has truly been a humbling process.

The topic of this dissertation, African American women's dress and the culture of consumption was largely inspired by my discovery of a single issue of Ringwood's Afro-American Journal of Fashion from 1893 in the records of the National Association of Colored Women. I stumbled across the magazine when writing a paper on African American women's dress for Dr. Gundaker's African American Material Culture course. After turning in the paper, I still wanted to find out more about the publication and its editor Julia Ringwood Coston. My interest in the topic was again raised when I read Elaine S. Abelson's When Ladies Go A Thieving. The book discusses about how the term kleptomaniac was coined so as not to stigmatize middle-class women, or rather their husbands. A diagnosis of kleptomania made these ladies' theft not criminal, but symptomatic of a gendered psychological disorder which compelled them to steal. I found it very interesting that at the same time society was trying to decriminalize middle-class white women, it was attempting to criminalize African Americans for a range of behaviors, many of which should have not even been considered crimes. However, it made me wonder how African American women experienced department stores and the culture of consumption.

This dissertation would have never come to fruition without the many people who were in or came into my life during this process, assisting, encouraging, and motivating me. I would first like to thank the members of the committee: my advisor Dr. Grey Gundaker for her encouragement and her feedback; Dr. Charles McGovern, whose early critique of my initial prospectus, really helped me to focus this dissertation; and Dr. Regennia N. Williams and Dr. Arthur Knight for their willingness to step in and serve on my committee so that I could meet my completion deadline. I would also like to thank the American Studies Program’s administrative assistant, Jean Brown, for making sure I stayed on top of all the deadlines and other necessary requirements.

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ways throughout this process, but most of all for his belief, despite my own doubts, that I was capable of it.

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This dissertation would not have been possible without the love and support, both emotional and financial, of my parents. I am especially grateful to my mom to whom I have dedicated this dissertation. If it were not for her unwavering belief that I am "beautifully and wonderfully made" and for her willingness to listen, I do not know if I would have been able to have gotten through this process. I would also like to acknowledge my brothers and sisters who encouraged me with their subtle inquiry, "How long have you been in school?"

And last but certainly not least, I would like to thank Him, whom through all things are possible.
Dedicated to Ma Mère, my first teacher of consumption.
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Chapter 1

Introduction: I Shop Therefore I Am

At the turn of the twentieth century, a new culture of consumption emerged. While this culture had earlier antecedents dating back to the 18th century, it was the result of technological innovations as well as economic and cultural revolutions that culminated in the late 19th century.\(^1\) This new culture placed emphasis on consumption rather than production and included shifts from rural to urban, agricultural to industrial, and private to public. It also saw the expansion of the middle-class and the rise of the department store. Access to commodities also became increasingly widespread and less dependent on “social position and economic necessity.”\(^2\)

Despite the supposed democratization of the culture of consumption, the culture was raced, classed, and gendered.\(^3\) The ideal consumers were constructed as middle-class white women, which marked African American women as their antithesis. As a result, African American women have been absent from much of the writing on consumption and the making of modernity.

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\(^2\) Jonathan Friedman, *Consumption and Identity* (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic, 1994).

This dissertation responds to these absences, using dress to examine the experience of African American women as consumers in Cleveland, Ohio beginning with the culture of consumption's emergence in the late 19th century until prior to World War II. Because of fashion's association with modernity, dress, a highly visual form of consumption, was central to the development of a modern black female identity. When Mamie Garvin Fields attended a lecture by clubwoman Mary Church Terrell on the "Modern Woman," it was not just what Terrell had to say that established her as an expert, but her own self-presentation. According to Fields, "Oh my, when I saw her walk onto that podium in her pink evening dress and long white gloves, with her beautifully done hair, she was that Modern Woman." 

African American dress is not a new subject of inquiry. The distinctiveness of African American dress has always captured the attention of various observers dating back to slavery. Even during their enslavement, African Americans displayed a penchant for the consumption that would come to define modern life. Enslaved African Americans, whenever possible, dressed in ways that exceeded their status, using clothes to express and to define themselves in ways that contradicted notions of their inferiority. The enslaved would dress in their finery

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4 While the sartorial displays of African American men during this period are also worthy of attention, this dissertation focuses on women because fashion was largely considered a feminine concern. See Rob Schorman, Selling Style: Clothing and Social Change at the Turn of the Century (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press 2003), 8.

for “their Saturday night parties and especially for church on Sunday.”6 For women this included the wearing of red garments and hoop skirts constructed out of grapevines.7 According to Jane Sutton of Mississippi, when she and the other enslaved women dressed up to go to the Baptist Church their owner required them to attend, they wore “pretty” calico dresses.8 Julia Larken of Georgia had a similar recollection: “Dey was dressed in der best Sunday go-to-meetin clothes...Some of de ‘omans wore homespun dresses, but most of ‘em had a calico dress that was saved special for Sunday meetin wear. ‘Omans wore two or three petticoats all ruffled up and starched ‘til one if dem underskirts would stand by itself.”9 In yet another example, Addie Vinson recalled “allus had nice clothes for Sunday. Dey made up our summertime Sunday dresses out of a thin cloth called Sunday-parade. Dey was made spenser fashion wid ruffles ‘round de neck and waist.” Some further embellished the “long pantalettes wid their scalloped ruffles” that were worn underneath using locust thorns to punch eyelets into the scallops.10 To further ensure successful self-presentation, enslaved women pinned up their skirts and undergarments to ensure that they did not get dirty on what was often a long walk. They also walked barefoot to make sure that their

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shoes, which often had been painstakingly polished, did not get dust on them and remained shiny.\textsuperscript{11} This "dress[ing] to death" drew suspicion and criticism from white observers.\textsuperscript{12} This was because dress "played a crucial role in the creation and maintenance of social norms."\textsuperscript{13} The ability of the enslaved to dress as they chose was an exercise of control over their own bodies, the very thing that slavery sought to deny.\textsuperscript{14} Believing that dressing well made the enslaved less accepting of the social order, the powers that be attempted to intervene in the self-presentation of the enslaved, passing sumptuary laws that restricted their dress.\textsuperscript{15} For instance, in South Carolina, these laws prohibited enslaved persons from wearing certain fabrics. To enforce black subordination, owners also attempted to limit the dress of the enslaved, in terms of both quality and quantity. Dress was also an element in punishments. Helen Bradley Foster writes, "Instances wherein dress or its absence became the type of degrading torture inflicted by white 'masters' included...the forced wearing of clothes of the...

\textsuperscript{12} According to Ted Ownby, "slave owners were extremely suspicious about slaves who used too many shoes and clothing." See Ted Ownby, \textit{American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, and Culture}, 1830-1998 (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 47.
\textsuperscript{14} The ability of the enslaved to control what they wore had a lot to do with the fact that enslaved women were largely responsible for clothing production. See White and White, \textit{Stylin'}, 61 and Lydia Jean Wares, "Dress of the African American Woman in Slavery and Freedom: 1500 to 1935" (PhD diss., Purdue University, 1981).
opposite sex...and the subtraction of clothing, particularly stripping the body before flogging."\(^{16}\)

For those blacks who escaped, clothing was essential to masking their enslaved status and asserting themselves as free. According to Pamela E. Klassen, "The meager clothes allotted to slaves, made from either telltale homespun fabrics or out-of-fashion hand-me-downs from white masters and mistresses, marked them as slaves, constraining their freedom to venture far beyond their masters' homes without being caught."\(^{17}\) As a result, in runaway ads "fugitive slaves" were sometimes reported as having stolen clothing.\(^{18}\)

The dress of free blacks in both the north and south was also often of interest to whites, as it "was the most visible and obvious result" of their autonomy.\(^{19}\) Frederick Law Olmstead, while reporting on southern slavery for the *New York Times*, could not help making the following observation about free blacks:

> In what I suppose to be the fashionable streets, there were many more well-dressed and highly-dressed colored people than white...Many of the

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\(^{19}\) White and White, *Stylin'*, 91.
colored ladies were dressed not only expensively, but with good taste and
effect, after the latest Parisian mode. Many of them were quite attractive in
appearance, and some would have produced a decided sensation in any
European drawing-room. Their walk and carriage was more often stylish
and graceful than that of the white ladies who were out.\textsuperscript{20}

As alluded to in the preceding, “Taste was more than just an expression of
aesthetic preference, it signaled one’s social identity or class status as well.”\textsuperscript{21}

After emancipation, African Americans struggling for equality, continued to use
dress as an important indicator of their freed status.

Dress, central to the performance of identity, refers to the “assemblage of
body modifications and supplement displayed by a person in the presentation of
self.”\textsuperscript{22} For the purposes of this dissertation, discussions of dress primarily focus
on clothing. Diane Crane argues:

"Clothing, as one of the most visible forms of consumption, performs a
major role in the social construction of identity. Clothing choices provide
an excellent field for studying how people interpret a specific form of
culture for their own purposes, one that includes strong norms about

\textsuperscript{20} Frederick Law Olmstead, \textit{A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States; With Remarks on Their
observations of black dress were quite complimentary. White onlookers were often harsh in their
descriptions of black’s sartorial styles, often poking fun at them. Olmstead also shows the dandy
or dandizette, a term often used for well-dressed blacks and often seen as a phenomenon of
urban life, was not confined to the north.

\textsuperscript{21} Vicki Howard, \textit{Brides, Inc.: American Weddings and the Business Tradition} (Philadelphia, PA:
University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 23.

\textsuperscript{22} Joanne B. Eicher and Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins, “Definition and Classification of Dress:
Implications for Analysis of Gender Roles,” in \textit{Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural
appropriate appearances at a particular point in time (otherwise known as fashion) as well as an extraordinarily rich variety of alternatives...clothing is an indication of how people in different eras have perceived their positions in social structures and negotiated status boundaries.\textsuperscript{23}

In looking at African American women's dress during this period, this dissertation explores the clothed body not simply as a theoretical abstraction, but part of a lived experience that involves the "overlapping practices of production and consumption."\textsuperscript{24} This illuminates the ability of African American women to find a sense of affirmation within oppressive systems. As Robin Kelley argues, "Clothing, as a badge of oppression or an act of transgression, is crucial to understanding opposition by subordinate groups."\textsuperscript{25} African American women in Cleveland used dress to fulfill their own needs and in doing so subverted the hegemonic meanings of dress, destabilizing racial, gender, and class hierarchies.

\textit{Thoroughly Modern Millie} (1967), from which this dissertation takes its title, was first a film, then a Broadway musical. Set in the 1920s, it tells the story of a young white woman who migrates to New York City and engages in new forms of fashion and leisure to construct herself as a modern woman, all the while trying to avoid the pitfalls of urban society. However, unlike for Millie, "modern" was rarely used as an adjective by the dominant culture to describe

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23} Diane Crane, \textit{Fashion and its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing} (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Robin Kelley, "We Are Not What We Seem: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," \textit{Journal of American History} 80.1 (1993): 86.
\end{itemize}
African American women. Despite the influence of African American cultural forms on modernity in terms of music, dance, and popular culture generally, the actual people are largely absent in many examinations and portrayed as victims of or obstacles to modernity rather than participants. Although dominant culture refused to acknowledge African American women's modernity, they saw themselves as such. Like Millie, African American women contested and negotiated their identities within the realm of the culture of consumption, struggling to create modern identities.

Identity is about how we see ourselves, how others see us, and how we wish to be seen. Warren I. Susman argues, “One of the things that make the modern world ‘modern’ is the development of consciousness of self.” Modernity promoted the idea that identity was not as a static entity, but a work in progress created through narrative. African Americans seized on this idea embedding their modern identities in the master narrative of progress, emphasizing “self-

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27 Black women even expressed their modern subjectivities in the naming of their social clubs. In Cleveland clubs had names such as Modern Misses, Modern Cosmetic Club, Modern, Modernettes, Modernistics, Modern Wives, Modern Matrons, Modern Maids, Modern Eight, Modern Maidens, Modern 13, Modern Pals, Modern Priscillas, Modern Beauticians, and Modern Aristocrats. As shown later, in addition to their names, these clubs also used fashion and its display to assert their modernity.


development and mastery."\textsuperscript{30} Proof of the crucial role of consumption and material culture in expressing identities, African American women used dress to create a visual narrative of progress. Their clothed bodies, evidence of the material achievement associated with civilization and progress, were the embodiment of racial and gender advancement.

\textit{The Context}

Cleveland, Ohio during the period 1890-1940, provides the context for looking at early African American consumption of women's dress in this dissertation. In \textit{Selling Mrs. Consumer} (1929), Catherine Frederick referred to Cleveland as "an excellent typical American city."\textsuperscript{31} African American modernity is usually discussed in terms of black migration to the north. This time period allows for an examination of how African Americans experienced the culture of consumption during urbanization, migration, and the Great Depression. This period also includes what scholars have termed "The Nadir," an era which was marked by the deterioration of race relations and the rise of white supremacy. Neilson writes, "[i]t was not until American [race] relations dipped to an all-time low after the end of Reconstruction that modern America came into existence. When white America launched its search for a new social order congruent with

\textsuperscript{30} Susman, \textit{Culture as History}, 274. For more on master narratives, also referred to as metanarratives, see Jean-Francois Lyotard, \textit{The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge} (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

\textsuperscript{31} Christine Frederick, \textit{Selling Mrs. Consumer} (New York, NY: Business Bourse, 1929), 206.
the emerging urban-industrial realities, it also launched modern black urban America in all of its complexities."32

Cleveland is worthy of examination in relationship to these issues because it was the site of Ringwood's Afro-American Journal of Fashion (1891-1895), one of the earliest fashion magazines specifically aimed at African American women. The journal was published by Julia Ringwood Coston, an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) minister's wife from 1891-1895 and during its brief run the journal achieved national and international circulation. The magazine also provides an early example of African Americans' belief that consumption could transform perceptions and thereby the status of the race, a topic which is explored further in chapter 2 of this dissertation.

The city developed as an industrial center in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In addition to iron and steel manufacturing, Cleveland's main industries included the garment industry and by 1916, the city would be the nation's fourth largest manufacturer of women's clothing.33 Moreover, Cleveland has the distinction of having one the first indoor shopping centers in the United States, the Arcade, which was completed in 1890.34 During the late nineteenth

34 While the Cleveland Arcade is often labeled as the "first indoor mall," it is more closely related to the 19th century arcades of Europe, which it had been modeled after.
and early twentieth century, Cleveland’s culture of consumption expanded as “[n]ew shops and department stores were established or enlarged.”

Cleveland’s African American population grew in tandem with Cleveland’s development as an industrial and commercial center. Cleveland was one of the mid-western cities that attracted African Americans from the South who were looking for better opportunities, which included those in the realm of fashion. While Cleveland, as an African American metropolis, has received considerably less scholarly attention than cities such as Chicago and Detroit, it is no less important. Cleveland has had a strong African American presence since the early nineteenth century, but African Americans comprised a very small percentage of the population until the Great Migration. Beginning in 1890, Cleveland’s African American population began to increase and by 1910, the African American population had more than doubled and would continue to increase throughout the period under review. In 1915, African Americans began migrating to the city in larger numbers to take advantage of the employment opportunities that emerged in wartime industries. As a result, Cleveland had the largest African American population in the state. The migration marked a shift in Cleveland’s African American population from northern to southern born and from middle-class to working-class. This demographic shift was a source of racial and class tensions. The city’s established residents, both white and black, felt that the

behavior of the new arrivals, especially their appearances, jeopardized existing race relations, which were generally thought to be better than those that existed in other northern cities.

Review of the Literature

In examining how African American women in Cleveland experienced modernity, this dissertation brings together literature on the dress and fashion, the culture of consumption, and the Great Migration, all of which were defining features of modern life.

Dress and Fashion

Various disciplines have explored the meanings of fashion and dress. Instead of focusing on its utilitarian functions, studies have mainly focused on its aesthetic and symbolic dimensions. This is because the "less practical" elements of dress reveal more about social and cultural processes, especially for the construction of identity. Early writers saw fashion solely in terms of class differentiation. Georg Simmel (1904), locating fashion as a function of modernity, described a cycle of imitation and differentiation in which the elite created and recreated their fashions in order to distance themselves from those they believed to be their social inferiors. Simmel's diffusion model of fashion only took into account one aspect of identity—class. However, more recent studies have increasingly recognized the myriad of identities that can be expressed through

fashion and dress in addition to class. Scholars focusing on the role of fashion and dress in identity formation also investigate age, ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation.

According to Simmel, fashion involves a negotiation between "uniformity" and "individuality," a central tension of modernity. It is within this negotiation that issues of agency arise. How one chooses to dress one's body is both a private and public matter shaped not only by the individual, but by society and culture. Furthermore, agency is circumscribed by the fact that the wearer cannot control how viewers interpret the meaning of the sartorial display, which potentially limits the extent to which the wearer is able to use clothing to construct identity. Simmel's work speaks to the limited ability of African American women's to use dress to resist and redefine their racial and gender identities.

Helen Foster Bradley's, "New Raiments of Self: African American Clothing in the Antebellum South" (1997), which refers to itself as a "folk history," looks at the dress of enslaved people as documented in the WPA slave narratives. In addition to examining what was actually worn, it also explores the clothing's connection to a West African cultural heritage and various aspects of acquisition. While the book looks at a much earlier period, it is useful because it

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argues “in the matter of clothing, it is clear that the hegemony of whites was never absolute,” which is important because it shows how African Americans were not completely dominated and how clothing was an important aspect of their resistance. As such, Foster argues, it is important to look at clothing not in terms of items, but rather how it was used. The book also shows how clothing can be used to elucidate how African Americans experienced a particular historical moment. According to Foster, these experiences have continued relevance because “what happened then remains a potent factor in explaining what happens now.” African American experiences with clothing during slavery influenced their experiences even after the institution’s demise. The book also offers a useful perspective on the relationship of clothing to identity: “Clothing enables a human being to identify personal self and communal self in relation to those of other communities; and clothing is the most obvious silent message by which a person communicates his or her self as an individual to others.” Like their ancestors, African American women in Cleveland managed both personal and group identities through dress.

*Stylin': African American Expressive Culture From Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (1998) argues that dress played an important role in the creation of a cultural identity for African Americans. The book represents one of the most comprehensive studies of African American dress and examines how African

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43 Ibid., 4-5.
44 Ibid., 4.
45 Ibid.
Americans used their bodies in distinctive ways as a form of resistance. 

Analyzing African American dress and other modes of expression during enslavement and freedom, the book demonstrates how self-presentation was crucial to African Americans' self-definition, which is a focus of this dissertation. According to the Shane and Graham White, "within the confines of an oppressive social system, African Americans have been able to develop and give visual expression to cultural preferences that were at variance with those of the dominant group." The authors argue that this cultural variation, such as the preference for bright colors, is the result of the persistence of an African cultural heritage. Therefore, African Americans' dress is not a poor imitation of dominant culture but a selective appropriation.  

Although well researched and very descriptive, the work's only weakness perhaps, is its concentration on the modes of display, with little attention to the modes of consumption.

Like Stylin', Wares' dissertation "Dress of African Americans in Slavery and Freedom: 1500 to 1935" focuses on a huge time span and argues that African American fashion sense drew on both African and Euro-American styles. However, Wares pays closer attention to modes of production, arguing that cultural retentions were largely the result of the fact that enslaved women were responsible for making clothes. However, during slavery, African American's women's influence on fashion was not confined to members of her own race, as

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46 White and White, Stylin', 4.  
enslaved labor was used in the production of clothing, even for the white elite.\textsuperscript{48} The study is important not only in terms of its breadth and depth, but in the close attention paid to how African retentions were important to the maintenance of African Americans' unique subcultural identity. Also, Wares avoids the tendency to treat African American as a static and monolithic group and shows how African American dress was influenced by time, place, and socio-economic status.

In \textit{Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity} (2009), focusing on the figure of the black dandy, Miller examines how African Americans in their struggles for equality used style to create a unique identity through which they were able to define their modernity and counter negative stereotypes.\textsuperscript{49} However, adopting fashionable dress simultaneously reified and challenged "authoritative aesthetics." Style was never entirely liberating because it was also about conformity.\textsuperscript{50} While the examination focuses almost entirely on men's fashions, Miller argues "black sartorial style can be read as an index of changing notions of racial identity and the other identities in which race is constructed, performed, and lived—namely, gender, sexuality, class, and nation," which applies to examinations of African American dress regardless of gender.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 194-196.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 19-20.
The Culture of Consumption

In many ways the scholarship on dress overlaps the scholarship on the culture of consumption. In the late 19th century people increasingly accessed dress through the culture of consumption. The study of consumption is generally acknowledged to have begun with Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). In this pioneering work, Veblen argued that "conspicuous consumption," a term which he coined, served primarily as a means of social differentiation that usually signified a distance from engagement in productive labor.\(^{52}\) As an indicator of class status, goods represented both "difference and inequality."\(^{53}\) The accumulation of goods became increasingly important in anonymous urban environments where the maintenance and improvement of one's social status became increasingly dependent on visual cues. Veblen writes, "The means of communication and the mobility of the population now expose the individual to the observation of many persons who have no other means of judging his reputability than the display of goods (and perhaps of breeding) which he is able to make while he is under their direct observation."\(^{54}\) Veblen goes on to argue "that admitted expenditure for display is more obviously present, and is, perhaps, more universally practiced in the matter of dress than in any other line of consumption."\(^{55}\) Veblen saw women's dress as a function of


\(^{55}\) Ibid., 103.
women's oppression, as a symbol of their subordination and objectification where women had little or no agency, and were simply objects to display men's status.

Although he acknowledges the limitations of identity in the modern city, Veblen ultimately dismisses consumption as wasteful. Veblen is critical of such waste associating it with the display of excess and lack of functionality.56 For example, in examining dress, Veblen finds that expenditures for clothing are ultimately wasteful as they have less to do with “the protection of the person” than with “respectable appearance.”57 Moreover, in recognizing that consumption “does serve human life or human well-being,” he also realizes that the desire to accumulate markers of status could override more basic human needs. According to Veblen, in the “matter of dress...people will undergo a very considerable degree of privation in the comforts or the necessities of life in order to afford what is considered a decent amount of wasteful consumption.”58

In his study, Veblen adopts a top down approach, arguing that “emulation,” is the driving force behind consumption.59 He writes:

In modern civilized communities the lines of demarcation between social classes have grown vague and transient...The result is that the members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of life in

56 Ibid., 60.
57 Ibid., 68.
58 Ibid., 103.
59 Ibid., 68.
vogue in the next higher stratum, and bend their energies to live up to that ideal.\textsuperscript{60}

While offering a theoretical framework for consumption, that acknowledges the social and cultural life of goods, Veblen fails to acknowledge that these goods play an instrumental role in agency and the construction of identity, which is a central focus of this dissertation.

\textit{Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century} (1998) by Robert E. Weems is considered one of the seminal works on African Americans and consumer culture.\textsuperscript{61} Weems argues that black urban migration was responsible for the recognition of a viable African American consumer market and the expansion of their consumer power. The usefulness of this work to this study is limited, however, as it contains only one chapter on African American consumerism prior to 1940, it pays little attention to African Americans consumerism as it relates to clothing, and it virtually ignores women even though they were targeted as the primary consumers. This is largely because Weems is more concerned with businesses rather than consumerism, specifically how advertising sought to attract this market. Despite these limitations, the work is useful because Weems demonstrates how civil rights protest often centered on African Americans' desire to have equal access to

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 52.
consumer culture, a desire that was certainly manifest in Cleveland, especially during the Depression-era.

In *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure* (1999), Nan Enstad focuses on immigrant women in New York City to show how women used consumer products, including clothes, to "construct political identities." Working-class women participated in consumer culture on their own terms and used it to create their own definitions of what it meant to be a lady. In doing so, they constructed a powerful counter discourse to negative perceptions of their womanhood. African American women, like the women in Enstad’s study, appropriated mainstream fashion to construct African American femininity in ways that contrasted with dominant culture. Their appropriation of the discourse of femininity included both acceptance and rejection of dominant culture’s notions of femininity and was central in creating distance from an enslaved past.

In *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (2000), Lori Merish uses nineteenth century women’s sentimental fiction to interrogate consumer culture. Merish includes two chapters on African American women, both of which focus on dress. These chapters include analysis of works by Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Keckley, and Frances Harper. Merish argues, "Denied access to the political public
sphere, nineteenth century African Americans...appropriated the discourse of fashion as an alternative, competing register of publicity and social recognition."62

Examining African American women's magazines, including Half-Century and Ringwood's Afro-American Journal of Fashion which date back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Noliwe Rooks makes a similar argument. In Ladies' Pages: African American Women's Magazines and the Culture That Made Them (2004). Rooks argues that "within the contexts of African American migration, urbanization, and consumerism" these magazines constructed product consumption as "a means to shape a new, modern, and liberatory meaning for Blackness in general and African American womanhood in particular."63 These magazines offered the African American middle-class, especially club women—which the majority of African American women were not—as a model for proper African American femininity. Thus as prescriptive literature, these magazines are more telling regarding ideals rather than lived experience. Despite the narrow focus of her research, Rooks details the context in which African American consumerism emerged and the tensions that surrounded it, including the conflicts that arose between notions of Victorian womanhood and the new consumer culture.

The ability of both the working-class and African American women to subvert the culture from within was largely made possible through the gendering

of consumption. Scholars have shown how consumption played an essential role in the construction of women's identities. The notion that shopping was women's work helped expand women's opportunities not only as consumers, but also as workers.64 Engendering consumption also helped to empower women as citizen consumers. In Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945 (2006), Charles F. McGovern argues that beginning in the late nineteenth century national identity became increasingly tied to consumption. Women who were targeted as the primary consumers were enfranchised into a form of citizenship based upon their spending. Shopping was seen as a form of civic engagement and denoted political agency. The relationship between consumption and citizenship was made explicit through advertisers' use of national symbols and political language which "depicted consumption as the best means for women to achieve both their individual freedom and their full public power as citizens."65

Despite the fact that African Americans faced barriers at all levels of citizenship, this rhetoric was not lost on them. African Americans saw participation in the culture of consumption as a basic right of their citizenship. Lizabeth Cohen in A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America (2003) asserts that African American consumption became important in the struggle for civil rights. Utilizing various forms of consumer activism, beginning during the Depression, African Americans sought to counter

65 McGovern, Sold American, 79.
racial discrimination in the marketplace in terms of both labor and leisure. In Cleveland, African American women, as the primary consumers in households, were on the forefront of such activism. They were members of organizations like the Future Outlook League and the Housewives' League, which tried to improve African Americans' participation in consumer culture as laborers.

In studying the mobilization of African Americans as consumer citizens, Cohen also explores race as part of "the processes of exclusion which structure and limit access to consumption." It is only recently that scholars have begun examining about how race structured consumption. Previously, scholarship had the tendency to focus on the democratization of fashion during the period under investigation, suggesting that the increased availability of fashion seemed to cut across previously established social boundaries. While more recent research has focused on the intersections between race and consumer culture, this research usually focuses on the south.

In *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (1998), Grace Elizabeth Hale explores African Americans and consumer culture. Her chapter entitled, "Bounding Consumption", looks at the contradictions of consumer culture, as it simultaneously reinforced and undermined racial hierarchies. She argues, "Clothing, more than other consumer goods, conveyed a lasting meaning and incited white fears of upwardly mobile African Americans.

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and the unhinging class and racial identities that such 'New Negroes' signified."

In order to reconstitute racial hierarchies, whites unable to completely deny access to blacks for fear of lost profits, instead whites limited customer service, prohibiting blacks from trying on and returning clothing. Hale's study exposes white supremacy as neither natural nor real, neither earned nor God ordained, but as a false construct maintained by excluding those deemed "other" from facets of American life and culture. While Hale's study is concerned with the South, it proves useful for looking at Cleveland, which had its own culture of segregation. Cleveland, like other northern cities was constructed as a "land of opportunity" and blacks began migrating to the city, in search of these opportunities in the twentieth century. Ironically, however, the opportunities that Cleveland promised dwindled as the black population grew. Not coincidentally, the increasing number of African Americans in the city resulted in increasing discrimination and segregation, which included restricting African Americans' access to consumer culture.70

"Weighed Upon A Scale: African American Women, Class and Culture in New Orleans and Washington D.C., 1880-1915" (2003), a dissertation by Angela Michele Winand, relies on the works of Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Mary Church Terrell, and Nellie DeSpelderto analyze "the relationship between consumption,

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70 While Cleveland and other northern cities practiced segregation, William W. Giffin argues, "The imposition of segregation in Ohio was less visible and more difficult to challenge on legal grounds than in the South because blacks and whites in Ohio were separated mainly by private acts of racial discrimination an extralegal means." See William W. Giffin, *African Americans and the Color Line in Ohio 1915-1930* (Columbus, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 216.
class identity, gender and culture." She argues that the formation of a Black female middle-class identity was based on consumption, particularly dress. These women’s acceptance and adherence to Victorian values was the basis of a respectable identity on which they asserted themselves as equal citizens and sought the privileges thereof. This work will be especially important for examining the fashion of middle-class women in Cleveland during the period under investigation.

Many of the studies focusing specifically on African American women’s consumption and self-presentation have not focused on clothing, but beauty culture, specifically hairdressing and cosmetics. For instance, Style & Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975 (2007) by Susannah Walker, argues that beauty culture was an important facet of African American women’s consumerism. In the context of a racist and sexist culture that often excluded and denigrated African American women, especially their appearance, beauty culture was highly politicized and an important avenue to racial uplift. The same applies to clothing and fashion, the focus of this dissertation.

African American Migration

The influx of African Americans into the urban centers of the north has received considerable scholarly attention. Early studies constructed African

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American migration as a problem. Focusing on the push-pull factors that influenced African American migration, scholars examined African Americans as subjects rather than actors, thus relegating them to secondary characters in their own migration out of the south. These studies looked at the demographic, social, political and cultural impacts of the migration, generally arguing that the negative consequences of migration and urbanization were held responsible for the deterioration of race relations in the north.73

Migration studies of the 1960s and 1970s, used migration as a lens through which to look at the formation of African American urban communities in the north. These studies asserted that the African American migration was responsible for increased racism and discrimination which in turn resulted in the patterns of residential segregation which created urban black ghettos. These studies include Kenneth Kusmer's *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930* (1976). Kusmer argues that occupational and residential restrictions resulted in the creation of Cleveland's African American community. While ghettoization usually has negative connotations, Kusmer argues this helped to foster a sense of race pride and self-help that previously did not exist.

While earlier studies examined African American migration in terms of separation from both cultural and familial roots and therefore as culturally destructive, later studies of black migration examined how migration from specific

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areas or states influenced community and cultural developments in the north including the formation of working-class consciousness. In *Alabama North: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-45* (1999), Kimberley Phillips examines how migration from Alabama to Cleveland informed working-class culture and politics. Although Phillips is more concerned with African American labor than with consumption, the book does provide important insight into how during the Great Depression African Americans used their consumer power to expand employment opportunities. Focusing primarily on the Future Outlook League, a working-class organization, Phillips argues activists abandoned the accommodationism of the black middle-class in favor of more militant tactics, pressuring businesses whose clientele was predominantly black to reflect that in their hiring practices. Phillips’ study is important because it documents not only how African American migrants were transformed by migration but also how they transformed the places to which they migrated. Moreover, Phillips responds to Darlene Clark Hine’s call for gendered analysis of migration, demonstrating the integral role women played in working-class politics.

Victoria Wolcott also responds to the “void concerning black woman migrants” in *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (2001). Wolcott expands on Higginbotham’s “the politics of respectability,” which maintains that African American adopted Victorian female

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domesticity as the basis of racial uplift. Wolcott examines how middle-class women sought to impress their adherence to these values on migrant and working-class women by focusing their reform efforts on appearance and behavior, especially in public places. However, their efforts were contested because meanings of respectability were never static. The working-class did not rely on the middle-class definitions, but constructed a form of respectability in accordance with their own standards of what was considered appropriate which evolved over time and therefore becomes a lens through which to examine social change.

The most recent studies of African American migration have included explicit examination of African Americans' central role in modernity especially as it relates to consumption. These studies argue that migration to urban centers expanded African Americans' ability to participate in consumption, and thereby modernity, as the two were closely related. According to these studies, African Americans were not passive victims of modernity but active participants who used mass culture and consumerism to construct themselves as modern subjects. In *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (2005), Jacqueline Najuma Stewart uses early cinematic culture as a lens through which to explore how image production became an essential component of African American modernity in Chicago. This concern with African American representation was not confined to the cinema and extended to other forms of

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leisure. African American women were most affected by these concerns. Stewart argues that in order to access "the display of fashion and sophistication that city life was supposed to enable," African American women were forced to contend with constructions and expectations of their race, class, and gender.\textsuperscript{76} Stewart's study is indispensable because of its examination of "the close relationships between race, modernity, and mass culture."\textsuperscript{77}

In \textit{Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life} (2007), Davarian Baldwin argues that the cultural production of the New Negro Movement was not confined to Harlem. In Baldwin's work, African American migrants to Chicago appropriated "consumer culture to challenge both white and black conceptions of 'northern freedom.'"\textsuperscript{78} As a result, consumer culture became a site for the creation of autonomous black spaces, especially around leisure. Within these spaces, migrants were able create "their own New Negro visions of respectability."\textsuperscript{79} Although Baldwin's examination of African American women as consumers is primarily confined to beauty culture, the idea that African Americans' participation with consumer culture was central to their constructions of themselves as modern subjects is particularly useful.

\textsuperscript{77} Stewart, \textit{Migrating to the Movies}, 9.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 9.
Theoretical Framework

For the purposes of this dissertation, it is not dress itself, but how it was used and understood that matters. According to Joanne Entwistle, "Understanding dress in everyday life requires understanding not just how the body is represented within the fashion system and its discourses on dress, but also how the body is experienced and lived and the role dress plays in the presentation of the body/self."\(^{80}\) Michel de Certeau's work serves as the primary theoretical framework for interpreting African American dress and consumption. In the *Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau asserts that consumption "insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order."\(^{81}\) Therefore, consumers are not passive victims of the culture of consumption, but are involved in secondary production. As such, it is not only the intentions of the producers, but also those of consumers that must be considered in order to understand the culture of consumption. This secondary production is accomplished through what de Certeau refers to as "tactics." These "tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices."\(^{82}\)

Consumption "involves not just the purchasing and using up of items produced by the commercial world, but also bringing meaning to items,

\(^{82}\) Ibid., xvii.
appropriating them, making them, indeed taking them as one's own."\(^{83}\) While the culture of consumption came to dominate many aspects of life, as many cultural theorists have noted, domination is never complete. Noting the continued significance of human agency, Daniel Horowitz argues, "[M]any Americans tried to use consumer goods on their own terms...not simply on the terms capitalism offered."\(^{84}\)

Fashion as it relates to dress, "can be seen as one example of a tactic oppressed groups have frequently adopted: mobilizing dominant discourses in subversive ways."\(^{85}\) African American women were not content to rest at the margins and subverted the culture by using it to their own ends. Despite the racist dimensions of the emerging culture, African American women believed that consumption could serve as a form of empowerment. African American women seized on the rhetoric of the new culture of consumption in an attempt to transform their second-class citizenship. Black women across class lines believed consumption, especially as it related to dress, provided a means to resist both racial and gender oppression. Moreover, they believed that consumption could serve as the basis for political, social, and economic change. Thus, African American women's consumption was an important site of

resistance in which devising tactics to gain access to the culture of consumption became part of the struggles of everyday life for African Americans.

Methodology

This dissertation employs a variety of sources including, but not limited to: photographs, personal correspondence, institutional and organization records, court records, newspapers and other periodicals, fictional literature, and oral histories. These sources offer descriptions of African American women's dress for the time period in question to see how African American women understood consumption, as well as their attitudes and behavior concerning the new culture, especially as it related to fashion and style. It also looks at the various dialogues that African American women's dress became enmeshed in during the time period both within and outside the African American community and how changing notions of womanhood affected black women's dress.

Significance

This dissertation contributes to the discussion of how dress is embedded with meanings that extend beyond their utilitarian and/or economic value. African American women "accommodated, adapted and manipulated their [dress] to reflect their new identities, fill expected and unexpected needs, and express political ideology."86 As a result, early African American consumption was both a

86 Cunningham and Lab, ed., Dress in American Culture, 226.
part of, and separate from the culture of consumption that would come to dominate American life and culture. This dissertation brings together the literature on consumption, material culture, aesthetics, popular culture, and its relationship to African American women and the social construction of race. The dissertation is useful to African American studies, American studies, and gender studies.

This dissertation adds to the growing scholarship on African Americans and modernity. Over the past thirty years, consumption has been a growing area of inquiry. Studies acknowledge the important role of consumption in the making of modernity. Ann Bermingham, while locating the culture of consumption in an earlier period, argues that "perhaps the thing that distinguishes the modern period from any that preceded it, is the fact that consumption has been the primary means through which individuals have participated in culture and transformed it." 87

However, while the role of consumption in modernity has been extensively explored; African Americans' role in modernity through their own consumption has been largely ignored. Modern life was full of contradictions. While African Americans and their culture was seen as pre-modern, African American cultural forms, especially those involving performance, crossed racial lines are were integral in the making of modernity. Despite attempts to construct African Americans as the antithesis of modernity, African Americans seized on the

rhetoric of "possibility" that modern life offered as a way of ameliorating their second class status in terms of both race and gender. This was especially true for dress.

In addition, by focusing on dress and participation in the culture of consumption as important signifier of femininity, this dissertation also contributes to discussion of gender as performance.8 Dress is both an indicator and a producer of gender and status. African American women manipulated dress to construct themselves either within or outside the bounds of proper femininity and gender roles, as defined by the dominant culture. In doing so, they subverted racialized gender hierarchies. Since African American women were excluded from definitions of womanhood by whites and even by members of their own race, dress that subscribed to or rebelled against the dominant culture's ideal, worked to destabilize gender.

Chapter 2, Clothes Declare the Woman 1890-1915, focuses primarily on the city's African American middle-class, this chapter examines the dress and the related modes of consumption, including department store shopping, before the Great Migration. Despite the fact that prevailing gender ideologies were grounded in race and racism, at the turn of the twentieth century, black middle-class women adopted a genteel performance based on Victorian ideals of femininity and the body became a site on which the progress of the race could be

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demonstrated. They believed racial equality could be achieved through consumption and as such constructed an identity based on consumption in accordance with Victorian values, particularly those concerning self-improvement and moral purity. They believed that adherence to these values would confer upon them a respectability that would ultimately result in their acceptance by larger society. However, they also recognized its demoralizing aspects.

Chapter 3, Migrating to Shop 1915-1940, looks at the culture of consumption's relationship to African American migration. Employment opportunities and escaping the racial violence of the Jim Crow South are routinely listed as reasons for African American migration north; but better access to the consumer culture also figured into African Americans decisions to move north. However, migrants would find their opportunities to participate in the culture of consumption increasingly limited as patterns of segregation intensified. The influx of southern migrants to Cleveland created tensions within Cleveland's African American community; especially as the existing African American community saw the rights and privileges they had previously enjoyed disappear. The established African American community blamed the erosion of economic, political, and social opportunities on the presence of the newly arrived migrants. In an attempt to regain their lost privileges, the African American middle-class,

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89 According to E. Franklin Frazier, this was an attempt by the African American's middle-class to remake themselves in the image of their oppressors. Frazier writes, "They have accepted unconditionally the values of the white bourgeois world: the morals and its canons of respectability. In fact they have tended to overemphasize their conformity to white ideals." See E. Franklin Frazier, Black Bourgeoisie (New York, NY: Free Press Paperbacks, [1957] 1997), 26.

90 Winand, "Weighed Upon A Scale"; Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent; and Wolcott, Remaking Respectability.
along with various organizations and institutions, sought to control the fashion of the new arrivals in terms of middle-class values of sexual morality, cleanliness, thrift, piety, and hard work which they believed were being threatened by migration and the emerging consumer culture. As such, dress particularly as it related to commercial leisure became an important site of contestation.

Chapter 4, Fashioning Blackness 1920-1940, argued that while the increasing black population limited African Americans' ability to interact with dominant culture, it also represented new opportunities for the creation of autonomous black spaces. As Farah Jasmine Griffin argues, "Migrants are not passive victims, subjected to the whims of urban power. They are also agents who sometimes are capable of resisting. Often they can see the very structures and ideologies that repress them as a mean of enabling their agency." The growing black population, along with growing segregation, opened up possibilities for fashion consumption in new ways, especially in terms of black business development and display. In these spaces they were able to reclaim the black body and express ideas that contradicted dominant culture and engendered a sense of pride. Moreover, these spaces were critical to the development of the New Negro, showing that African Americans had a usable past that could be used to transform the black image as racially and culturally inferior to urban and modern.

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Chapter 5, Not too Depressed to Shop 1929-1940, analyzes African American consumption during the Great Depression. During the Depression, which seemed to hit African Americans the hardest, blacks in Cleveland became more aggressive in their tactics to assert their rights in consumer culture, both as consumers and as workers. Retail outlets became contested spaces as African Americans used the legal system and consumer activism to protest the discrimination they experienced. This chapter will also examine how women, as the primary consumers, were essential to these protests.
In 1890, an article appeared in the Cleveland Gazette in which an unidentified "newsgatherer" recounted an incident that occurred in a store in an Augusta, Georgia. According to the informant, a "white lady" requested from the sales clerk "a dress that Negroes don't wear." The clerk was only able to present the customer with one option, a "salt sack." However, it was noted that even the sack may not have been an available option, as even sack dresses were also worn by African American women.¹

As the above report illustrates, African American women were voracious consumers of clothes. African American women's concerns with appearance and fashion might seem frivolous when weighed alongside other issues facing African Americans. However, their seeming obsession with dress was not simply a social diversion, as "it was primarily in the arena of consumption (rather than politics, work, or social life) that African Americans of means could demonstrate their equality with whites and express, through their 'modern' appearance and lifestyle, a fitness for modernity."² Associated with civilization and progress, modernity encouraged identity creation through consumption and presented "new

¹ "A Dress Negroes Don't Wear," Gazette, 24 May 1890. During the late 19th Century, the Gazette was the only African American Newspaper operating in Cleveland. The Gazette was edited by Harry C. Smith, who served in the Ohio State Legislature. It was the major African American newspaper and the only local black newspaper that covers the duration of the period under investigation. In 1903, it was joined by the short-lived Cleveland Journal which operated from 1903-1913, however, there are only extant copies for 1903-1910.

² James C. Davis, Commerce in Color: Race, Consumer Culture, and American Literature (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 11.
possibilities for self-fashioning and agency."³ African American women, especially those belonging to the middle-class, were very fashion conscious. They were because "[b]esides its focus on change, fashion is inescapably about the body's relationship to identity and social power."⁴ Middle-class African American believed that the opportunities for self-improvement that the emerging culture offered held the key to personal and racial advancement.⁵ As such, fashionable clothing was an important "tactic" in African American women's negotiations with dominant culture for acceptance.

For African Americans, middle-class status, increasingly defined by consumption of shared goods and values, was the model for achievement and virtually synonymous with constructions of freedom.⁶ As Robert Weems writes:

African Americans, of both genders, have historically viewed consumption as a means to construct an "identity." African Americans, in fact, have placed greater emphasis than other groups on "identity construction" through consumption. Because blacks possess the dubious distinction of

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⁵ The black middle-class was not defined by economic status, but adherence to a shared ideology that defined racial progress in terms of "self-help, racial solidarity, temperance, thrift, chastity, social purity, patriarchal authority, and the accumulation of wealth." See Kevin K. Gaines, Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 2.
⁶ It is argued that "shopping and consumer spending emerged as an important component of urban middle-class identity in the decades after the Civil War. See Elaine Abelson, When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989), 13. For more on middle-class status and African American freedom, see Claudia Tate, Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 58.
being the only group in the United States to have been designated as slaves, many African Americans view consumerism, and in fact, conspicuous consumption, as a means to separate themselves from a "degraded past."\(^7\)

An early study examining consumption habits among African Americans reduced this type of conspicuous consumption to attempts by the race to cope with their marginalization from dominant society. It argued "colored people who have the means are not allowed to share in most of the activities which serve as symbols of economic and social status for parallel white groups. They appear to compensate psychologically for this deprivation by acquiring" among other things "expensive clothes."\(^8\) However, African Americans believed that the performance of black middle-class identity constructed through consumption could have real world impact and aid in their quests for civil rights. However, African Americans were not alone in their belief in the emancipatory potential of consumption, as contemporary constructions of the modern woman located independence in participation in consumer culture.\(^9\)

Americans increasingly saw the right to consume as a central aspect of their rights as citizens. During the period in question, American citizenship and


democracy became in many ways synonymous with consumption.\textsuperscript{10} African Americans responded to the conflation of these American ideals, by promoting consumption as a way of gaining political recognition.\textsuperscript{11} The focus on consumption reinforced the notion that women were expected to play a key role in race advancement, as consumption was primarily considered the work of woman, an aspect of their productive labor in the home. Fashionable dress, perhaps more than any other commodity, was used by African Americans in their struggle for freedom and racial equality. As a highly visible and portable form of consumption, dress was always with the wearer and therefore more directly communicated with viewers, especially the dominant society from which they were seeking acceptance. The emphasis on portability reflected a more urban existence in which people, including women, were increasingly involved in activities outside of their homes.

Even before the culture of consumption came to dominate American life and culture, African Americans had a long history of equating sartorial displays with the exercise of freedom. The ability to dress as one desired not only compensated for the material deprivation that African Americans experienced during their enslavement, but was one of the primary ways in which they expressed control over their own bodies. Prior to emancipation, people of African descent, both enslaved and free, attempted to distance themselves from the stigma of racial inferiority by dressing in ways that contradicted their

\textsuperscript{10} McGovern, \textit{Sold American}, 5.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 15.
subordinate status. This often entailed the adoption of fashions associated with genteel performance. In an 1863 issue of Harper's Weekly, artist Alfred Waud who captured images of the Civil War in sketches and drawings, observed the following among the contrabands, as escapees who sought refuge behind Union lines were called:

Down on the Peninsula it appeared constantly on the Sabbath. No matter how fine a day, the old darkeys, clad in ancient dress-suits, white cotton gloves, and tall bell hats, always made their appearance with large 'Gampish umbrellas—as I conjecture an insignia of respectability. Somehow or other the ladies of the colored persuasion manage to get hoops, although bonnets and other fashionable frivolities are out of their reach.12

However, even in Cleveland, which never had a history of slavery and in fact had a reputation of being antislavery because it was an important destination on the Underground Railroad, African Americans still found it difficult to distance themselves from their enslaved past. Even the lives of the city's African American elite, who were further removed from slavery by having been free since before emancipation, were structured by their perceived innate inferiority. In 1910, a colonial tea was held for the benefit of the Cleveland Council of Women, a white organization. Attendees dressed in colonial costumes and "were served by a real

old negro 'mammy' wearing the turban, kerchief and apron of colonial days."\(^{13}\)

Such representations of African Americans in servile positions contained black social and economic upward mobility. This romanticized version of antebellum southern plantation life reinscribed a narrative of white racial superiority in which white leisure rested on black servitude. Despite slavery's demise, African American women would still be expected to relieve white women from the drudgeries of everyday life. This was further reinforced by the fact that most of the employment opportunities available to African American women in Cleveland, as elsewhere, were in the area of personal service.

African American women in Cleveland found it not only difficult to change their socio-economic status, but also their perceived lack of morality. Black womanhood was not revered, but constantly insulted and assaulted. Since at this time women were considered "the guardians of culture and morality," the "race problem" was defined in terms of African American women, whom white commentators blamed for all that was wrong with the race.\(^{14}\) African American women were dismissed as degenerate and were believed to be inherently "prostitutes and ... natural liars and thieves."\(^{15}\) At the Cleveland Federation of Colored Women's Club's first round table, the members read a piece by Tayleur entitled "The Negro Woman-Moral and Social Decadence," which had appeared

\(^{13}\) "Club Work," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 2 February 1910.
\(^{15}\) Qtd. in Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1972), 436. The statement was originally made by James Jacks, a member of the Missouri Press Association, in a letter to a British anti-lynching organization. Jacks drew attention to black immorality in order to justify racist attitudes and violence against blacks.
in *Outlook Magazine* in 1904. Tayleur, a white progressive reformer who did social work among African American women in New York, argued that black women had suffered from the social distance that had been imposed between the races after the end of slavery. According to Tayleur, "The modern negro woman has no such object lesson in morality or morals or modesty and she wants none."\(^{16}\) For Tayleur the moral degeneracy of African American women was evident in their style choices. Waxing nostalgic, she lamented the loss of the enslaved woman dressed "in guinea blue calicoes, starched until it rattled like the best taffeta" who had been replaced by "an ignorant creature in dirty finery". Furthermore, Tayleur argued that African American women's work ethic had been subsumed by "a desire to buy a sleazy silk dress."\(^{17}\) The ideas expressed by Tayleur echoed a larger discourse that held that no longer under whites' direct control, blacks lacking "self-discipline and restraint" had given into their baser instincts, "threaten[ing] the republic with their violence and moral bankruptcy."\(^{18}\)

As a result of African American's perceived immorality, black women were particularly vulnerable to sexual assault. They were viewed as complicit in their sexual victimization and all their sexual liaisons were considered consensual, making it virtually impossible for black women to be considered the victims of rape.\(^{19}\) In an article titled "A Brutal Outrage," it was reported that an African


\(^{17}\) Ibid.


\(^{19}\) See Beverly Guy-Shetfall, *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes toward Black Women*, 44.
American woman travelling in Ohio from Circleville to Columbus to visit her sister was raped by six white men, when after becoming lost; she entered into a nearby saloon for directions. In addition to sexually assaulting her, the woman suffered further humiliation when the men stole her “bundle of clothes” and “hat.”\(^{20}\) While the men were awaiting trial, a “Circleville newspaper” attempted to “lower the reputation” of the woman, implying that she was somehow culpable in her sexual victimization. Moreover, this woman was described as the wife of a “poor man,” so that her social class made her even more morally suspect.

Dating back to slavery, African American women were associated with an aggressive sexuality, so they were not viewed as the victims but instigators of illicit sexual contact with white men. During the Civil War, enslaved women seeking refuge behind Union Lines were sometimes turned away under the assumption that they were not there seeking freedom, but were there as prostitutes seeking venues to ply their trade.\(^{21}\) Records show that officers were “not so concerned about soldiers’ exploitation of formerly enslaved women, but most perceived any African American women consorting with Union soldiers as corrupting the troops.”\(^{22}\) The sexual assault of African American women by white soldiers in contrabands camps often went unanswered because it was assumed


\(^{20}\) “A Brutal Outrage,” Gazette, 1 October 1892.


that "the colored women [were] proud to have illicit intercourse with white men."

Similar to the construction of the rapacious black male, the construction of the oversexed black female allowed white men to justify racial violence and project their own predilections for interracial sex onto blacks. The rape of black women after emancipation, like lynching, attempted to reinscribe white male domination and control over the black body. Ideas of white supremacy were reinforced by the fact that the rape of black females by white males often went unchecked, but the mere rumor of even the most innocent of interactions between white females and black males could result in lynching. Rape, while considered male privilege, was only the prerogative of white males.

African American women wanted to be "judged moral, chaste, and virtuous just like their white counterparts." To counter negative assumptions regarding African American womanhood, African American women used fashion, which was part of women's everyday lives, to reconstruct the meanings of their bodies and advance the position that their bodies were indeed worth protecting.

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23 Qtd. in Leslie A. Schwalm, *Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 102-103. Women who refused sexual advances and those who tried to protect them were subject to physical punishment.
Hoping to recover a dignity and self-respect that the dominant culture had continually attempted to deny them, African American women believed that their bodies mediated through dress could respond to contemporary racism and sexism, serving as powerful visual refutation against claims of inferiority. Part of the reason that African American women believed dress had the power to subvert racist ideologies that held African Americans as inferior and other, was because dress was seen as a marker of civilization.27 As race leader Booker T. Washington claimed, “[N]o white American ever thinks that any other race is wholly civilized until he wears the white man’s clothes.”28 At the same Ohio Federation of Colored Women’s meeting where Tayleur’s piece was read, members also read an essay by Margaret Murray Washington, wife of Booker T. Washington. The essay had appeared in Outlook as a counterpoint to Tayleur. Washington cited examples of African American progress, and like Tayleur described them in terms of fashion. According to Washington, “Our women are wide awake to the necessity of social culture, and no more pleasing feature is there to receive their friends in their best attire in tastefully furnished reception rooms.”29 She also noted that “Young negro woman are teaching hundreds of

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27 African American women argued that they were not innately inferior, but that their perceived inferiority was the result of circumstances that had been beyond their control. It was environment not biology that prohibited them from being good wives and mothers.
their sisters the same principles of dressmaking and millenary that were taught in the training schools of Pratt and Teachers' College.\textsuperscript{30}

Middle-class African American women's construction of a modern gender identity was in large part connected to issues of representation. According to Stuart Hall, "identities are about...the process of becoming rather than being; not 'who we are' or 'where we came from; so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation."\textsuperscript{31} For African Americans, how they represented themselves, was often rooted in what W.E.B. Du Bois termed as double consciousness, a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others."\textsuperscript{32}

In representations in the public sphere, African American women were not constructed as completely human, let alone feminine. As an example, the Plain Dealer published a story about a conductor who attempted to "collect fare from a chimpanzee." According to the report a man was transporting a chimp he was attempting to sell, which he had dressed in "a child's dress and hat." The chimp was mistaken for "a little colored girl" described as "an ordinary but very homely." The true identity of the "child" was uncovered when the conductor tried to collect a fare and was informed this was not the case.\textsuperscript{33} As the story suggests,

\begin{flushright}
30 Ibid., 274.
33 "Thought it was a girl," \textit{Plain Dealer}, 19 May 1890.
\end{flushright}
such depictions of African American females as animal-like stressed their physical unattractiveness.\textsuperscript{34}

Adhering to what has been termed the “politics of respectability,” which was the basis of racial uplift, African American women constructed a modern feminine identity. The “politics of respectability” was very much aligned with the modern cultural “ethic of self-control and autonomous achievement.”\textsuperscript{35} This identity embodied African women’s acceptance of middle-class values, rooted in Victorian ideals of the “cult of true womanhood” which included piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.\textsuperscript{36} Consumption was particularly important in representations of respectability. So despite the culture of consumption’s emphasis on self, which was seemingly diametrically opposed to the interest of racial uplift, African American women attempted to manage the potential conflict insisting that the self could be cultivated in the interest of elevating African American womanhood. Therefore, these women constructed their identities not in terms of individuality, but as representatives of the race.

\textit{Refashioning Respectability}

As indicated, dress was viewed as essential to shaping a woman’s public persona and the way in which she desired to be perceived by others. At the first annual convention of the Ohio Federation of the National Association of Afro-

\textsuperscript{34} Guy-Sheftall, \textit{Daughters of Sorrow}, 49.
American Women's clubs which was hosted in Cleveland, it was proclaimed, "The present duty of each colored woman is to prove herself worthy of respect, and she will receive it from all whose opinion is worth having, of whatever race."37 For these women, one's self-presentation, especially as it related to dress, was central to constructions of respectability. This was further highlighted by the fact that "[w]hen any nineteenth-century American woman ventured onto a public stage clothing was a necessary and evocative medium for her message."38 When women spoke in public just as much attention was paid to what they looked like as to what they said. Well-dressed women were even referred to as “smart,” suggesting that sartorial choices equated to intelligence. In 1890, a letter appeared in the Gazette discussing the graduating address delivered by Miss Anna Guy, the first African American to graduate from high school in Hardin County. Suggesting that dress and womanhood had much in common, the letter spent a considerable amount of time talking about what she wore before even mentioning the subject of her talk, “True Womanhood.”39

The culture of consumption maintained that ideals could be expressed materially. Outward appearances were not superficial, but a physical manifestation of inward character. In a statement that appeared in the Gazette culled from the Dallas Express, “Colored women” were urged to “stay off the

37 “Creates a Sensation,” Gazette, 4 January 1902.
39 “The First Graduate,” Gazette, 24 May 1890. Guy was described as being “beautifully dressed in a white cashmere, elaborately trimmed with surah silk.”
streets looking like you look in the back yard. Clothes do not make the woman, but they oftimes [sic] declare the woman." Dress was considered an indicator of class and morality because these attributes were believed to be materially discernible. Victorians "equate[d] material and moral progress." As Sarah Gordon writes, "One reason middle-class observers often portrayed poor women, both white and African-American, as morally slack was because their finances did not allow for suitable clothing." The notion that the body was an extension of the self not only resonated with European but African based ideology. According to African cosmology, the outward is a physical manifestation of the inner self. As such, "there is no difference between the body, its appearance, and the self."

In keeping with the "politics of respectability," African American middle-class women seeking to transform their public image strictly adhered to Victorian standards of dress, which was dependent on a variety of factors including style, neatness, cleanliness, but most importantly modesty. It was considered a woman's societal duty "to dress consistently and tastefully." Beginning in the late-Victorian era, middle-class African American women often modeled themselves after the Gibson Girl, the image of the modern woman. The Gibson

41 Lears, No Place of Grace, 12.
Girl was defined by her clothes — a shirt waist and skirt. As Elizabeth Wilson argues, when a woman purchased these items, she "brought a symbol of emancipation, glamour and success." Modesty has been defined as "a combination of bodily coverage, amount and type of jewelry, choice of colors, and other factors that constantly change to accommodate the boundaries of accepted taste." During the Victorian period, this was outlined as "appropriately conservative dress that was not loud or gaudy or excessively ornamented." This usually entailed the wearing of a "floor-length dress with fitted bodice, a full skirt, and long sleeves often trimmed with a ruffle or lace." Such style of dress allowed women to retain their femininity without being perceived as too seductive.

Modesty was central to perceptions of morality and so while dress was an acknowledged part of a women's attraction, it was also the cause of some anxiety. Immodest dress was sometimes linked to women inappropriately trying to attract the attention of men. In a comical piece entitled, "Vulgarity," a woman says to another woman, "It is vulgar to dress so as to attract attention on the street." She tells how she saw a woman "going down the street...in a gown which

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45 The Gibson Girl was created by illustrator Charles Dana Gibson and represented femininity in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods. Despite the emphasis on femininity, fashions were becoming more masculine. For instance, the shirt waist, the must have garment, was modeled after the men's shirt.
caused every man she passed to turn and look at her." The woman to whom she recounts the incident asks, "Sure enough? I wonder who is her dressmaker?" To which the women replies, "I asked her and she wouldn't tell me." However, a more serious article suggested that women's wearing of immodest clothing was not simply a matter of morality, but health and provided statistics that immodest dressing was the cause of ill health and women's shorter life expectancies.

The primacy of modesty in dress was made clear by the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), the nation's leading African American women's organization. The organization held sessions on subjects related to dress at its annual conventions. For example, one session was titled "Modesty in Manners and Dress." The NACW felt the need to address such concerns claiming, "Whereas, there is such a tendency for our young girls and women to follow the extremes of fashion and to so dress as to invite criticism upon their moral integrity, therefore be it resolved, we do all within our power to urge women to adopt a more sensible and more modest attire that will be indicative of true womanhood." The organization asked teachers, who were thought to have a great influence, to set an example, to "refrain from indulging in...extreme and extravagant display and finery."

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50 "Vulgarity," Gazette, 24 May 1912.
54 Ibid.
Appearances mattered at all times. When it was reported that "young ladies" in Lockland, Ohio masqueraded on Halloween wearing men's clothes, it was described as "a most disgraceful proceeding." Proper dress was even considered important for those accused of committing crimes. When Lizzie Ruthven was being tried for "receiving stolen property," particular attention was paid to her attire. It was reported that at her arraignment she "wore her fetching jet-trimmed velvet cape...Her [shirt] waist was of light green and her skirt of a darker shade of emerald. Her big black hat was on straight." However, while her ensemble was considered appropriate, there was some criticism implied as it was noted that she had worn the "same costume" while testifying in the case of her husband from whom she was charged of receiving the stolen goods. Ruthven may have had some conception that wearing the same outfit twice so publically was something of a fashion *faux pas*, as it seems she had not worn the exact same costume, choosing to substitute the sealskin jacket that she wore while testifying on her husband's behalf, for a cape. But in drawing attention to her limited wardrobe, the article also drew attention to her lower class position,

55 "In Men's Attire," *Gazette*, 10 November 1894.
56 *Gazette*, 12 January 1901.
57 It was reported that the Ruthven's (sometimes spelled Ruthebon) recovered stolen goods made a room in the police station resemble "the shipping room of a large department store." Among the goods allegedly stolen by Ruthven's husband were clothes, including a dress. Ruthven's husband who was charged with shooting a police officer to evade arrest was ultimately found guilty and executed. Lizzie was reported to have escaped from jail. See "Men Suspected is Still Free," *Plain Dealer*, 8 May 1900; "The Murderer of Patrolman Shipp," *Plain Dealer*, 13 May 1900; "Offer $1,000 For Shipp's Slayer," *Plain Dealer*, 9 May 1900; "Says Jewelry Was a Gift," *Plain Dealer*, 20 November 1900; and "Lizzie Ruthven Still at Liberty," *Gazette*, 8 February 1902.
58 "Says Jewelry was a Gift," *Plain Dealer*, 20 November 1900.
suggesting perhaps that her alleged criminal behavior was not a function of her race, but of her class.

Despite the belief that one's dress was a reflection of the inner self, the new culture's emphasis on performance detracted from notions of authenticity. Dress was also seen as artifice, with the ability to obscure class. Dress could also modify the body. Advertisements promoted "the body not as a static entity but as something manipulable [sic] and changeable; indeed, a central promise of commodity culture was then—as it is now—the power to transform and 'perfect' the body."59 For instance, the corset, which received considerable attention in fashion advice columns that appeared in Cleveland's African American newspapers, was declared as "the foundation of all good dressing."60 This was because corsets enabled women to achieve the "perfect figure" allowing them to alter their bodies to be compatible with current styles.61

The corset, "described as a 'quintessentially Victorian' garment, because of its role in creating and policing middle-class femininity," embodied the contradictions inherent in the emerging culture.62 As intimate apparel, the corset was both an invisible and visible garment that simultaneously concealed and revealed the feminine form. The corset's visibility was obscured by the fact that it was meant to be worn underneath other clothing. The visibility of the garment

59 Merish, Sentimental Materialism, 232.
60 "Of Interest to Women," Gazette, 27 January 1912.
61 M. Paquin, "The Perfect Figure in Women," Cleveland Journal, 19 September 1903. The article declared, "in nine cases out of ten a well-made dress is quite dependent on a well-made corset."
62 Valerie Steele, The Corset: A Cultural History (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 35. Steele argues that "corsets...functioned to prepare girls for certain social roles, including the necessity of conforming to contemporary standards of feminine beauty and propriety" (49).
was apparent in the way in which it reshaped a women’s body drawing attention to it, especially a woman’s bust, waist, stomach and hips. Moreover, the types of materials (i.e. silk and lace) used in its construction, which were costly when compared to other fabrics, were an indication that the garment was “intended for the view of others.”63 Thus, despite the fact that the corset was associated with notions of female chastity, it simultaneously sexualized the female body. However, any notions of impropriety that the garment implied were lessened by its rigidness, which affected the way a woman carried herself, causing her to appear “upright,” both physically and morally.64 According to Miller, “The iron cage of the corset create[d] a ‘touch-me-not’ aura of high morality and discipline.”65

Despite the inconsistencies of the emerging culture, the importance of dress within the black middle-class meant that there was constant pressure to keep up the fashion demands of the myriad of social activities: club meetings, teas, receptions, balls, and debuts (fig. 1). Participation in such events constructed them as members of genteel society and served as material and visual representation of black progress. The increasing social life of African American women was connected with the notion that traditional ideas of feminine domesticity were no longer considered satisfying. Women were encouraged to find outlets that relieved them from the monotony of “household duties and

64 Ibid., 137-140.
65 Ibid., 137.
Figure 1. Young Social Group in Charles Chesnutt Backyard on Old Brenton Street, 1901. Cleveland Press Collection, Cleveland State University.
cares." A women's column that appeared in the Cleveland Journal expressing the importance of club life advised "every Afro-American lady in Cleveland for her own betterment and self-culture and for the uplifting of our women en masse identify herself with some work outside of her home life." While exhorting the benefits of club membership, the article also warned that women must strike a balance between club life and home life, and that club activities should not be participated in at expense to their responsibilities at home.

Dress was an important part of middle-class social activities. Accounts that appeared in the newspapers often mentioned the dress of those in attendance. In a report of the City Federation of Women's Clubs Woman's Day program held at Mt. Zion Congregational Church, those who attended the event's evening service were described as "well dressed and intelligent." While women were expected to dress well for all occasions, even when being called upon at their residences, evening and formal attire usually received the most attention.

For instance, it was reported that at the Centennials ball, "The costumes of many

66 Bertha J. Blue, "Women, And Things of Interest to Them," Cleveland Journal, 4 July 1903. Blue, a local school teacher, while exhorting the benefits of club membership, also warned that women must strike a balance between club life and home life, and that club activities should not be participated in at expense to their responsibilities at home.
67 "Woman's Day," Cleveland Journal, 16 January 1904. As part of the evening program, women read papers including one on "Woman's Part in the Solution of the Race Problem" and the other on "The Responsibilities of Young Woman in the work of Uplifting." The papers discussed that an important facet of women's leadership was setting an example and that women were an important measure of the progress of the race.
68 According to etiquette, "It is important that a lady should always dress neatly at home. She is then ready to receive a morning caller without having to change her dress. She should change her dress in the evening...for it is in the evening that she...is most likely to have visitors." See Northrop, College of Life, 28.
of the ladies were very fine indeed.69 At the Eureka's Wheel Club ball, which featured a combination of full and evening dress, the women in attendance were described as being elegantly dressed.70 This type of attire was probably seen as deserving more attention because it required more preparation and planning. The announcement for the Cleveland Progressive Social Club's "full dress ball and banquet" informed readers that "the ladies have been for weeks securing their dresses for the occasion."71

It was in evening wear that the most egregious violations of "golden rule in dress," which was "to avoid extremes," occurred.72 A fashion advice column condemning overdressing located the tendency not so much in street wear but in evening wear which offered a greater variety of choices. The article claimed that the secret to dressing well was in "knowing what to leave off." According to the article, "If women digested this simple rule, there would be fewer grotesque human fashion plates to rouse a laugh."73 Because of the association of overdressing with evening wear (which due to costs was primarily viewed as a privilege of the middle-class) it was mainly a topic of concern for women belonging to this status. Overdressing was problematic because middle-class women believed that engaging in conspicuous consumption, should not make one conspicuous. It was also synonymous with excess which prominently figured in criticisms of consumption, as it contradicted the "self-control" which "had

69 Gazette, 20 April 1901.
71 Gazette, 2 April 1892.
72 Northrop, College of Life, 27.
73 "Art of Dressing Well," Gazette, 30 March 1912.
become the unquestioned norm for the middle and upper classes as well as for the rest of the society.Overdressing also had the potential to reify stereotypes of African Americans' inability to consume appropriately. While this class also avoided modes of dress that connected them to their heritage, often deeming it "backwards," distancing themselves from their past proved to be difficult.

Overdressing was characteristic of what African American anthropologist and writer, Zora Neale Hurston, described as the tendency to adorn the adornment, which she believed was characteristic of African American expression. African American women were also advised to avoid bright colors, as bright colors were thought to distinguish the dress of blacks from whites. According to an article that appeared in the *New York Times*, blacks "run more exaggerated styles and bright hues." Bright colors drew the gaze to the body in ways that were potentially problematic. As far as members of the black middle-class were concerned, drawing attention to the body in this manner was believed to "dissipate the high ideals of women." Red was especially to be avoided, because not only was it linked to blacks' enslaved past, but it was also associated with sexual desire and female eroticism. Women were instead urged to wear dark colors like black or

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76 Qtd. in White and White, *Stylin*', 234.
77 Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 200.
blue because they complemented any complexion and did not have any negative connotations with immorality.

For these women, "[t]here were few social sins more unforgivable than inappropriate attire." This included not only being overdressed, but underdressed. Improper dress was an indication that one did not belong. This was because, "[t]he problem of not wearing the correct attire became one with not knowing how to shop and not understanding how clothes had been transformed into a new symbol of middle-class life." Those invited to social affairs were advised to dress in keeping with the occasion or refuse to attend. Not being properly attired could result in public humiliation and embarrassment, as it could also result in being the victim of gossip and/or perhaps being ostracized from "polite society."

In terms of evening wear, despite the emphasis on "proper" dress, notions of modesty were a bit more relaxed as women were able to "don a low cut-gown, which might reveal a considerable portion of her 'neck.'" However, there was a fine line between appropriate and inappropriate dress. A comical piece that appeared in the Gazette entitled, "Decollete" satirized this point. The joke features a woman, who after reading the morning paper describing a social event that she and her husband attended the night before, asks her husband if he had

81 Gatewood, Aristocrats of Color, 203.
83 Carlson, "Black Ideals of Womanhood in the Late Victorian Era," 62.
seen a particular woman at the event. The husband replies, “Yes.” The wife then asked the husband to verify that the woman was as the paper described “entirely dressed in black.” To which the husband replies, “Well-er-no. I wouldn’t say she was dressed entirely.”

Women were cautioned against dressing too provocatively, as it potentially supported notions of African American women’s hypersexuality and threatened to undermine the respectability that African American middle-class women were working with such diligence to cultivate. Under the headline, “Art of Dressing Well,” readers were informed, “The too scant or too low-cut or too transparent gown is bad form, though many well born and bred women offend in this way.”

As the example of the décolleté indicates, while women’s modernity was constructed in terms of their adherence to the latest fashions, women were directed to reject certain forms of dress despite their popularity. Women were also urged not to wear the hobble skirt or the pull-back skirt, which gained popularity in the 1910s. The skirts were long form-fitting garments characterized by their tightness. The styles received criticism for impeding women’s movement in extreme ways, even making the simple task of walking difficult. The Gazette published an article reporting on a lecture given at a Dressmaker’s Association meeting in Chicago, in which the skirt was referred to as a “vulgar garment” and “immodest” because it “displayed a woman’s form too freely.” In case immodesty was not enough of an inducement for women to discontinue wearing the style,

64 “Decollete,” Gazette, 1 August 1908.
65 “Art of Dressing Well,” Gazette, 30 March 1912.

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Mme. Baker, president of the National Dressmaker’s Association, appealed to women’s desire to be fashionable and argued that the skirt was actually outmoded. According to Baker, the continued popularity of the skirt displayed the fashion backwardness of American women because no woman in Paris, the fashion capital of the world, “would think of wearing such a skirt.” Just in case readers did not understand the newspaper’s position on the fashion, in the same issue in another section, the following statement appeared, “Madam Baker is right—the pull back skirt women are wearing nowadays is disgustingly immodest and out to go.” To further get the point across, the hobble skirt was also fodder for jokes, which attributed women’s tardiness to the garment. In one joke, a woman wearing the garment is running late because she drops her purse on the streetcar and is unable to pick it up. While, the skirts were compatible with the restrictiveness that in many ways defined women’s fashion, they were deemed impractical, even dangerous. Moreover, the ways in which the garments restricted women’s physical activity, was seemingly an attack on women’s more public roles. In the 1910s, the hobble skirt was succeeded by the slashed skirt. The garment favored the long and slim silhouette that was popular, but was viewed as more “practical” because the slits in the skirt allowed for greater mobility. However, despite some early positive reception, the slashed skirt was...

86 "Pull-Back Skirt Immodest," Gazette, 4 October 1902.
87 Gazette, 4 October 1902. Madam Baker was the President of the National Dressmaker’s Association.
88 Gazette, 17 June 1911. Articles appeared in the paper debating whether the hobble skirt was an American or a Parisian invention. See "Hobble Skirt is American," Gazette, 10 September 1910 and "Hobble Skirt Joke," Gazette, 17 December 1910.
eventually considered “immodest” and “suggestive.” This was because the slash exposed a portion of a women’s leg when she was in motion, countering Victorian notions that “women should reveal little of themselves in the street.” The African American Woman’s Convention of the Baptist Church adopted this sentiment and urged women to avoid the slashed skirt along with the décolleté dress. They “perceived the more revealing styles as lowering man’s respect for woman and opening her to sexual advances,” and thus detracted from notions of respectability that were central to racial uplift.

Women were also advised that being well dressed was not just about following the latest fashion trends because the fashion industry was not “one size fits all.” Women were encouraged to dress according to age, marital status, body type, hair color, complexion, and occasion. For example, plus size women were advised to dress simply and avoid “gay colors, broken lines, big figures and shiny fabrics, huge hats and picture effects” as they did not flatter the larger woman. So as to not appear out of place, women were also reminded that fashions meant for metropolitan areas did not translate well to the “small town.”

Despite the importance of appearances, women were cautioned against putting too much emphasis on dressing well. At the Ohio Federation of the National Association of Afro-American Women’s Convention mentioned earlier, the sermon “Proper Dress for Woman” was delivered. The sermon suggested

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91 Schorman, *Selling Style*, 47.
92 Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 200
93 “Art of Dressing Well,” *Gazette*, 30 March 1912.
94 Ibid.
that "more attention should be given to adorning the soul than the body."95 Women who put dressing above their roles as mothers were considered "unworthy of the name of woman."96 Moreover, in keeping with traditional notions of thrift, women were encouraged not to make purchases beyond their means, as this implied style with no substance. When an unidentified woman asked author Charles Chesnutt, a member of the city's black elite, to loan her $300 for a fur coat because as she explained, "one needed to dress well, and a fur coat was a necessity to a well-dressed woman," he declined.97 His daughter, Helen, recalled that this was "not because he could not afford it, but he did not believe that a person should make purchases beyond their means." Citing his wife and daughters as examples, Chesnutt told her that many well-dressed women did not own fur coats. He then went on to lecture the woman, admonishing her "that buying clothing on time was very poor business; as a business woman she ought to know that." When the women left, she was supposedly "more satisfied with her economic status."98

95 "Woman's Day," Cleveland Journal, 16 January 1904. As part of the evening program, women read papers including one on "Woman's Part in the Solution of the Race Problem" and the other on "The Responsibilities of Young Woman in the work of Uplifting." The papers discussed that an important facet of women's leadership was setting an example and that women were an important measure of the progress of the race.
98 Chesnutt, Charles Waddell Chesnutt, 282-283.
Dressing for the Wedding

In 1904, the Chesnutts prepared for their daughter Ethel to wed Edward C. Williams, a librarian at Western Reserve University. During the summer, the Chesnutts abandoned their usual entertaining to focus on wedding planning. According to daughter Helen, “That summer was an unusually quiet one. There were no guests, for Susan needed all her time to prepare for Ethel’s wedding and prepare her outfit.”99 The couple was married in late November in a private ceremony that took place in the Chesnutts’ home.100 The wedding of Ethel Chesnutt also indicated the fact that “[f]ew if any events assumed greater significance in the social life of aristocrats of color than weddings.”101

Weddings were an important signifier of black middle-class status. Reports of nuptials attested to the participants’ social status and respectability. The bride was often described as the daughter of a prominent community member; however, it was also noted that the bride was also distinguished through her own accomplishments. This usually included making some reference to the bride’s popularity, personality, education, and work whether paid or unpaid. When Lavenia M. Bundy, the daughter of a minister married Dr. Elby C. Cox, a Cincinnati dentist, it was reported that she was “a most charming young lady.” It was also noted that the graduate of “Cleveland public schools and the Y.W.C.A. course” had worked in Sunday schools.102

99 Ibid., 184.
100 Gazette, 29 November 1904.
101 Gatewood, Aristocrats of Color, 209.
Like dress, marriage was considered an emblem of civilization and freedom.\textsuperscript{103} As such, marriage was seen as a viable solution to the race problem, especially as it related to expanding and strengthening the middle-class. According to duCille, "For many members of the black female intelligentsia of the 1890s, the institution of marriage was the calling card that announced the civility and democratic entitlement which they attempted to claim for themselves and the black masses they saw as their constituencies."\textsuperscript{104} This continued into the early twentieth century, as evidenced by the middle-class editorship of the Gazette suggesting that ministers working in conjunction with law enforcement should lead "a crusade against men and women living together without the formality of marriage."\textsuperscript{105}

Moreover, as a prerequisite to achieving the desired status of wife and mother, the wedding implied acceptance of traditional gender roles.\textsuperscript{106} Marriage, like dress, was considered the embodiment of women's adherence to Victorian models of behavior as it underscored African American women's domesticity and womanhood. While the white wedding did not become the norm until the 1950s, and despite the white wedding's emphasis on whiteness which has been viewed by some as symbolic of white superiority, it assumed special significance among


\textsuperscript{105} Gazette, 19 February 1910.

\textsuperscript{106} Tate, \textit{Domestic Allegories}, 91, 152.
the African American middle-class. This was in part due to middle-class women's obsession with Victorian mores. The white wedding which "elevated and idealized marriage" had been popularized by Queen Victoria herself. 107

The white wedding was not something entirely new to African Americans as it had been practiced to some extent even during their enslavement. When Tempie Herndon recalled her slave wedding, she recalled that she "had on a white dress, white shoes, and long white gloves." She also had worn a veil resourcefully made "out of a white net window curtain." As during slavery, the wedding ceremony continued to have the "vital function of lifting them out of their private relationship and reminding them that the bond between them also bound them to their community and entailed wider responsibilities."108 However, unlike slave marriages, the weddings of African Americans after the demise of slavery had a sanctity that denoted a permanency and legitimacy that had been lacking under slavery.110 Moreover, the white wedding symbolized the ability to control one's own sexuality. Not only was it reflective of the ability to choose sexual partners, but it was also predicated upon sexual purity and Christian morality.

107 Howard, Brides, Inc., 6 and 4. Howard argues that the rise of the white wedding in the 1950s was connected to "a new cult of marriage" that arose in response to post-World War II prosperity and return to traditional gender roles, which had been upset by the war. For discussion on the white wedding reinforcing notions of white superiority, see Cele C. Otenes and Elizabeth H. Pleck, Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 31.
109 Ibid., 461.
Thus, the white wedding undermined discourses of African American women as sexually promiscuous.

For African American women in Cleveland, the most immediate model for the white wedding was that of Reconstruction Senator Blanche K. Bruce and Josephine Willson Bruce in 1878, which for many years remained one of Cleveland’s most memorable African American weddings. In keeping with middle-class notions of restraint, the bride’s parents “agreed that the wedding should ‘make as little display as possible.’ The ceremony, therefore, was to take place at the Willson residence in the presence of a few intimate friends rather than a church with hundreds of guests.”\footnote{Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 5. The wedding was a private affair, so much so, the drapes had been closed to prevent onlookers.} The bride’s dress had been created by a New York designer. According to a description, “The bride was attired in a beautiful white silk cut dress in the princess style and trimmed in white satin. The dress was covered with satin orange blossoms, and the veil worn over the head reaching to the floor like a cloud.”\footnote{“The Marriage,” *Gazette*, 26 June 1878, quoted in Lawrence Otis Graham, *The Senator and the Socialite: The True Story of America’s First Black Dynasty* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2006), 95.} Josephine was part of Cleveland’s African American elite. The daughter of a dentist, Bruce was considered a “model” for other African American women because “she embodied the attributes of the ideal Victorian lady.”\footnote{Tate, *Domestic Allegories*, 60.}

When Mary Jefferson married Frederick Hall at the Antioch Church, she followed in the tradition, entering “the church to the strains of the wedding
march,” wearing “a white silk gown trimmed with orange blossoms.”114 Hattie B. Sampson married Dr. Ellis Andrews Dale before 400 guests wearing “a gown of white satin trimmed with valecinnnes [sic], with a veil of tulle fashioned with orange blossoms.”115 When Miss Eva May Sehon married she wore a “trained gown of white brocaded silk and carried white roses and maiden hair fern,” seemingly choosing to forgo the orange blossoms. However, while not including them in her own self-presentation she might have paid homage the custom, as she had her attendants wear trained dresses like herself, but theirs were of white and orange-colored silk.116

As the dress of Sehon’s attendants suggests, it was not unusual for bridesmaids also to wear white and/or dresses of a similar style, as the “custom of dressing bridesmaids in white gowns identical to the bride’s was still being recommended as late as 1911.”117 The practice was “supposedly to ward off evil spirits, confuse any potential kidnappers who might disrupt the ceremony, and also to rattle the groom when he came to marry his true love.”118 However, beginning in the late 19th century, the idea that the bride should be the focus and the best dressed woman on her special day was beginning to take hold. It was increasingly recommended in fashion advice columns that the bridesmaids’ costumes no longer replicate the bride’s. So when Della J. Sutton married

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114 Gazette, 4 January 1896.
115 Gazette, 10 October 1903.
116 Gazette, 3 December 1892. A subsequent report of the wedding described the bridesmaids’ attire much different. See Gazette, 31 December 1892.
117 Otnes and Pleck, Cinderella Dreams, 82.
118 Ibid., 82.
Charles E. Scott at her residence in 1892, it was appropriate that she and her bridesmaid went in opposite directions concerning their costumes. The bride wore a “dove-colored dress with flowers and the bridesmaid work a black dress with pink stripes and flowers.”\textsuperscript{119} In a description of an 1895 wedding, this trend continued when the bride wore “a white satin dress,” while her maid of honor opted for color wearing “a Nile green silk dress.”\textsuperscript{120} Not only did the bridesmaids no longer have to dress as the bride, but they did not have to dress alike among themselves. At the wedding of Wilhelmina Patterson and William C. Joyner, the three bridesmaids all wore different colors. The first wore a gown of “pale green China silk trimmed with chiffon.” The second “wore a dress of Pink China silk trimmed with white lace and ribbons.” The third “dressed in a corn-colored silk,” but like the second was “trimmed with lace and ribbons.” However, it seems they also adhered to older traditions, as the maid of honor and the flower girl wore white like the bride, the bridesmaid even wearing a veil.\textsuperscript{121}

Despite the growing popularity of the church weddings, the home weddings described above, illustrate that “marrying at home was still an acceptable, and in many cases a desirable choice.”\textsuperscript{122} This was because situated in the private sphere, the home wedding underscored the domesticity associated with marriage. Moreover, as a relatively understated event, the home wedding

\textsuperscript{119} “Sutton-Scott,” Gazette, 2 April 1892.
\textsuperscript{120} Gazette, 8 June 1895.
\textsuperscript{121} Gazette, 6 June 1896.
\textsuperscript{122} Howard, Brides, Inc., 14.
embodied notions of restraint that were essential to the middle-class notions of “mannered and sedate behavior.”

While the white wedding was not confined to the church, it seems that the church wedding was almost exclusively a white wedding during this period. In descriptions of church weddings that appeared in the newspaper, brides were almost always reported to have worn white and the gowns appear to have been more elaborate in this setting. For instance at the Sellars-Meares nuptials which took place at the Mt. Zion Congregational Church, "The bride was attired in a magnificent French organdie trimmed with brilliant and satin finish over white satin petticoat with white ostrich plumes tipped with pearls."

The white wedding was not a fait accomplis because not all brides chose to wear white to their nuptials. When Mary Ingels Thompson, former resident of Kentucky, married in Cleveland at her sister's home she chose "a dress of tan whipcord." Her choice of color would not have been offensive, as tan was not considered loud or gaudy and kept with the more subdued color palette that the African American middle-class had adopted. She kept pace with emerging wedding tradition in terms of flowers, carrying "a bouquet of bride roses and maiden hair fern."
Mock or Tom Thumb weddings were also popular during the period.\textsuperscript{126} These events were predominately hosted at churches (which was where actual weddings were increasingly taking place). The weddings were considered grand events, the Predestinarian [sic] Church’s mock wedding even required a stage manager.\textsuperscript{127} Mock weddings were usually performed by the young, sometimes small children.\textsuperscript{128} Children were the embodiment of human innocence and purity that were central to notions of the white wedding. However, there was some contradiction in this as “real” weddings were a precursor to the loss of innocence. After an actual wedding ceremony, it was expected that a couple would engage in sexual activity.

Fake weddings were not only entertaining, but were a celebration of the institution of marriage that allowed African Americans to “demonstrate its skill and familiarity with upper-class values” central to notions of respectability.\textsuperscript{129} They were also meant to be didactic, especially for the young, serving as a model for marriage. The mock bride and groom, like their real counterparts, were sometimes referred to as the “contracting parties,” emphasizing the fact that marriage was a legal union that came with certain obligations. Words like “train” were used to explain the process by which those involved prepared for the event.

\textsuperscript{126} The Tom Thumb wedding was named after the 1863 wedding of famous petite P.T. Barnum performer.
\textsuperscript{127} Gazette, 17 January 1903.
\textsuperscript{128} Adults also took part in these rituals. Shiloh Church’s Young Ladies Loyalty club put on its mock wedding, it featured members of the club who were classified as “grown-up.” A later report indicated that indeed the participants were adults, as the mock bride and at least three of the bridesmaids were purportedly married. See Gazette, 21 July 1902 and Gazette, 26 July 1902.
\textsuperscript{129} Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984),121.
As one African American etiquette book had suggested, "young persons should be encouraged to attend social gatherings...Only by actually doing this can one be prepared to do it perfectly." As a medium through which to impart the expectations of the marriage ritual, the mock wedding also included important fashion lessons. Participants played dress up, appearing in "full dress," wearing miniature replicas of wedding costumes. The female participants in the Young Ladies Loyalty club's mock wedding "dressed in white" with "white bows in their hair." Having the actors appropriately dressed for the occasion, indicated that particular occasions called for specific types of dress.

Even predominately male organizations hosted these events, as was the case when a boy's cadet drill corps included one along with its exhibition drill, which suggests that despite the construction of weddings as a largely feminine concern, males also recognized its importance, at least as entertainment. However, not everyone saw the value in the mock ceremonies. The Gazette reported how an AME minister in Buffalo, New York declared such events as "sacrilegious." The minister did not like the use of the sacred ritual used as entertainment and took special exception with the fact that the actual vows had been used as a part of the display. The minister probably found this problematic because these vows were seen as legally and spiritually binding.

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130 Northrop, College of Life, 54.
131 Gazette, 26 July 1902. The wedding was complete with reception. After the ceremony, "cake, ice cream and watermelon were served."
132 Gazette, 14 March 1914.
133 "Sued for $100," Gazette, 22 July 1893.
Dress mattered for the bride both before and after the wedding. Since dress was seen as a reflection of the inner self and contributed to a person's physical attractiveness, it was important factor in determining a person's marriageability. DuCille argues that "dressing the parts of woman/wife/mother is an essential aspect of the coupling process." In a fictional conversation, "Miss Gibson Girl" asks her "Dressmaker" when a dress she is having made will be completed. When she is told it will be "two weeks," she exclaims, "Heavens! In the meantime he may propose to someone else." Fashion advice columns also made the correlation between the two clear. In the early twentieth century when the shorter skirt was coming into fashion, an article advocating the acceptability of the garment read:

Today, when he marries, man seeks a companion for the hard tramp over the hills and dales of life, then let him cease from admiring the damsel who is a vision of beauty in cheap lace and turn his attention instead to the girl, who shows that she has learned the habits of economy and neatness, the girl who has probably paid for her gown with her hard-earned money, the girl with the short skirt.

Even author Charles Chesnutt addressed dress as a factor in determining a woman's suitability for marriage in his short story, "Wife of His Youth" (1898), a

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135 "Too Much Delay," Gazette, 21 December 1907.
136 "Woman's Sphere," Cleveland Journal, 1 December 1906.

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fictional account of the Cleveland Social Circle of which Chesnutt was a member. According to Chesnutt’s daughter Helen, the Cleveland Social Circle was a very exclusive organization—membership in it was the sine qua non of social standing. The men were business or professional men, or had good middle-class jobs. Most of the young women stayed at home and took lessons in music, embroidery, or elocution and helped their mothers with the housework. A few were employed as teachers, dressmakers, or milliners. As the fictional story indicates, appearances for this elitist organization were very important. It was not only class, but complexion that determined eligibility for membership. The club was considered a “blue vein” club, which required members to be light skinned. Such prerequisites for membership reinforced notions that African American mobility was based on how close African Americans approximated whiteness both physically and ideologically.

In the story, set after emancipation, Mr. Ryder (a.k.a Sam Taylor) a formerly enslaved man, is a symbol of black progress. Despite the fact that his complexion is not light enough, “his appearance was such to confer distinction upon them, which included being “always neatly dressed.” Ryder’s social aspirations are threatened when Eliza Jane, his estranged wife, locates him.

137 Chesnutt, Charles Waddell Chesnutt, 61. The club had been organized by Mary Morris, the daughter of a prominent African American tailor.  
138 “Rounder,” Gazette, 6 August 1938. It seems that Morris later had become a recluse.  
139 Charles W. Chesnutt, “The Wife of His Youth,” (1898) in The Northern Stories of Charles W. Chesnutt, ed. Charles Duncan (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004), 66. The story originally appeared in the Atlantic Monthly. The story takes its title from Malachi 2:14 in which the Hebrew people are admonished not to be disloyal. The story suggests that African Americans’ enslaved past was not something to hide from but to acknowledge even in one’s quest for social mobility.
During slavery, the couple had been married, but due to forces beyond their control, had become separated. Eliza Jane’s presence complicates Ryder’s plans to marry the young widow, Miss Molly Dixon, in whose honor he is throwing a ball. Ryder is forced to decide between the two women and ultimately chooses Eliza Jane, but only after her appearance is “transform[ed]...into something reassuringly bourgeois.”

When Eliza Jane first appears she is quite unfashionable. According to the story, “She looked like a bit of the old plantation life.” She is described as wearing “a blue calico gown of ancient cut, a little red shawl fastened around her shoulders with an old-fashioned brass brooch, and a large bonnet profusely ornamented with faded red and yellow artificial flowers.” However, when introduced at the ball Eliza Jane “was neatly dressed in gray, and wore the white cap of an elderly woman.” Since slave marriages were not considered legal, Ryder could have easily denied Eliza Jane; however, her altered appearance into the “dress and display” of his class, makes the couple’s reunification socially acceptable.

As the short story suggests, a stylish wardrobe was perceived as essential to not only getting, but keeping a husband. As one etiquette book advised, “No wife should betray that total indifference for her husband’s taste which is implied in the neglect of her appearance” In a joke, a woman named Henrietta says to

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141 Chesnutt, “The Wife of His Youth,” 69.
142 Ibid., 69.
143 Ibid., “The Wife of His Youth,” 75.
Mr. Meekton, “So you will agree that women have greater powers of persuasion than men.” Mr. Meekton replies to her in the affirmative arguing, “No man could go out and buy five or six hundred dollars worth of silk hats and suits of clothes and satisfy his wife with the explanation that he wanted to make himself more attractive in her eyes.” As such, the trousseau assumed great importance in the wedding preparations for the bride to be. A fashion advice column in the Gazette told its readers, “Choosing gowns and accessories that comprise a fashionable trousseau is no slight task.” The trousseau was supposed to consist of “the bride’s attire to last her for the first few years of her wedded life.” Due to the nature of fashion, which was constantly changing, women were directed to be conservative in their purchasing of items for their trousseaus, so that the items would not become outdated before they had the chance to be worn. Putting together a trousseau could also be an expensive undertaking, which countered notions of thrift. However, the newspaper noted that with the growth of the ready-to-wear industry the trousseau was becoming less expensive, as it was possible for women to create one for as little as 75 dollars.

Weddings both real and fake provided orientation to the culture of consumption. The wedding’s growing focus on consumption was further

145 “Couldn’t be Done,” Gazette, 30 November 1912.
146 Sarah Davidson, “Some Garments that are Designed for June Bride,” Gazette, 4 May 1901.
147 Northrop, The College Life, 63.
148 “A Bride’s Trousseau for $75,” Gazette, 19 April 1902.
evidenced in gift giving.\textsuperscript{149} Gifts were expected to be exchanged between the bride and groom. It was customary for a groom to give his bride jewelry. In the early 1900s, this practice was captured in the ring ceremony. At their 1903 June wedding, it was reported that a Mr. Timothy Pullen "presented" his bride with "a beautiful ring."\textsuperscript{150} Gifts were also exchanged between the bride and her bridesmaids, as well as between the groom and groomsmen. Wedding presents were also an important part of the ritual. According to etiquette, it was "customary...to make an exhibition of the presents the day before, or the day of the wedding."\textsuperscript{151} The gifts were also referred to in newspaper reports of nuptials. Sometimes this entailed printing a detailed list of the items along with the names from whom the gifts had been received. In other instances, it was simply reported that the couple received "costly" gifts for which they expressed their appreciation.\textsuperscript{152} According to the report of one wedding, "The presents received filled one big room and are noted for their variety in beauty and usefulness."\textsuperscript{153}

For African Americans, the emphasis on materialism and display that defined the customs surrounding marriage cannot be reduced to simple crass conspicuous consumption. As Tate argues in her study of the construction of domesticity in post-Reconstruction African American literature, the white wedding was "more the affirmation of the characters' attainment of middle-class status,

\textsuperscript{149} Howard argues, "The commercialization of American weddings began with the rise of the wedding gift tradition" (15). For more on wedding gift giving, see Howard, \textit{Brides, Inc.}, 15-21.

\textsuperscript{150} "June Weddings," \textit{Cleveland Journal}, 4 July 1903.

\textsuperscript{151} Northrop, \textit{The College Life}, 63.

\textsuperscript{152} "June Weddings," \textit{Cleveland Journal}, 4 July 1903.

\textsuperscript{153} "A Brilliant Wedding," \textit{Cleveland Journal}, 3 October 1903.
values, and economic security than a gratuitous display of wealth.”\textsuperscript{154} While the wedding held special significance for African Americans who hoped such displays would help transform their second class status, this was also part of a larger trend in American society: “Increasingly, nineteenth-century couples who planned a white wedding or were given expensive gifts were not only expressing their socioeconomic status but also declaring their allegiance—and that of their community—to the sentimental sensibility and genteel lifestyle that marked the middle-class.”\textsuperscript{155} This orientation was especially important for the bride for whom consumption, as one of her primary domestic responsibilities, would become an important part of her everyday life. Moreover, the linking of marriage with consumption indicated that the two had much in common, like marriage, women were socialized to seek fulfillment through consumption.

Despite the wedding’s growing emphasis on conspicuous consumption, older values concerning thrift had not completely eroded. In the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, “weddings did not revolve around the singular display of goods and special once-in-a life time consumption.”\textsuperscript{156} This was indicated in the fact that “middle-class women often married in practical ensembles that they might wear again for any number of special occasions rather than in gowns specifically designed for a wedding only.”\textsuperscript{157} Even the wearing of the white wedding dress only once had not...

\textsuperscript{154} Tate, \textit{Domestic Allegories}, 126.


\textsuperscript{156} Howard, \textit{Brides, Inc.}, 2.

yet become custom. The Gazette reported that race woman Mary Church Terrell had “wore her wedding dress of white faille” at a reception given in her honor in Boston in November of 1891. Her dress seemed quite fashionable as the hostess wore a dress of cream faille and the co-hostess of white silk. The ladies’ wearing of white in November also suggests that the practice of not wearing white after a certain date had not yet become etiquette, which like the white wedding itself suggests that traditions are not inevitable, but are just as much about invention as they are about retention.

Shopping for Respectability

When Josephine Willson Bruce was putting together her trousseau, she did not find Cleveland stores suitable for supplying a wardrobe benefitting her new life as the wife of a U.S. Senator, instead opting to travel to New York to shop at Saks and Company. In the 1870s, department stores largely did not yet exist in Cleveland, nor did the dry goods stores that would transform themselves into city’s great department stores. Euclid Avenue was still predominately a residential neighborhood and had not yet become the city’s major shopping thoroughfare. However, by the 1890s, the wife of President McKinley was able to purchase clothes in the city benefitting her status as first

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158 Howard, Brides, Inc., 2.
159 “Doings of the Race,” Gazette, 21 November 1891.
lady, as she appeared in Washington wearing "a blue serge dress and seals skin coat purchased at Halle's," which would become one of the city's foremost department stores. In just a little over a decade, Cleveland had become a much different place for consumers. In the late nineteenth century, many of Cleveland's major department stores were becoming well established. Department stores were "palaces of consumption," and were the "embodiment of urban bourgeois respectability." The start of the decade also saw the completion of the Cleveland Arcade also known as the "Crystal Palace," the precursor to the modern indoor mall. Opened on Memorial Day 1890, the arcade was a spectacle of glass and light. Located between Euclid and Superior Avenues, the arcade was referred to as a "complete town" because its merchants "represent[ed] nearly all branches of trade found in the city."

The increased consumer opportunities in downtown reflected the fact that a modern urban identity was constructed in terms of engagement with the culture of consumption. Shopping, which was increasingly becoming part of women's daily life was constructed as a major form of feminine recreation and leisure. Spaces associated with shopping, like other entertainment spaces were "sites for

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164 "A Complete Town," *Plain Dealer*, 11 April 1890.
socializing, self-display, and consumption.\footnote{Shelley Stamp, Movie Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 196. This quote is specifically referring to movie theaters, but it applies to other entertainment sites, such as those associated with shopping.} It also represented new opportunities for women to engage in public life.\footnote{Benson, Counter Cultures, 4.}

An article that appeared in the Gazette attested to the feminization of shopping, suggesting “Bucket shopping is about the only kind men indulge in.”\footnote{“Pointed Paragraphs. Some Short Sentences Containing Truths Which We All Recognize,” Gazette, 19 November 1898.} Shopping had become so popular among women that it was a major subject of jokes in the Gazette. In one joke a “new clerk” at a department store suggests a scheme to charge admission to bargain sales.\footnote{“Pith and Point,” Gazette, 30 November 1901.} In another titled, “Heavenly Shopping,” a women tells her husband that she had a dream in which heaven was “an immense dry good store” where she “didn’t have to do anything but shop.” The woman is especially excited about the bargain counter where goods were cheaper than in the real world. The joke is that despite the women’s excitement over the discounted items, they represented no real savings as they were only a few cents cheaper.\footnote{“Heavenly Shopping,” Gazette, 2 May 1896.} Heavenly Shopping” also pointed to the fact that even heaven had been co-opted by the new culture, becoming a consumer paradise. Women were proselytized that they could be content with a certain amount of earthly consumer deprivation as they would reap their rewards in heaven.\footnote{Susan J. Matt, Keeping Up With the Joneses: Envy in American Consumer Society, 1890-1930 (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 32.}
Despite being a fact of life, shopping was still considered newsworthy as it was not unusual for the newspaper to contain reports of women's shopping activities, even reporting when women came from nearby towns like Painesville to do their shopping in Cleveland. Shopping downtown, especially at department stores, symbolized convenience in terms of location, service, and variety of goods offered.

Women were encouraged to spend considerable time shopping. Browsing, lingering, touching, and wandering were important aspects of the shopping ritual.\(^{171}\) Another joke underscored this fact through a conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Trott. Mr. Trott asks his wife, “Well, my dear, did you enjoy your shopping trip today?” Mrs. Trott replies, “No, I didn’t. I found exactly what I wanted in the very first store I entered.”\(^{172}\) The very nature of consumer culture helped to reconfigure female desire and legitimated female’s ability to look. “Pleasure” rather than “necessity” was supposed to be the drawing force behind shopping.\(^{173}\) Part of the lure of shopping was that women were not obligated to buy but instead could experience the department store through browsing. Women were encouraged to loiter in these spaces, as just looking was thought “to stimulate new and underdeveloped desires” essential to the profitability and sustainability of the emerging culture.\(^{174}\)

\(^{172}\) “Spoiled Her Pleasures,” Advocate, 25 September 1915.
\(^{174}\) Leach, Land of Desire, 277.
The construction of shopping as a socially acceptable feminine leisure activity also meant that women were expected to dress in a particular way when engaging in the activity. Shopping was not just about purchasing, but about seeing and being seen as "department stores" were "legitimate arenas for women's performance." Advice columns indicated whether a specific fashion was appropriate for wearing while shopping. According to one column, there were even skirts specifically designed for shopping. This reflected the specialization of clothes that occurred in the late 19th century as women's activities outside the home increased. This specialization expanded the expectations of what was considered appropriated dress. Clothes were no longer just dictated by time of day, but discrete activities. Pointing towards this new demand of fashion, one article pondered that the "calling costume is often such a contrast to the shopping costume one wonders how women [will] survive the sudden change." 

While shopping afforded women new opportunities, it also represented new dangers, countering notions of consumer spaces as safe. Consumer culture gave women more freedom, as shopping permitted women to go in public unescorted. The Gazette questioned the respectability of the Arcade, warning women to be careful there, as it was "getting to be a rendezvous as well as a

parade ground for disreputable women and fast men.” More than the fear of illicit sexual activity, these warnings underscored the association of consumption with unregulated modern life which opened up possibilities for behavior that contradicted traditional notions of femininity. Women’s vulnerability had often been constructed in terms of going out in public. However, participation in consumer culture seemed to counter notions of female dependence. Women empowered by their new roles, were more assertive, challenging ideas of female submissiveness and helplessness. A piece titled, “The Weaker Sex” put the emerging culture’s ability to challenge traditional notions of femininity into view, questioning the idea that women needed a man’s protection. A woman experiences a “busy day” in which “[s]he had browbeaten 14 salespeople, bullyragged a floorwalker, argued victoriously with a milliner, laid down the law to a modiste, nipped in the bud a taxi chauffeur’s attempt to overcharge her, made a street cart conductor stop in the middle of the block for her…and otherwise refused to allow herself to be imposed upon.”

There were also anxieties about consumer culture’s erosion of class and racial boundaries. Women of different classes and races shopping alongside each other indicated an equality that some considered problematic. The Gazette republished a Washington Post article that reported that “at a department store bargain counter…[w]omen squeezed and elbowed and shoved.” The article describes women competing for the bargains going head to head when they

178 “Our Man About Town,” Gazette, 31 January 1891.
“happened to pick up the same bargain at one and the same time.” As case in point, the article distinguished the class of two women by what they wore: a “haughty matron with an electric seal coat” and a “humble-looking little woman in a faded tan coat.” The two women both grabbed a box of “imported soap” at the same time and refused to lessen their grasp until the woman in the “faded tan coat” relented. According to the article, “The humble-looking little woman held on for a minute, studying her antagonist, then she slowly relaxed her hold on the box” saying to the woman in the electric seal coat, “Well, you can have it...You look as if you need the soap.” The “humble-looking” woman’s ability to not only hold her own, but insult the cleanliness of a woman who was considered her social superior, was indicative of consumer’s culture ability to disrupt the social order and weaken class boundaries. White middle and upper class women found the ability of their social inferiors to act on an equal plane, an affront to their social position.

Shopping challenged notions of racially segregated social life. Department stores opened up possibilities for interracial contact in ways that perceived to threaten the social order. This was highlighted in popular culture in such films as Mixed Babies (1908) where racial mixing literally occurs while women shop. The writer of the film was D.W. Griffith who was in large part responsible for the controversial film Birth of a Nation (1915, D.W. Griffith Productions), a film that also deals with white anxiety about racial mixing.

180 “Needed the Soap,” Gazette, 27 January 1900.
181 The writer of the film was D.W. Griffith who was in large part responsible for the controversial film Birth of a Nation (1915, D.W. Griffith Productions), a film that also deals with white anxiety about racial mixing.
shopper are switched while the women take advantage of a bargain sale in a department store.

The film suggests the disorder of modern life. Stewart argues, “Many baby-switching films demonstrate that both traditional racial and gender roles are changing in ways that threaten the stability of the white family and, by extension, the social order.” In the film, the women more interested in shopping neglect their roles as mothers, relying on the child care services provided by the department store to watch their infants. The film also demonstrates what happens when black women have access to the same privileges as their white counterparts. This is shown not only in the mixing up of the babies, but in the mere presence of the black female shopper who displays “extreme confidence”. She “aggressively” competes with the white shoppers to get the best bargains. At one point in the film, she even becomes enmeshed in an argument with a white shopper in which a store manager must intercede. Despite her ability to “hold her own” in this space, as the only black shopper present, she appears as an anomaly and therefore does not seem to belong.

Racially exclusionary practices worked against the new identities African American women created. This was because, “While blacks in nineteenth-century Cleveland had been generally integrated into Cleveland society, by the turn of the century racial discrimination became more conspicuous.”

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183 Ibid.
184 Miller and Wheeler, *Cleveland*, 106.
counter rising discrimination, the Ohio Civil Rights Law of 1894 was enacted. The law prohibited discrimination in public places, strengthening the Public Accommodation Law of 1884, mandating harsher penalties for those found in violation of law.185

The culture of consumption was in many ways about the construction of consumer space as white space and thus the marginalization of people of African descent. It is argued, "The expansion of consumer culture both drew the region into the nation and played an essential role in the re-creation of racial identities between 1890 and 1940. The construction of department stores as white space, countered the idea that they were "relatively democratic institutions" that "guaranteed the same reception and treatment for all."186 Department stores promoted not only style, but service as a way of capturing consumers.187 These "non-selling services" were important attraction to female consumers because they epitomized the comfort that had come to be expected in modern culture.188 However, African American women might be allowed to purchase style, but they did not receive the same level of customer service as their white counterparts. Some stores limited service to the act of purchase and did not permit African Americans to try on different articles. African Americans were also denied or

185 Passage of the law was led by Harry C. Smith, editor of the Gazette, when he was serving in the state legislature. The 1894 law increased fines and jail time for violators. Despite instances of discrimination Cleveland still prided itself on its lack of racism. A later article read, "The Citizens of Cleveland of all classes may congratulate themselves on the fact that racial prejudices exist in much less degree in Cleveland than it does in the majority of our large cities of the north and west." See "Racial Prejudice in Cleveland," Cleveland Journal, 13 June 1903.
186 Benson, Counter Cultures, 89.
187 See Leach, Land of Desire and Service and Style: How the American Department Store Fashioned the Middle-Class (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2006)
188 Benson, Counter Cultures, 18, 83-84 and Lears, No Place of Grace, 11.
received poor service when attempting to patronize department store restaurants, which was part of the shopping experience.

In 1908, Harry C. Smith, editor of the Gazette wrote to department stores regarding a recent complaint he had received. A woman described as “a most estimable lady” was served coffee and ice cream that was made inedible by the addition of salt. Smith also noted that in other cases African American customers had been “forced...to wait until all others were accommodated.” Smith highlighted that the African Americans were undeserving of this discriminatory treatment because they were respectable. He wrote: “[I]n many cases those thus insulted are infinitely the superiors in every way to the poor, misguided and prejudiced servants—employees.” In response, the stores denied discriminatory policies and assured Smith that their establishments did not condone poor treatment of African American customers and offered in their defense the fact that they employed a number of African Americans in varying capacities.189

According to the “politics of respectability,” access to consumer culture was something to be earned. Therefore, African American women had to prove themselves worthy of participation. A local column advised African American women, “When we go shopping, let us be particularly careful about our conduct in every way, on the street cars, on the street, and in the stores. It seems as though our actions are more noticeable than those of other races and we must do nothing that will make a bad impression. We must be neat in dress, polite and

189 Gazette, 7 February 1903.
pleasant in our speech, and personify the golden rule."190 African Americans were directed to avoid loudness in all its varieties including talking, laughing and dressing, especially in public places as this brought unwanted attention that reflected negatively on the race. In the same article that warned women of the potential dangers awaiting them at the arcade, women were also warned, "If you desire respect and good treatment from respectable people, you must conduct yourself as a lady in or out of the Arcade, on the street or at home."191

African Americans responded to discrimination by shopping at the stores that gave them the best treatment. African American newspapers directed readers to shop at stores that valued their patronage. Newspapers encouraged readers to patronize retailers that advertised within their pages: "Our advertisers want your trade and ask for it through the columns of the Gazette. Patronize them in preference to others when you can, because they will treat you as well if not better than those who do not thus invite you to trade with them; because their prices are as reasonable as others and their goods better, and because they patronize a race enterprise."192 The Cleveland Journal, featured a column entitled, "Where to Trade," which listed white businesses "whom we know will appreciate the patronage of our race." The two department stores that received the most mention were the May Company and Bailey's, which were located right

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190 "Women, And Things of Interest to Them," Cleveland Journal, 28 March 1903.
192 Gazette, 7 March 1908.
next to each other for most of their existence. The two stores also frequently advertised in the city's African American newspapers.

The May Company opened its doors in Cleveland in 1899 and came to be known as "Ohio's largest Department Store." The store succeeded the E.R. Hull & Dutton Co., which had been established in 1890 and was one of the city's "leading clothiers." Both the May Company and its predecessor were commended for their treatment of African Americans as both patrons and employees. The Hull & Dutton Co. even made news for its hiring of African Americans as clerks. In 1895, the Gazette announced, "Effie Nichols is now employed as a clerk...in the cloak department." The store also employed an African American salesman. The hiring of African Americans was a good indicator of a store's desire for African American patronage because generally stores "match[ed] their selling staffs to their desired clientele." The editor of the Gazette, echoed this sentiment when he wrote that the best way for stores to show that they respected African American customers and did not discriminate, was to hire African Americans as clerks. The store might have been more receptive to African Americans because it had not yet become a palace of consumption, and was still considered a "bargain store." Its "harsh lighting,

193 Gazette, 5 January 1895.
194 Benson, Counter Cultures, 209.
195 "It is Not So, They Say!," Gazette, 20 June 1908.
scuffed floors, and aisle tables," did not conform to the image of the department store as a place of comfort and luxury.  

Bailey’s, referred to as the “Big Store,” frequently advertised in the city’s African American newspapers. Advertisements in the Gazette encouraged readers to “patronize the Bailey Co.” not only for their prices or selection, but “for their considerate treatment of their patrons regardless of class or color.” An advertisement that appeared in The Cleveland Journal referred to Bailey’s as “the home store of the colored people.” Bailey’s choice to highlight its non-discriminatory practices was not merely an advertising ploy. When a female employee at the store’s soda fountain did not give an African American woman “proper service,” the employee was dismissed on the spot. The manager then turned to the remaining employees informing them, “I want you girls to understand that the Bailey Co, caters to all well-behaved people, and all, regardless of race or color, must be properly treated. There is no such thing as a color-line in this store anywhere. If there are any more complaints from this department, I will clean out the entire force.”

In addition to welcoming African American shoppers, the store also gave “Merchant Red Trading Stamps” free with purchases. Customers received a

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196 Jan Whitaker, Service and Style: How the American Department Store Fashioned the Middle Class (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2006), 33. For more on the importance of opulence and the rise of the department store, see Benson, Counter Cultures and Leach, Land of Desire.
197 Advertisement, Gazette, 11 January 1902.
198 In an article that appeared in the Cleveland Journal, one of the reasons that Bailey’s could be considered “a cosmopolitan institution” was because of its “catering alike...to both the classes and the masses, regardless of race, color or creed.” The other reason was the vast array of merchandise that had been “secured by the best judgment of expert merchandise buyers.” See “Serving the Wants of the Public,” Cleveland Journal, 28 May 1904.
199 Gazette, 26 August 1911.
single stamp for every ten cents they spent at the store. The stamps could be collected in a special book given away free of purchase and later be redeemed for merchandise. The stamps operated as a customer loyalty program. The store made their intentions clear in an advertisement explaining the aim of the program: ‘[t]o induce our customers to concentrate all their shopping at this great store.’ As further inducement, the store gave customers a hundred stamps to start their book and offered double stamps on purchases made on Saturday mornings. In conjunction with the stamp program, the store also advertised “better goods for less money or the same goods for less money than any other store in Cleveland.”

In 1911, the store offered a promotion through which customers’ purchases could have philanthropic possibilities. The store was donating $5000 to “churches and charitable institutions, and every “purchase of 10 cents” entitled customers to cast their vote for the organization of their choice. African American organizations were not excluded from the promotion. Included among the list of eligible organizations were two of the city’s AME Churches. The Gazette told its readers, “We should patronize Bailey’s, and vote for one of these churches as we may have as large a share as possible in this gift.” The store’s willingness to make charitable contribution to these religious organizations showed that the store’s community relations efforts extended to the African American community.

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200 Cleveland Journal, 4 June 1904.
201 Advertisement, Cleveland Journal, 4 June 1904.
202 Gazette, 14 November 1911.
Fundraising efforts such as this were part of the store’s larger program of civic responsibility. Stores tried to convince customers that they were not just concerned with turning a profit, but that they cared about the welfare of the communities that they served.203

The store also encouraged the loyalty of its African American customers by being one of the few establishments not to use the term “nigger” in its advertising. Cleveland department stores used the derogatory term “nigger brown” to describe the color of merchandise in the Plain Dealer. Even the May Company used the term. In 1913, the Gazette brought attention to the “insulting” advertising. The newspaper was of the opinion that the Cleveland’s Federation of Women’s Clubs should take the lead in this matter and go directly to the management of the offending department stores. The newspaper believed that African American women’s patronage of the store was significant enough that the stores would immediately abandon such advertising.204 There is no evidence that the Federation did anything to address the matter and if they did, it did not result in any changes. A year later, May Company advertisements still used the disparaging term and again the Gazette focused attention on the situation, calling for the involvement of the Federation. The newspaper was insistent that the Federation take “immediate committee action,” believing that as the primary consumers, women should “take the lead.” If such efforts proved unsuccessful,

203 Whitaker, Service and Style, 154 and Leach, Land of Desire, 122 and138.  
204 Gazette, 27 September 1913.
the Gazette called for African Americans "to immediately discontinue their patronage" of the department store.\textsuperscript{205}

Thus while affording new opportunities, consumer culture "enact[ed] anew old inequities or oppression."\textsuperscript{206} Advertising was one of the primary ways in which companies interacted with their customers before they entered an establishment or purchased a certain product. However, the use of the term nigger in reference to products or other racially demeaning advertisements, suggested that companies did not consider African American consumers.\textsuperscript{207} This was because African Americans were not considered a viable consumer market; therefore most companies, especially those that did not create products designed specifically for use by African Americans, did not worry about how their advertisements would be perceived by blacks. Advertising created an increasingly national market in part through the circulation of black imagery that figured the implied consumer as white."\textsuperscript{208} To do this, advertising drew upon "racist conceptions to insist on the grotesque impossibility of black consumerism."\textsuperscript{209}

As a result, the idea "that women were innately suited to consumption," did not extend to African American women.\textsuperscript{210} As previously discussed, African

\textsuperscript{205} "Cleveland Sixth City," Gazette, 28 November 1914.
\textsuperscript{206} McGovern, Sold American, 20.
\textsuperscript{208} Hale, Making Whiteness, 125.
\textsuperscript{210} McGovern, Sold American, 41.
American women were the antithesis of the ideal consumer. African American women's participation in consumer culture meant confronting and resisting racist, unflattering, and demeaning images of African American womanhood. In order to maintain African American subordination, early advertisements in the dominant culture depicted people of African descent as producers rather than consumers and as objects to be consumed not as subjects doing the consumption (i.e. Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, Gold Dust Twins). When blacks were depicted as consumers they are problematic figures, marked by their inability to consume “appropriately” or seen as subversive figures that represent the anxieties concerning the anonymity of modern life and consumer culture’s ability to destabilize class and racial hierarchies.211 While the fashion industry was seen as a homogenizing force, it could not “obliterate” race where complexions did not allow.212 So while advertisements suggested that blacks could be “whitened,” if not in skin color, certainly in terms of appearance," they also suggested that no amount of consumption could assimilate African Americans.213 As such, African American dress was targeted for elegance as much as for poverty.

This was depicted in constructions of the well-dressed black woman whose ability to access consumer goods served as a symbol of black upward mobility and was therefore threatening in a world that was based on black

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211 Dress actually had the ability to subvert the anonymity of city life because it "could act as display or mask or both [emphasis author's]." See Wilson, Adorned in Dreams, 156.
212 For dress as a homogenizing force that could collapse differences between people, especially ethnic groups, see Jenna Weissmann Joselit, Perfect Fit Clothes, Character, and the Promise of America (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, 2001) and Kidwell and Christman, Suiting Everyone.
inferiority. Her presence also played on anxieties surrounding miscegenation. Advertisements downplayed her threat by making her a subject of parody. Advertisements grossly caricatured African Americans’ physical appearance, constructing it as a sign of their innate inferiority. Advertisements suggested that the African American woman wearing the markers of gentility (i.e. gloves, veils, and parasols) could only momentarily fool onlookers, as she is betrayed by her “skin color and facial features,” which are constructed as unattractive. In deeming the well-dressed black woman as a poor imitation, advertising coded both fashion and female desirability as white privilege.

This same theme is also apparent in early film, in which unbeknownst, a white man makes advances towards a well-dressed black women becoming shocked and disgusted when he becomes aware of his potential paramour’s true racial identity. In the film Matrimony's Speed Limit (1913, Solax Film Company) directed by pioneer female filmmaker Alice Guy-Blaché, a man (white) is tricked into believing that he must marry by noon in order to collect an inheritance. The man proposes to random women he encounters on the street. One of the women he proposes to is a well-dressed woman wearing a veil and gloves. The woman receptive to his proposal raises her veil revealing that

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215 See Jacqueline Bobo, Black Women as Cultural Readers (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995); Lauren Rabinovitz, “Past Imperfect: Feminism and Social Histories of Silent Film, Cinémas 16 (2005): 21-34; and Stewart, Migrating to the Movies.
216 America's First Women Filmmakers, Videorecording, directed by Alice Guy-Blaché and Lois Weber (New York, NY: Unapix Consumer Products, 1995). While there are many examples of these sorts of films, Matrimony's Speed Limit was chosen because of its focus on marriage which is an important focus of this chapter. Also, the director, Guy-Blaché, actually lived in Cleveland for a short time while her husband was employed by Gaumont, a film company. See Alison McMahon, Alice Guy-Blaché Lost Visionary of the Cinema (New York, NY: Continuum, 2002), 70.
she is black. The man, while desperate to marry, is unwilling to accept her as his mate and runs away. The film suggests that no amount of clothing can confer on blacks the respectability necessary to make them socially acceptable, especially as marriage partners for whites. The woman’s apparent willingness to accept the proposal pokes fun at African American women’s desire to achieve respectability through marriage and their sexual availability.217

Critiques and parodies of African American sartorial expressions in advertising and film represented a simultaneous recognition and rejection of African Americans’ attempts to use consumption to rearticulate their racial identities and demand for equal treatment. African American women were limited in their ability to use dress to reform their public image. Dominant culture attempted to suppress and control the meanings such displays suggested. This underscores the idea that while dress is seen as a site of agency, this agency is limited by the fact that viewers also bring meaning to the display that can contradict with the intentions of the wearer. The racist imagery in advertisements attempted to make black progress innocuous, downplaying the threat it posed to white supremacy. In a society that was increasingly defining citizenship in terms of consumption, advertising excluded African Americans from a national identity. African Americans unfitness for consumption was an example of their unfitness

for citizenship. This justified the rising tide of racism and black
disenfranchisement that was taking place in the late 19th century.

First and foremost, African Americans were urged to patronize race
enterprises whenever possible. This was not only the best way to avoid
discrimination, but it economically benefitted the community. African Americans
often found it difficult to find employment in white-owned stores. Even stores that
were well regarded for their treatment increasingly discriminated against them in
terms of employment, in the early twentieth century. When defending themselves
against charges of discrimination, department stores cited that they employed
African Americans. However, stores tended to restrict black employment to
positions in which they did not interact with customers, so it became increasingly
rare that they knowingly hired African Americans in clerk positions. In fact, in
1903 when Bailey’s dismissed Miss Josie Adams from her position as a clerk, the
action was attributed to racial prejudice. In another instance, even after being
invited to apply for employment at May Company, the daughter of H.J. Embry, a
respected Cleveland citizen, was rejected reportedly because of “her color and
race.” One of the reasons that stores did not want to employ blacks in
prominent positions because they feared it would increase black patronage to
such a degree that the stores would lose their appeal among white customers.

218 Gazette, 7 February 1903. In 1913, Bailey’s compared to other retail stores employed more
African American men. It also employed Norman Talbot who eventually became a share holder in
the company. See “Cleveland Sixth City,” Gazette, 21 June 1913.
219 Gazette, 24 March 1906.
220 Whitaker, Service and Style, 171.
Racing the Fashion Industry

African Americans realized the potential of African American dress related consumption and began their own entrepreneurial endeavors. In 1904, the Cleveland Gazette claimed, “During the last two years business among our people of this city has been steadily growing, until now we have a great number of places that are doing well than ever before.” Listed among these growing number of African American owned businesses was a second hand clothing store. African American businesses growth was mostly contained to Central Avenue area, which had already begun developing as an important thoroughfare of the black community. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the avenue was where most of the black businesses and churches were located. A 1906 article “Looking to the Future” announced:

We are going to make Central avenue [sic] a credit to the city of Cleveland, from a business point of view. We are going to have a business community so complete that the only reason we will have for going down to the city will be to look it over and get a few pointers as to how the displays in the store windows of the large department stores, gents’ furnishings, dry goods, millinery, grocery and show stores down there compare with our own Central avenue.

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221 Gazette, 9 July 1904.
Since 1894, Getrude Blackman, who was described as “our leading modiste” operated a dressmaking business out of her home. The business appears to have been successful as it was reported, “Her rooms are crowded with elegant costumes which her corps of assistants are constantly turning out.” In 1901, Mina Fields “opened up a fine dressmaking establishment at her home on Calvert street [sic].” However, it seems she soon abandoned the enterprise because a few weeks later, she “secured a lucrative position as seamstress for the Proctor-Paige dressmaking establishment.” The following year, Fields was employed by J.M. Hastings, a ladies tailor, where she was made “head of the skirt department.” The promotion made Fields, “the only Afro-American in the city occupying such a position in this line of work.”

In 1911, Edith Woods opened “a neat and nice dry goods and notions store” at 4217 Central Avenue. The store, opened evenings, offered “home-made underwear, night robes and house dresses and aprons of all descriptions” for sale. In later advertisements, the store also sold “fancy waists.” Specializing in dressmaking, items were made to order. Advertisements encouraged “ladies” to “[s]how some race pride” through patronizing the establishment.

In Christmas advertising, Woods used the practicality of the goods as gifts as a

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224 Carrie W. Clifford, “Cleveland and Its Colored People,” *The Colored American* 5 (1905): 378. Gertrude had initially been in business with her sister, Lulu, who had been a dressmaker in Cleveland since 1890.
225 *Gazette*, 9 February 1901.
226 *Gazette*, 23 February 1901.
227 *Gazette*, 11 January 1902.
228 *Gazette*, 30 March 1912 and *Gazette*, 16 November 1912.
229 *Gazette*, 15 February 1913. The store also had children’s clothes for sale and in 1914, men's clothing could also be purchased at the store.
230 “Cleveland Sixth City,” *Gazette*, 11 January 1913.
selling point. Her advertising seems to have been effective because when the society pages reported that Woods was attending a dressmakers' convention in Chicago in 1913, she was described as "successful business" woman.

Men also tried their hand in the women's fashion industry. Before Garrett A. Morgan gained fame as the inventor of the gas mask and stop light, he attempted to make a name for himself in the fashion industry. In 1907, Morgan who had formerly been employed as a machinist in a textile factory began operating a sewing machine sales and repair shop. In 1910, after marrying for a second time, Morgan began operating a shirt waist factory on Harlem Avenue with his Bohemian wife, who was an experienced dressmaker.

The opening of the factory was heralded as an important opportunity for African American woman to gain industrial employment. However, it seems working conditions were less than ideal because on August 16, 1910 some of the employees went on strike, protesting low wages. Morgan blamed the strike on an Italian man who had informed the female employees that "he could take them to a place where they could earn more than the Morgan factory was paying them." However, a subsequent statement by employees clarified that it had been four not ten women who had gone on strike and that it was not an Italian

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231 Gazette, 16 December 1911.
232 "Cleveland Sixth City," Gazette, 13 September 1913.
233 An inventor, like Morgan's, entrance into clothing manufacturing, points to the rise of scientific methods in the fashion industry, which allowed men to wrest control in the female-dominated industry. See Gamber, *The Female Economy*, 125-126, 128.
234 Gazette, 7 May 1910 and Gazette, 4 June 1910.
235 Gazette, 24 September 1910.
236 Gazette, 20 August 1910.
who organized the strike, but they themselves “after working seven weeks for the small sum of $3.00 to $3.50 a week.” The statement had been submitted to the Gazette by Misses Davis, Milliner, Williams, and Thompson, presumably the four women who had gone on strike. In addition to printing the women’s statements, the paper also noted that “similar complaints against the Morgan shirt factory” had been lodged.237 The women did not appreciate that their agency had been denied and attributed to someone else. They asserted themselves as workers capable of deciding for themselves when they were dissatisfied with working conditions. Morgan, however, did not let personnel issues stop him from pursuing his entrepreneurial dreams. In 1911, he expanded business operations to a “cut rate clothing store” on Central Avenue. The store offered “ladies fine woolens and worsted garments, made to order” which were produced at its own factory. This enabled the clothing “to be purchased...for thirty to fifty per cent below the regular retail price.”238

The prevalence of “made to order” African American owned businesses seems to suggest that initially ready-to-wear clothing, despite its association with modernity, was not popular.239 In the early twentieth century, Cleveland was the second leading manufacturer of ready-to-wear clothing, “surpassed only by New

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237 Gazette, 24 September 1910.
238 “Cut Rate Clothing Store,” Gazette, 23 December 1911.
239 The use of the term ready-to-wear and ready-made are interchangeable, however, I have chosen to use the term ready-to wear puts the emphasis on the consumer instead of the producer. In the 1890s, the term ready-to-wear was increasing used denoting the shift towards consumption. According to Robert Schorman, “the shift in emphasis...supports the idea that consumer culture originated in this era. See Robert Schorman, “The Truth About Goods: Clothing, Advertising, and the Representation of Cultural Values at the End of the Nineteenth Century,” American Studies 37.1 (1996): 24.
York City. Retailers such as the Halle Brothers and the E.R. Dalton store which was the “forerunner of the May Company” offered ready-to-wear clothing for sale. African Americans might have been reluctant to wear ready-to-wear clothing because it had negative connotations, as it may have been reminiscent of the clothing associated with slavery. Enslaved African Americans were one of the first groups to wear pre-made clothing. However, these clothes unlike ready-to-wear clothes were not designed to be fashionable, a function of the inferior materials used, the fit which was one size fits all, and the craftsmanship. It was observed how slave clothing did not consider the individual and made the connection between the garments and “penitentiary uniforms.” Furthermore, in the nineteenth century, “ready-to-wear establishments were known simply as ‘slop shops.’ The clothing they sold was called ‘slop clothes.’” These terms further marked African Americans’ “degraded” status. Ready-to-wear clothing was also considered “morally suspect” as it was associated with the working-class whose mores were considered questionable. African American women wanting to distinguish themselves as part of the middle-class were perhaps

240 Bernice Tolbert, Buy Ohio: Advertising the Products of Cleveland and Ohio, 1840-1940 (Cleveland, OH: Western Reserve Historical Society, 1980), 4.
241 Ibid., 18. Halle Brothers began carrying women’s ready to wear clothing, but it was not referred to as a department store until 1914.
242 Olmstead, A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, 27. In observing how ready-to-wear slave clothing did not consider the individual, Olmstead made the connection between these garments and “penitentiary uniforms.”
244 Howard, Brides, Inc., 23.
 disinclined to wear clothing not befitting the socio-economic status to which they were laying claim.

Upon closer inspection, African American women’s avoidance of ready-to-wear clothing might not have been a legacy of their enslaved past, but part of a larger trend. According to statistics, “in 1890 women’s styles accounted for only 25 percent of factory-made clothing.”\(^{245}\) This is because custom-made clothing also did more for a women’s appearance because it fit more precisely. The first women’s ready-to-wear items did not require as much specificity in fit. In the 1890s, the only ready-to-wear items that were advertised in Cleveland’s African American press for sale were things like shirt waists, hosiery, cloaks/capes, and underwear. Beginning in the 1900s, stores began expanding their offerings of ready-to-wear clothing. The department store was about the open display of goods, which was supposed to encourage customers to make purchases. Ready-to-wear garments allowed department stores to fill their enormous spaces, adding to the spectacle that was necessary to create consumer desire. The May Company claimed, “We please the hard-to-please in Ready-to-Wear,” in addition to shirt waists, advertised suits, skirts, and coats for purchase.\(^{246}\) Bailey’s also offered a line of women’s ready-to-wear clothing for sale that included coats, suits, and skirts.\(^{247}\) Offerings of ready-to-wear clothing were not restricted to department stores. The Central Avenue Store advertised “ready-

\(^{245}\) Gordon, “Boundless Possibilities,” 70.
\(^{246}\) Advertisement, Gazette, 27 April 1901.
\(^{247}\) Advertisement, Gazette, 22 October 1904.
made" wrappers, muslin gowns, and sateen skirts.\textsuperscript{248} However, it was not until
the 1910s that ready-to-wear clothes were affordable. This was largely due to
changing styles which were less complicated, no longer requiring as much
tailoring and fabric. Not only did such changes in fashion allow for more
affordability, they also made it possible for clothes to "fit just fine off the rack."\textsuperscript{249}

In 1912, J. Lomsky a dry goods store on Central Avenue began advertising in the
\textit{Gazette}. The store carried a "complete line" of both women’s and men’s clothing.
At the store women could purchase both corsets and waists for as little as $1.00.
The store also encouraged shoppers by giving double stamps on Tuesdays and
Fridays.\textsuperscript{250} Despite the growth of the industry, it was not until the 1920s that
women’s ready-to-wear clothing gained in popularity and dominated the fashion
industry.

The lack of women's ready-to-wear clothing available, was not dictated by
the producers but consumers. It seems that there just was not a demand among
middle-class women for these items because of contemporary notions of gender
identity. According to Rob Schorman, "the very act of custom-making clothes was
intimately tied to ideals of femininity."\textsuperscript{251} Custom made clothing also "suggested a
commitment to Victorian principles."\textsuperscript{252} Because of these associations African
American preferred it over ready-to-wear. The association of ready-to-wear with
femininity was further evidenced by the fact that some of the first garments to be

\textsuperscript{248} Advertisement, \textit{Cleveland Journal}, 22 October 1904.
\textsuperscript{249} Gordon, "Boundless Possibilities," 70.
\textsuperscript{250} Advertisement, \textit{Gazette}, 30 March 1912.
\textsuperscript{251} Schorman, \textit{Selling Style}, 46.
\textsuperscript{252} Ibid., 66.
mass-produced after underwear and outerwear were the shirt-waist and tailor-made suit, which were both modeled after men's wear.

African Americans were also involved in millinery, as hats were considered an important part of a women's self-presentation. In the early 1900s, Madam Johnson operated an establishment on Central Avenue, which was advertised, as an "Up to Date Millinery and Dressmaking Parlors."\textsuperscript{253} Despite offering both services, millinery services received more attention in advertisements. A subsequent announcement did not mention that the establishment offered dressmaking, instead emphasized the shop sold "the finest millenary in the city and at the best figures."\textsuperscript{254} This probably reflects that the establishment specialized in mourning hats, which it offered "to order and loan."\textsuperscript{255} Apparently customers could rent hats, much as today men's formal wear is rented for special events. Since mourning hats were for funerals, which most women did not attend frequently, and because millenary fashions changed constantly, hats on loan would have represented an attractive option. According to the Gazette, "Our people should patronize Madam Johnson...We are always pleased to see as many of our race as possible go into businesses for themselves, and the people of this city should assist her as much as possible in her undertaking."\textsuperscript{256} In 1913, Anna Walker relocated from New York to Cleveland and operated an "up to date millinery store" on Central Avenue. The store,

\textsuperscript{253} Advertisement, Gazette, 2 June 1900.
\textsuperscript{254} Gazette, 16 June 1900.
\textsuperscript{255} Advertisement, Gazette, 2 June 1900. This same advertisement appeared a few times in the Gazette.
\textsuperscript{256} Gazette, 28 July 1900.
described as “neat and cozy,” advertised itself as “displaying some of the finest millinery to be seen in the city.” In addition to retailing the “latest styles” in custom-made hats, Walker’s services included blocking and remodeling, as well as the cleaning, dyeing, and curling of feathers. Walker herself was described as “polite, agreeable, accommodating, and proficient in all she attempts.” Despite having a superior establishment and frequently advertising in the black press, Walker seemed to have trouble attracting a clientele. Sympathetic to her endeavor, the Gazette criticized African Americans for their failure to patronize her establishment, instead giving their business to white establishments. The newspaper urged women’s clubs to show race pride and support the store. However, it seems the plea might have gone unanswered as there are no advertisements for Walker’s Millinery after 1915. It seems that other African American milliners suffered a similar fate. Between 1910 and 1920, the number of African American milliners declined by more than half, and by 1930 there were none.

The lack of success and eventual disappearance of African American milliners seems odd considering the importance of hats to African American women’s self-presentation. Hats focused attention on the body, particularly the

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257 “Cleveland Sixth City,” Gazette, 8 November 1913; “Cleveland Sixth City, Gazette,” 10 November 1914; and “Cleveland Sixth City,” Gazette, 3 October 1914.

258 Kenneth L. Kusmer, A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930 (Urban, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 287. Before 1910, African American milliners enjoyed some success. Milliner, Ida Henderson, was head trimmer at James McHenry’s Millinery, Notions and Fancy Dry Goods Store, which had two locations on Euclid Avenue. It seems her position allowed her to live comfortably as she resided in “beautiful home.” See Clifford, “Cleveland and Its Colored People,” 377. The decline in millinery was symptomatic of the industry as a whole: “By the 1920s...entrepreneurial opportunities for women in the millinery trade had trade had dramatically declined.” See Gamber, The Female Economy, 200
“head and face,” but in a way that emphasized respectability.\textsuperscript{259} It seems that African Americans were more receptive to mass produced hats than they were clothes. Milliners had to face the competition of mass production earlier than dressmakers. According to a survey conducted by the Cleveland Foundation in 1915, changes in the industry shifted away from custom-made to factory made hats which favored larger retailers such as department stores which could offer not only better pricing, but selection.\textsuperscript{260} The May Company had advertised “ready-to-wear” hats in the \textit{Gazette} since the early 1900s.

\textit{Home Sewing}

Despite the growing ready-to-wear industry, home sewing remained popular and was encouraged as it promoted self-sufficiency and self-reliance, which were consistent with the traditional ideals of thrift and industry. It was also associated with femininity. In items that appeared in the press, men prized women who made their own clothes. In a humorous piece, two men discuss their wives dressmaking bills. One man says to another, “I hate to pay dressmaking bills, don’t you, Larkin?” To which Larkin replies, “No; I’m very fond of my wife’s dressmaker. It’s a positive pleasure to pay her bills.”\textsuperscript{261} The man eventually discovers that Larkin’s wife makes her own clothes. The piece appeared proceeded by the words “It’s All Right.” While the words may reference the fact

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{260} Edna Bryner, \textit{The Garment Trades} (Cleveland, OH: The Survey Committee of the Cleveland Foundation, 1916), 49.
\textsuperscript{261} “A Little Nonsense,” \textit{Gazette}, 22 February 1896.
\end{footnotesize}
that it was all right for Larkin to have such “fond” feelings because they were being directed to his wife, they also illustrate the acceptability of home sewing. For most women regardless of class, sewing was part of their everyday lives, involving both consumption and production. Women were expected to “know something of sewing, the making, mending, and changing of garments, and preparing them in time to suit the seasons.” As a result, home sewing continued to be an important mode of production even for Cleveland’s African American middle-class. Sewing had been an important skill for African American women dating back to slavery, valued not only by their masters but the enslaved themselves. It continued to have relevance as a “tool for self-definition” for African American middle-class identity, as it emphasized the domesticity that was integral to the “politics of respectability.”

The idea that the African American middle-class sewed out of economic vulnerability is illustrated by Charles Chesnutt’s wife, Susan, who continued to sew her children’s clothes. A few years before, Susan had written to Charles to

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264 Gaines, Uplifting the Race, 140. According to an African American etiquette book of the period, “the art of dressing...performs the same part in beautifying domestic life as is performed by music and the fine arts in embellishing the life moral and spiritual.” See Northrop, Gay, and Penn, The College of Life, 26.
ask him to buy her a new dress so she could keep pace with society in North Carolina, but he was unable to afford it. However, it seems, Susan Chesnutt enjoyed sewing. Susan’s favorite club was a neighborhood club that did “sewing for charity.” As a woman who did not work outside of the home, Susan’s participation in home sewing was a way for her “to influence the household budget without earning a wage.” Sewing was such a part of the Chesnutts’ domestic life, one of their homes even had a designated sewing room.

While it was not unusual for mothers to make clothing for their children, as the Chesnutts’ eldest daughters grew older, they no longer thought their mother’s handiwork adequate. The girls “complained” to their father that their clothes lacked in both craftsmanship and style as “their clothes looked hopelessly homemade” despite Susan’s use of “good material.” The girls asked their father if they might instead secure a dressmaker. When Chesnutt brought the matter up with his wife, she was not initially keen on the idea, telling him “dressmakers and ready-made clothes are expensive and I can make them much cheaper, and they look just as well.” Chesnutt not wanting to hurt his wife’s feelings, was able to convince her to hire a dressmaker by appealing to her own vanity: “But when you’ve done all that work, you won’t look just as well—you’ll be worn out—so let’s try this plan for a while.” When Chesnutt’s daughters were putting together their college wardrobes, “two dressmakers were employed.” Despite professional

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265 Chesnutt, Charles Waddell Chesnutt, 36.
266 Ibid., 189.
268 Chesnutt, Charles Waddell Chesnutt, 67.
assistance, the mother and daughters helped considerably “by sewing hooks and
eyes on the waists and brush-braid on the skirts.” The added expense of hiring a
dressmaker seemed to have been worthwhile attracting the admiration of
“dearest friends and neighbors” who came by to see the garments before they
were packed and sent off with the girls. As the Chesnutts’ daughters’ desire for
a dressmaker expressed, “Clothing that was obviously homemade could be a
source of embarrassment, as it was a clear sign of a family’s economic status.”
Susan, however, continued to make her younger daughters’ clothes. Writing to
his daughters who were away at college, Chesnutt informed them that his wife
was making “a gored skirt with trimming on the edges.” The skirt was economical
as it was made out of one of the other daughter’s old dresses.

Home sewing was revolutionized by developments in the fabric, sewing
machine, and pattern industries, which made the craft less of a financial
investment and also reduced the difficulty of the task. While at mid-century
sewing machines had cost upwards of $100, towards the end of the nineteenth
century a sewing machine could be purchased for under $20. In the Gazette, the
John M. Symth Co., a Chicago mail order company advertised “a thoroughly up-
to-date, first class sewing machine at the astoundingly low price of $14.25.”
The Sears, Roebuck, & Co. also advertised a sewing machine at the “special

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269 Chesnutt, Charles Waddell Chesnutt, 79.
270 Gordon, “Make it Yourself,” chapter 1.
271 Chesnutt, Charles Waddell Chesnutt, 89.
272 Advertisement, Gazette, 4 November 1899.

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offer price" of $15.50.\textsuperscript{273} Despite the slightly higher price, the Sears machine may have been a more attractive bargain to potential buyers as it offered a three month trial period, compared to Smyth’s 60-day trial period. In addition, while orders for both machines were “cash on delivery” plus freight charges, Smyth Co. required approval and two dollars to be sent when placing orders, but Sears did not require any money to be sent with orders. Sears could have also inspired a level of consumer confidence that Smyth did not. In a statement attributed to “editor,” the reliability of the retailer was mentioned in the advertisement. In the early twentieth century, Sears claimed to be the “largest dealers in sewing machines in America.”\textsuperscript{274} Moreover, Sears had a positive reputation with African American consumers. These outside companies seemed to have been more interested in African American business than Cleveland-based companies. The city “was a great manufacturing center for sewing machines,” as it was home to four companies, Standard, White, Domestic, and Davis Sewing.\textsuperscript{275} However, none of the companies seemed to have actively courted African American customers by advertising in black newspapers. This may have not been due to racism, but because these companies relied mainly on “small advertising cards”.\textsuperscript{276}

While the sewing machine helped ease the burden of home sewing, in the early twentieth century it seems that the novelty of the sewing machine had worn

\textsuperscript{273} Advertisement, Gazette, 11 February 1899.
\textsuperscript{275} Tolbert, Buy Ohio, 16
\textsuperscript{276} Ibid., 17.
off so much that hand sewing was once again in vogue: "[b]y 1890, the sewing machine had lost its novelty and had become an accepted part of domestic life. It was now too common for its prior status symbol role, and the American public had begun to take it for granted." A fashion column that appeared in the *Gazette* in 1906 proclaimed, "If you, or any member of your family can do fine handiwork, you are most fortunate this year, for this is the day when the pushing, boastful sewing machine must take a back seat. Hand-sewing has ‘come in’ with a vengeance, returning machine work into the background." Fashions for the year required intricate and delicate needlework that could not be accomplished with the sewing machine. For example, the trend was for "waists and blouses...to be trimmed with lace and handwork." Just a year before a fashion advice column declared, "Weary sewers will be glad to learn that no hand-sewing need be employed on the 1905 shirt waist."  

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Fashion advice columns in the *Gazette* paid particular attention to the home dressmaker, illustrating that the latest fashions were not out of their reach. Fashion advice columns were sensitive to the diversity of home dressmakers in terms of both class and skill. Fashion advice columns emphasized how economical home sewing was, especially how home sewing could lessen the expense of a stylish wardrobe. When lingerie waists came into vogue, women were advised that although they were available ready-to-wear, "equally good

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278 "In the World of Fashion," *Gazette*, 12 May 1906.
looking ones can be made at half the cost." Home sewing columns often indicated the amount of material required for the construction of garments and suggested the variety of fabrics that could be used. This gave readers an idea of the financial investment such an undertaking would take and allowed them to choose a fabric within their budget.

Fashion advice columns often discussed the degree of difficulty, indicating the level of proficiency required for making the garments discussed. Styles for the home dressmaker emphasized the simplicity of the garments in “design and material” and the ease with which they could be copied. Columns also gave tips on how to work with certain fabrics. When working with the delicate materials used in women’s evening attire, it was suggested that interlining be added to garments. According to the article, “the flimsiness of light evening dress may be remedied by sewing within the hem a strip of light flannel in a shade that will not change the color of the dress. This will weigh down the skirt without adding superfluous finery.” However, women could avoid the difficulty of certain fabrics by using plain materials for most garments, which were easier to work with and allowed for women to add more of their own personal touches. Women were also given advice on how to hide imperfections. One feature suggested that home dressmakers add French ruffles to ensembles they created “because they could help hide any slight defects in the hang of the skirt.”

281 “Still Cling to Separate Waist,” Gazette, 19 September 1913.  
blouses posed a problem for the home sewer as the seams had to lie flat, but ironing the seams risked ruining the material. To avoid this, it was advised “with both hands the seam should be pulled taut and slowly passed over the iron, care being taken to avoid touching more than the seam with the point or side and thereby marking the material underneath.”

In the early twentieth century, the Gazette recognized the strength of the home sewing market and decided to profit from it themselves, selling products for the home seamstress. In 1905, the newspaper featured “Our Pattern Department,” which advertised affordable patterns for sale. Patterns were associated with the “democratization of fashion” and embodied the notions of progress that were at the heart of modernity. They made it so that the creation of garments required less skill, so the home sewer could have as their end result a more reliable product. Advertisements included a detailed description of the garment as well as recommendations concerning suitable fabrics and occasions to wear them. Women could buy patterns for shirt waists, corset covers, dresses and coats. Through the column readers could purchase sewing patterns by sending in 10 cents along with the “size and number” of the desired pattern to the paper’s Pattern Department or Pattern Editor. To simplify the ordering the process, readers could use the fillable form (fig. 2). In 1908, the column was renamed “Practical Fashion.” Up until 1910s, the patterns were often advertised

287 Readers could also purchase patterns for children’s clothing.
Pattern No. 5406.—This charming mode was stylishly developed in pale blue taffeta. The fronts cross over a dainty vest of embroidered mouseline, and a narrow band of Persian embroidery forms a pretty finish for the edge. The back is quite plain, and three box-pleats in each side of the front give the fashionable amount of fullness that is softly draped into the belt. The design will reproduce satisfactorily in any of the season's fabrics, such as voile, cashmere, albatross, muslins and linens. The medium size will require 2½ yards of 36-inch material. Sizes for 32, 34, 36, 38, 40 and 42 inches bust measure.

This pattern will be sent to you on receipt of 10 cents. Address all orders to the Pattern Department of this paper. Be sure to give size and number of pattern wanted. For convenience, write your order on the following coupon:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. 5406.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SIZE: .................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAME: ..................................</td>
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<tr>
<td>ADDRESS: ................................</td>
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Figure 2. “Our Pattern Department,” Gazette, 16 December 1905.
as Parisian, bowing to the dominance of the French fashion industry. The newspaper placed so much emphasis on paper patterns that it included a notice of Ebenezer Butterick’s death in at the age of 76, noting that he was the “originator” of the invention.\textsuperscript{288} McCall’s, one of the leading pattern companies, also advertised its patterns and magazine in the newspaper. The \textit{Gazette} offered a special promotion with \textit{McCall’s} through which those willing to pay in advance could receive a yearly subscription to both publications and a dress pattern for two dollars.\textsuperscript{289} By taking advantage of the offer, people could “save money, keep in style, get all the race news every week, be happy and up to date.”\textsuperscript{290}

Sewing gave women more “choice” regarding “materials, designs, and methods.”\textsuperscript{291} It meant that “women could make choices and develop designs that suited their tastes, afford higher quality fabrics, and fit garments to individual bodies.”\textsuperscript{292} An advertisement for a pattern for a “plainly tucked shirt waist” noted that it was “a popular style with the home dressmaker, lending itself admirably to almost any form of ornamentation giving wide scope for individuality.”\textsuperscript{293} Patterns also gave women some flexibility in suiting their own personal styles. A pattern for a kimono offered women a choice in the length of the sleeves and the overall garment. Home sewing whether by hand or machine allowed an individuality and creativity that was virtually impossible with mass produced items. However,

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{288} “Ebenezer Butterick Dies,” \textit{Gazette}, 4 April 1903.
\textsuperscript{290} “Ibid.
\textsuperscript{291} Gordon, \textit{Make it Yourself},” chapter 2.
\textsuperscript{292} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{293} “Our Pattern Department,” \textit{Gazette}, 17 August 1907.
\end{flushleft}
women were still advised "to make a tour of the stores to see what people are
wearing; one may have fine technique in sewing, but if she has no ideas her work
will be in the amateur class noticeably."294 As this suggest, the shopping
experience was intended to be didactic. Woman supposedly "absorbed
information about goods just by wandering through the store."295 Encouraging
women to have continual contact with stores even when relying on home
manufacturing pointed towards the important role of stores, especially
department stores, in shaping consumer tastes.296

Fashioning the Press

In 1891, the National Afro-American Press Association held its annual
meeting in Cincinnati. At the meeting, the Association declared that as one of the
two most powerful institutions among African Americans, the other being the
church, that it "more than all others ha[d] an opportunity to influence and direct
the masses."297 This "influence" extended to the area of consumption, the press
helped orient women to the culture of consumption, providing information on
where and what to consume. Regardless of a woman's circumstances or where

294 'Still Cling to Separate Wait Garment," Gazette, 19 July 1913.
295 Gunther Barth, City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America
296 Benson, Counter Cultures, 22.
she lived, the press provided women with “the opportunity to engage with a fashionable ideal and fashionable items.”

From the inception of the Gazette in the 1880s, the editorship of the newspaper seemingly recognized African American women’s interest in dress and its potential appeal to its female readership. Fashion related columns even appeared on the newspaper’s front page. An announcement that appeared in the newspaper read, “Ladies! Ladies!! Ladies!!!...Call your lady friends and acquaintances attention up our up-to-date fashion and pattern departments and thus encourage them to subscribe or take The Gazette regularly.” The newspaper touted its fashion articles as “the very latest and best from the east.” Between the years 1911 and 1912, the newspaper printed the column “Of Interest to Our Women,” which featured news items of special interest to its female readership, much of which was dress related.

The Cleveland Journal, an African American newspaper established in 1903, had a women’s department which often contained fashion information. In its columns, the Journal sometimes summarized fashion advice from other publications like the New York Times. The Journal, by placing fashion advice in columns titled “Woman and Home” and “Household Hints,” made the connection between fashion and domesticity clear. The women’s department of the Journal

299 Advertisement, Gazette, 26 February 1910.
300 Gazette, 30 December 1893.
was under the direction of the Ohio Federation of Women's Clubs. The first editor was Carrie Washington Clifford, the first president of the organization.301

Fashion related columns were largely written by women. As previously discussed, the relationship between dress and domesticity enabled fashion to be constructed as a largely feminine concern. Moreover, because of fashion’s association with femininity, it was largely dismissed as a frivolous subject. Therefore, while journalism was still considered a largely masculine profession, fashion was considered a gender appropriate subject for women to engage. It was often under the guise of fashion and other topics that were considered uniquely feminine that women pursued careers in journalism, which gave them increasing access to public sphere.302 The “Ellen Osborn Fashion Letter,” which appeared in the Gazette was perhaps one of the country’s most popular fashion advice columns. In 1892, the newspaper began publishing the nationally syndicated column out of New York. Despite the column’s seeming adherence to traditional notions of femininity, it is interesting to note that the author of the column, Eliza Putnam Heaton, did not adhere to the conventions that she espoused. Heaton was involved in dress reform and rejected fashionable dress in her own life. She was even described as a “masculine woman.” A fellow

301 In 1903, Clifford established the Queen’s Garden, the official publication of the Ohio Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs. She also was in charge of the women’s department of Alexander’s Magazine, an African American periodical. For more on Clifford, see Davis, Black Americans in Cleveland, 208-209.
newspaper writer believed that it was Heaton's position as an outside observer made her a successful fashion reporter.  

Women's magazines also fostered the growth of consumer culture. Companies recognized African American women's desire to dress well and that they represented a potential reading audience for fashion related publications. Curtis Publishing based in Philadelphia attempted to secure agents in the Cleveland area through the Gazette. The advertisement read: "Women Who Like to Dress well can do so with the expenditure of very little money if they are willing to do a little pleasant work evenings." As payment for their services, the women could elect to get paid in money or in a silk dress.

Magazines were an important part of the fashion industry. They also "offered attractive opportunities to talented individuals with entrepreneurial abilities, creativity and self-confidence." One of them was Julia Ringwood Coston (née Balch), a resident of Cleveland. In 1891, Coston decided to start publishing a fashion magazine out of her home. She called it the Ringwood's Afro American Journal of Fashion. The publication was "devoted to the domestic, 

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303 Ibid., 60-61.
304 Gazette, 22 February 1890.
306 It has generally been assumed that her maiden name was Ringwood, however, according to her marriage license and an announcement of her marriage her maiden name was actually Balch and her middle name was Ringwood. The magazine appeared to have printed out of her home because the office of publication was listed as 86 Harmon Street, which was the same address for Coston’s residence according to the 1893 and 1894 city directories. See Cleveland City Directory (Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Directory Co., 1893), 211 and Cleveland City Directory (Cleveland OH: Cleveland City Directory Co., 1894), 215.
moral, social, educational and artistic interests of our women and our girls." 307

The magazine featured a combination of pieces that were written especially for the magazine and those that appeared in other publications like *Frank Leslie's Weekly*. The twelve-page magazine cost fifteen cents for a single copy and $1.25 for a year's subscription, with which subscribers received a dress pattern of their choosing. 308 Locally, the magazine was available at retail outlets in the city like Hexter's, a "news depot" located in the Arcade. To garner interest in the magazines, sample copies were also available for ten cents. 309

The appearance of the magazine in the 1890s coincided with the growth of magazine publishing. This growth had been facilitated by "an expanded postage system, higher literacy rates, and urbanization." 310 Publishing opportunities became increasingly available because of emerging technologies and the increasing reliance on advertising revenues, which lowered production costs. Ringwood's contained advertisements for boarding houses in New York, Providence, and Boston, and for Dr. Nickens' Blood & Nerve Tonic. However, it primarily attracted advertising from other magazines. While in many respects these publications may have been *Ringwood's* competitors, they also realized that they could work together for mutual benefit. To increase subscriptions,

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308 *Ringwood's Afro-American Journal of Fashion, May and June 1893, Records of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, 1895-1992*, microfilm (Bethesda, MA: University Publications of America, 1993), Reel 6, 80. This appears to be one of the only extant copies of the magazine. The journal, established in 1891, predates *Women's Era* which is often considered to be the first, but dates to 1894.
310 Gordon, "*Make It Yourself,*" chapter 4.
magazine offered a special promotion through which dressmakers could receive both *Ringwood's* and the *Queen of Fashion* for one low price.\(^{311}\)

The magazine accomplished the “special work” of the African American press, which was to give a voice to its people.\(^{312}\) *Ringwood’s* gave insight into middle-class black life and provided an avenue for the class to shape taste and etiquette. As Vicki Howard argues, “Etiquette And taste were a form of power. Being able to define what constituted proper behavior and good taste allowed one group to assert its vision of things over another.”\(^{313}\) In addition to fashion information, the magazine featured literary and home departments, and profiles of women considered a credit to the race.\(^{314}\) It focused attention on what African American women were doing and what they could do in interest of the racial advancement. It also constructed them as role models, as one of the magazine’s stated goals was to provide “modest publicity, and thus present [black women] as worthy models for the emulation of our growing womanhood.”\(^{315}\) The publication provided black women with the opportunity to address their unique concerns and exert more control over their public image. The journal was Coston’s response to the absence of affirming images of African American womanhood in the pages of magazines published in the dominant culture. Racist assumptions meant that African American women were either underrepresented or misrepresented in these publications. *Ringwood’s* offered alternative images of black womanhood.

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\(^{311}\) *Ringwood’s*, May and June 1893, n.p.


\(^{313}\) Howard, *Brides, Inc.*, 23.


\(^{315}\) Ibid., 143.
illustrating that print could be used "in actively reformist ways to counter racism and its effects." The magazine upheld the idea that African American women could be authorities on fashion. The magazine featured "artistic plates of colored American women and important hints on the latest fashions." While directed at an African American audience, the Philadelphia Times made special mention of "the pleasing fashion articles," noting that the magazine's appeal could reach across racial boundaries. The Florida Sentinel, noting the magazine's fashions, mentioned the magazine's role in racial uplift, remarking that the "illustrations and fashion department" in one of the magazine's June issue were "admirably arranged," and that this was proof of the progress of African American journalism.

The individuals who were involved in the magazine also served as proof of African American progress. The contributors, who were from all over the country, were prominent members of the race and some of the leading black female journalists. Both Mary Church Terrell and Victoria Earle Matthews, who also were listed as editors of the magazines, had already established themselves in journalism. Both women had been able to find some success as journalist in white newspapers, which was an accomplishment considering that African American women were largely excluded from white publications.

319 Ibid., 257.
While the magazine was not an official publication of either the AME Church or the women's club movement, it reflected the influence of both. Like Coston, many of the women involved in the magazine had connections to the AME Church, either as members or because they had published in church publications like the *AME Recorder* and the *AME Review*. Mary E. Lee, who was on the magazine's editorial board, was the wife of an AME Bishop. Sarah Mitchell, the only other Clevelander involved in the editorship of the magazine was a member of the St. Andrews AME Church where Coston's husband had served as pastor. Despite never having been married, Mitchell, one of the city's few African American school teachers, edited the Home Department which gave advice on things like house cleaning.\(^{320}\)

Many of the magazine's contributors were involved or would later become involved in the women's club movement, which had not yet been organized on a national level. Both Josephine Silone Yates who was listed as an editor along with Coston, and Mary Church Terrell were involved with the organization of the Colored Women's League which received attention in May and June 1893 issue.\(^{321}\) *Ringwood's* also offered a subscription discount to clubs depending on their size. The magazine also provided a platform to discuss the idea of a national organization. An article by Mary Church Terrell discussed plans for the Colored Women's League, which would eventually merge with other

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\(^{320}\) Mitchell, a teacher, was the only woman on the magazine's editorial board not to be or have been married. It was customary for teachers not to be married. Mitchell would later marry Rev. Bailey, a popular minister in the city.

\(^{321}\) For more on the African American involvement in the women's club movement, see White, *Too Heavy a Load.*
organizations to form the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). From what Terrell writes, it appears that one of the League’s goal was to improve African-American women’s appearances. According to the article, the league hoped to start classes in millinery. The league was optimistic that the classes would not only help women secure employment, but that those trained would improve not only their own self-presentation, but that of other women. According to Terrell, through such classes, women would learn the colors that were most flattering to African American women:

Every woman, no matter what her circumstances, owes it to herself, her family and her friends to look as well as her means will permit, and a wise selection of colors to be worn plays an important part in securing the best results. Our young woman will be taught the difference between the vanity which thinks only of show and adornment and the commendable desire to appear well.  

She went on to say, "Women who eschew the garish and gaudy in dress may demand more consideration and respect than those who violate this principle." In the context of the Colored Woman’s League, the magazine stressed that dress was especially important for women who assumed public roles.

The magazine also provided a platform for more controversial topics, like dress reform. African American women’s participation in dress reform has

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322 Mary Church Terrell, “What the Colored Woman’s League Will Do,” Ringwood’s, May and June 1893, 74. As mentioned here and earlier in this chapter, color was an important focus for African Americans when it came to clothing.  
323 Ibid.
received little attention. It is generally thought that African American women could not afford to align themselves with the dress reform movement as it was viewed as transgressive. Styles associated with dress reform were perceived as mannish or masculine, which was one of the stereotypes African American women were fighting against. Not only did dress reform detract from traditional notions of femininity, it was also associated with atheism.\textsuperscript{324} This would have been potentially problematic because, historically, for African Americans, presenting a moral self has been synonymous with presenting a Christian self. Furthermore, "The quest for black political rights often has been linked with the black community's willingness or ability to conform to the standards of a Christianity that embodied European norms of civilization."\textsuperscript{325} The clothing was also reminiscent of that worn by the enslaved and therefore had negative connotations.\textsuperscript{326} This association also worked against uplift in which African Americans were attempting to distance themselves from an enslaved past.

The amount of space devoted to the subject in the \textit{Ringwood's} May/June 1893 issue seems to suggest that the topic was at least open to discussion. Jenness-Miller, the enterprise of two sisters Annie J. Miller and Mabel Jenness, advertised both their magazine and dress system in the issue. According to the magazine advertisement, subscribers could receive a year's worth of \textit{Jenness-Miller Illustrated Monthly} and a copy of "Comprehensive Physical Culture" written

\textsuperscript{324} Steele, \textit{The Corset}, 60.  
\textsuperscript{326} Klassen, "The Robes of Womanhood," 50.
by Mabel, for $1.00. The magazine seemed to be open to having African American agents because the advertisement stated, "ONE THOUSAND AGENTS WANTED." The dress system appeared in a two-page spread which included illustrations under the heading "Jenness-Miller Artistic Clothing" (fig. 3). The dress system was a combination of undergarments designed to allow for more "freedom of movement" than traditional undergarments, available as "patterns and manufactured garments." The system consisted of the following items: the union suit, a simple "Jersey-fitting" body suit designed to mimic "one's own natural covering"; the model bodice, which provided an alternative to the traditional corset; the chemilette, which was a three-in-one garment replacing the chemise, drawers, and corset cover; and the divided skirt, designed to replace the petticoat. If one needed less bulk, in lieu of the divided skirt, they could also purchase Equestrienne Tights were available in either knee or ankle length. The tights protected a woman's legs, allowing for both "warmth" and "freedom of movement." All of the garments were designed to be covered by the gown form, "the essential feature of all Jenness-Miller dresses." It was advertised as more comfortable for wear as it preventing "weight-dragging down upon the abdomen and back." In the advertisement, Jenness-Miller even offered a line of maternity garments, which consisted of a chemilette, a divided skirt, and a gown form. Most of the advertised garments allowed for versatility and could be constructed using

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327 Advertisement, Ringwood's, May and June 1893, n.p.
328 Ibid.
329 Ringwood's, May and June 1893, 82.
Figure 3. "Jenness Miller Artistic Clothing," Ringwood's Afro-American Journal of Fashion, May and June 1893.
a variety of fabrics. For instance the Equestrienne Tights had the flexibility to be "manufactured in many different weights and qualities" of fabrics. Patterns could be purchased for twenty cents which included postage. Readers could also acquire an "illustrated catalogue, showing costumes, wrappers, jackets, etc., for ladies, misses, and children, together with price list of manufactured garments." These items could be ordered from Improved Dress Supplies located in New York.

To what degree Ringwood's readers subscribed to Jenness-Miller, is impossible to know. While dress reform had the stigma of being unfeminine, the women involved in Ringwood's, whose roles found them increasingly leaving the confines of home, might have found less restrictive clothing desirable. They might have also been able to appreciate dress reformers employment of dress as an important political tool, as they shared similar views. Jenness-Miller garments might have been more acceptable as the sisters did not use the term "dress reform, but "correct dress" instead. "Correct dress" was a mix between aesthetic dress which focused on dress as art and dress reform which focused on "health and fitness." The sisters believed dress should take into account the natural proportions of the body and not attempt to distort it or weigh it down. Both her magazine and dress system reflected their belief that it was possible to be well-dressed without sacrificing beauty, health, or comfort. They rejected the

330 "Jenness Miller Artistic Clothing," Ringwood's, May and June 1893, 82-83.
corset believing that exercise and not restrictive garments should be used to achieve the ideal body type. The sisters also advocated shorter skirts as more hygienic because they did not sweep up filth as women walked.

Jenness-Miller’s version of dress reform was considered more feminine than the more radical changes some reformers advocated. The fashions were considered moderate and were “meant to be close in design to acceptable fashions of the day.” Designated “not to call attention to the details of anatomy, as fashion is so prone to do,” the garments reinforced feminine modesty. Unlike bloomers and other versions of the divided skirt, the one sold by Jenness-Miller was not meant to be shown in public, but worn under a “dress skirt.” Annie argued that earlier efforts in dress reform had been unsuccessful because they had focused on the utilitarian aspects of clothing forgetting its aesthetic aspects: “They did not concern themselves with artistic selection, nor strive after picturesque and pleasing effects.” She felt the mainstream fashion industry had also failed in aesthetics because its emphasis on “exaggeration” did not flatter the natural feminine form. According to Annie, “Art in dress demands study of the body and adaptability of fabric, color and decoration of individuality.”

It seems that the Jenness-Miller method was more acceptable because even the Gazette, at one time supported the ideas of Jenness-Miller. After Annie

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333 Patricia A. Cunningham, Reforming Women’s Fashions, 1850-1920 (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2003), 82. See also Fischer, Pantaloons and Power, 173.
334 Cunningham, Reforming Women’s Fashion, 82.
336 Miller, “Dress Improvement,” 696.
delivered her lecture on “Beautiful Dressing” in 1889 at the city’s Music Hall, the newspaper printed: “We hope and trust there were many of our ladies who attended the talks given by Mrs. Annie Jenness Miller in regard to women’s dressing. Her mode is the remedy for half of the female complaints prevalent.”

However, interestingly when she returned to lecture in 1894, the paper did not mention it, though she continued to get generous coverage in the Plain Dealer. Neither did it mention the fact that Jenness-Miller dress items could be purchased at various retailers throughout the city. One of which was the N.O. Stone Shoe Store. The store carried Jenness-Miller shoes and had a reputation of treating African American customers well. In the 1890s, it seems the Gazette gave little attention to dress reform. When the newspaper did, its discussion of the subject was unflattering. An article, “The Beneficent Corset,” discussed how a paper that was read at the British Association at Bath praised the corset. Contrary to reports that the garment posed a threat to women’s health and general well-being, the paper argued that “reasonably tight” lacing increases mental and physical activity by causing a more liberal supply of blood to the brain, muscles and nerves.”

More than once the newspaper discussed how dress reform could have negative effects on the economy, as the corset manufacturing was a $10 million industry that had employed over 10,000. The article also noted that other enterprises which provided materials for making corsets would also be affected. The fall of the industry would also affect a

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337 Gazette, 3 March 1889.
338 Gazette, 12 February 1898.
considerable amount of advertising revenue was generated by the corset manufacturers.\footnote{339}{“Dress Reform,” \textit{Gazette}, 12 September 1891.}

The \textit{Gazette} also made fun of fashions that seem to detract from traditional notions of femininity. For instance, bloomers which implied gender inversion and were associated with “unrestrained female sexuality,” were rarely discussed.\footnote{340}{Steele, \textit{The Corset}, 60.} In one of the few instances in which the newspaper mentioned an African American women in Cleveland actually wearing the garment it is the subject of gossip. Readers were asked to guess the identity of the young lady who while wearing bloomers was involved in an embarrassing incident where she fell off her bike ripping the garment.\footnote{341}{\textit{Gazette}, 11 July 1896. As the article suggest, African American women were not immune to the bicycle craze of the 1890s. There were several African American cycling clubs.} Another column titled, “Humorous,” describes two ladies observing bicyclists in the park. The “First Lady” notices that one of the riders seems to have adopted rational dress after the recent death of her husband, as she is wearing “trousers and a tunic.” The “Second Lady” agrees but attributes the women’s new found fashion sense, not to any radical beliefs but to frugalness because she is wearing her deceased husband’s clothes.\footnote{342}{“Humorous,” \textit{Gazette}, 16 November 1895.} In addition to satirizing the masculinization of women’s fashion, the joke also deals with traditional middle-class values concerning thrift, suggesting that new ideals could exist alongside older ideals. It is probably no coincidence that anxiety about the “New Woman” in these pieces focused on bicycling, which was associated with both increased mobility and changing fashions that undermined...
traditional gender distinctions. As Gordon argues, bicycling represented new freedoms, as "the new clothing for bicycling, like the activity itself, was associated with modernity and independence."³⁴³

The disappearance of discussion of Jenness-Miller in the Gazette and the newspaper’s support of the corset is not surprising considering that the corset unlike the garments associated with dress reform were a "sign of gentility and respectability."³⁴⁴ The newspaper’s adoption of a more negative attitude towards dress reform could be related to the continued rise of racism in the 1890s. It is possible that the newspaper’s integrationist stance made it shy away from any appearance that African Americans were acting outside of traditional norms.

Despite the importance of pricing, advertising, and content, promoting Ringwood’s was in many ways about self-promotion. To attract readership, Coston constructed herself within Victorian ideals of femininity. It was very important for Coston to be perceived like her magazine, as “pure” and “womanly.”³⁴⁵ There was a fear that women’s increasing participation in public life was causing them to become mannish. The image of Coston that appeared on the cover of the magazine attested to her respectability, showing that her entrepreneurial endeavor had not detracted from her femininity (fig. 4). The picture showed her as a paragon of Victorian womanhood, dressed modestly in a garment with a high neck line and fashionable puff sleeves accessorized with a

³⁴⁴ Steele, The Corset, 49.
³⁴⁵ Majors, Noted Negro Women, 256.
Figure 4. Front Cover of Ringwood's Afro-American Journal of Fashion, May and June 1893.
tasteful brooch. Coston’s gaze in the picture was not a direct one, as it showed her looking demurely off to the side. Therefore, in the face of claims that women were becoming too assertive, Coston demonstrated an appropriate level of submissiveness that was central to notions of respectable femininity. As Rooks writes in her examination of the magazine, the image of Coston “would have signaled her status and understanding of middle-class sensibilities.”

Moreover, profiles of Coston that appeared in other publications assured the public that she was a true woman and despite her public endeavor, she had not violated any of the standards of Victorian femininity and was acting within proscribed gender roles. According to “one of her dearest friends,” “There is nothing masculine or egoistic in the character of Ms. Coston.” When asked about women writers, Coston herself made it clear that women posed no threat to what was considered the male sphere. According to Coston, “They know naught of women’s rights and universal suffrage; they are not troubled with the affairs of State, nor are they agents of reform. They are women, adorable women, into whose minds has crept no vicious longing for publicity, no hunger to usurp the sphere of men.”

Because “[b]lack women’s respectability and moral authority were contingent on their relationship to black men,” profiles of Coston highlighted fact that she was happily married and had not sacrificed her domestic duties, as she

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346 Rooks, Ladies’ Pages, 33.
347 Ibid.
348 Scruggs, Women of Distinction, 143.
349 Majors, Noted Negro Women, 253.
was committed to both home and family.\textsuperscript{350} Coston was the wife of African Methodist Episcopal (AME) minister, William H. Coston. Mrs. Coston was referred to as "a faithful, affectionate, earnest, Christian wife who fills her position in [her husband's] household and congregation with dignity and grace..."\textsuperscript{351} A fashion magazine would have been an acceptable pursuit for a minister's wife because they had been directed to use their influence to set an example of proper dress.\textsuperscript{352} Moreover, marriage was often viewed as a prerequisite for women's political and social activism. Coston believed that print culture could be an important tool in guiding women on their proper roles. In the journal's first issue, Coston editorialized that the magazine would serve as a cultivating influence, something that she felt lacking even in her girlhood.\textsuperscript{353} The magazine located black progress within notions of domesticity, and therefore promoted a middle-class status based on the "politics of respectability."

Any fears that the magazine challenged patriarchal authority where further diminished by her husband's relationship with the magazine. In the Gazette, the magazine was sometimes described as an endeavor of both husband and wife.\textsuperscript{354} It was also thought that her husband's own literary experience enabled him to "suggest plans and methods" for the magazine.\textsuperscript{355} He also travelled across

\textsuperscript{350} Gaines, \textit{Uplifting the Race}, 170
\textsuperscript{351} Scruggs, \textit{Women of Distinction}, 141.
\textsuperscript{352} "Dress and Home Life," \textit{Southern Workman} 28 (1899): 346.
\textsuperscript{353} Scruggs, \textit{Women of Distinction}, 142.
\textsuperscript{354} Coston's husband is also referred to as an editor of the magazine. See Horace Talbert, \textit{The Sons of Allen} (Xenia, OH: Aldine Press, 1906), 222. William was author of \textit{A Freeman and Yet a Slave} (Mt. Pleasant, IA: s.n., 1888?).
\textsuperscript{355} Scruggs, \textit{Women of Distinction}, 142.
the country “in the interest” of the magazine. However, since his name was not mentioned within the pages of the magazine, it seems that his relationship with the publication was not formally recognized.

In 1895, for reasons unknown Coston discontinued *Ringwood’s*, and passed into relative obscurity. Financial difficulties often made it hard for African American periodicals to remain in business, as a result many were short-lived. The only long standing publications had the backing of the African American church. It seems inadequate finances might have been the reason for *Ringwood’s* disappearance. In 1894, Coston was seemingly the recipient of some charity as no occasion was given when it was reported, “About sixty friends called upon Mrs. W.H. Coston… and gave her a surprise donation, costing of a variety of useful and valuable articles.” Perhaps the demands of being a wife and a mother became too much. In 1895, Coston experienced personal tragedy with the death of her daughter, her namesake, for whom she would remain in grief. Or perhaps the demands of her husband’s ministry became too much. He was constantly being transferred to preside over different congregations, forcing the family to relocate. There were also problems in her marriage and perhaps she became frustrated with promoting a domestic ideal with which she herself had become disillusioned. Despite the published portraits of the Costons’ happy marriage, this was not the case. The marriage was plagued by domestic violence.

358 *Gazette*, 5 May 1894.
and infidelity. When Julia finally sought a divorce in 1912, she charged that despite the fact that "she ha[d] always been true and faithful to her marriage vows," her husband "within three weeks after their said marriage began to beat and otherwise ill treat" her.\(^{359}\) She also recounted several instances of adultery on his part, one of which caused him to be dismissed from his ministerial duties at a church he presided over in Canada.\(^{360}\)

While the magazine was short lived, it had considerable influence. At its peak, it had an estimated circulation of "four thousand copies a month."\(^{361}\) The magazine even garnered the attention of the National Council of Woman of the United States, a predominately white organization, which invited Coston to its World's Congress of Representative Women to be held in Illinois in 1893.\(^{362}\) The magazine even received international attention. In 1892, Coston received a letter from a woman in Haiti requesting a subscription. In her letter she wrote: "Strange as the fact may seem to you it will be the first journal of fashion issued in Hayti [sic], and I am proud that the introduction be made by a lady of our race for no one other should have the precedence in a country of independent blacks."\(^{363}\)

*Ringwood's* attested to the statement, "The remarkable progress made by the

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\(^{359}\) *Julia R. Coston vs. William H. Coston* (1912), Record Group 26, Equity Case File 31096, District Courts of the United States, District of Columbia, National Archives & Records Administration, Washington, DC.

\(^{360}\) As Coston's marital situation indicates, the desire to hold on to this respectability was sometimes to women' s own detriment as they often stayed in unhealthy relationships to avoid the stigma of divorce. Divorce records reveal that Julia stayed in the marriage "out of love and respect for her said children."

\(^{361}\) Rooks, *Ladies' Pages*, 32.

\(^{362}\) *Ringwood's*, May and June 1893, 80.

\(^{363}\) Majors, *Noted Negro Women*, 257.
freedman in the last twenty-five years, is nowhere seen to a better advantage than in journalism."

That Desire to Dress

Participation in consumer culture could be uplifting as well as demoralizing. The emerging culture's emphasis on "immediate satisfaction" seemed to run contrary to Victorian ideals of thrift and self-restraint. According to Fannie Barrier Williams, a member of the NACW, blacks spent more money for clothes and superfluous finery than for any other one thing except food."

African American's seeming prioritization of dress was met with criticism. Citing ignorance and lack of education as the reason, an article that appeared in the Gazette claimed, "negroes in no small numbers, are abject slaves to fashion, which has developed unquenchable desires for finery and dimmed their range of vision in quest of nobler things." Ella Wheeler Wilcox, a white author who considered herself somewhat an expert on African Americans, claimed that regardless of regional origins, "it [was] an every day matter to see well groomed and fashionably attired colored men and women emerging from homes which [were] little less than squalid." This was a matter of concern for Wilcox

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364 "The National Afro-American Press Convention," AME Church Review 7.4 (1891): 446. Among the conventions resolutions was the denouncement of "all discrimination practiced in places of public amusement and accommodations as an outrage." This included Jim-Crow cars, which were considered one of the insults against African American women.


because she argued, "[t]he home, not the adornment of the person, marks the progress of any race from the crude to the civilized state." While Wilcox was quick to judge, it is understandable why African Americans might have invested in dress more than other material aspects in their attempts to communicate racial progress. As discussed earlier, because of the nature of race relations, it was African Americans' dressed bodies rather than their homes that were most visible to the white gaze, and would have served as the best refutation of racial inferiority. However, African Americans were cautioned, "Outward appearance is not always a true test of prosperity; for extravagance is the forerunner of poverty."  

The neglect of the home was not the only lapse attributed to the desire to dress. Barrier also argued, "the passion for ornamentation and display debilitates our moral as well as our physical strength." According to African American Ohioan, William Hannibal Thomas, "fine clothes are the open sesame to social recognition, a craze for dress and personal adornment has aroused within the freedmen a passionate discontent that urges them to resort to all sorts of reprehensible follies, and even crime, to obtain their desire."  

Reports of theft seemed to corroborate Thomas' claims. On Christmas Eve of 1898, Carrie Overton described as "an 18 year old school girl," was

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arrested and charged with petit larceny for stealing "goods from four of the leading merchants." Overton’s thievery was described as a crime of opportunity, as they were attributed to “crowded condition of downtown stores” during the holiday season, corroborating the idea that department stores supposedly encouraged theft. Among the items Overton stole was a pair of neck ruffles, gloves, pocket book and pencil, and some inexpensive trinkets.372 In another incident, teenagers Effie Williams and her sister Mary were arrested and charged with grand larceny for allegedly stealing clothing valued at almost $100 from a local tailor’s shop.373

Even though kleptomania represented a more respectable notion of theft, the term kleptomania does not appear to have been used as a defense for African American women charged with shoplifting. Kleptomania was a disease associated with unregulated modern life, and was a way of not criminally stigmatizing women who stole.374 Like the culture from which it emerged, kleptomania was race, classed, and gendered. Kleptomania as a defense was primarily successful with white middle-class female defendants, and had less to do with the women themselves than with not impugning the reputations of their husbands and fathers. A white woman, “well dressed, well educated, of a good family” was not believed to be capable of criminal behavior and therefore she

372 Gazette, 24 December 1898.
373 Gazette, 8 February 1902.
must be suffering from kleptomania.\textsuperscript{375} In distinguishing shoplifting from kleptomania, it was argued that “the distinction is made to depend upon the apparent social or financial standing of the offender.”\textsuperscript{376} The other difference was the types of the items stolen. To satisfy a diagnosis of kleptomania, the items stolen usually had to be associated with female adornment and be of little monetary value.

African Americans probably shied away from using the term because the “female kleptomaniac symbolized the extremes of aggressive female consumption.”\textsuperscript{377} In a world where black aggressiveness was perceived as threatening to the social order, the image of the black female kleptomaniac would not have been one that African Americans would have been inclined to perpetuate, especially since it detracted from proper femininity. The consumption behavior of blacks was already deemed suspect and linked to deviancy which would have confirmed stereotypes of African Americans as “illicit, excessive, and irrational consumers.”\textsuperscript{378} Kleptomania was a biologically based argument that might have lent credence to scientific racism, especially notions that African Americans had an innate propensity for criminal behavior.

Kleptomania, a disease to which women were more susceptible, was about females’ inherent mental weakness and confirmed notions of female immorality and inferiority. Sufferers of the disease were driven to steal not out of  

\textsuperscript{375} “Her Singular Mania,” Plain Dealer, 24 December 1899.  
\textsuperscript{376} “The Kleptomania Season,” Plain Dealer, 12 December 1904.  
\textsuperscript{378} Merish, Sentimental Materialism, 353n1.
economic need, but lack of self-control in their desires for goods. The culture’s emphasis on immediate gratification was supposedly too much for some women to bear. Moreover, the disorder was believed to have a sexual element because it was generally believed that women were "seduced" by the goods on display and women supposedly experienced sexual pleasure from stealing. As such, African Americans might not have wanted to further stereotypes of African American women as oversexed.

While the white press treated kleptomania as a serious problem; the black press refused to accept kleptomania as a legitimate disorder. The Gazette often printed features that detracted from the idea that kleptomania was a real disease. One article suggested that kleptomania was just an excuse for other issues. According to the news story, a woman reportedly shoplifted because she wanted to be sent to jail in order to escape an abusive home life. Other features concerning kleptomania were often humorous, illustrating as Elaine Abelson has argued, "female kleptomania quickly became a stock character, a popular joke." "Following Up the Fads" suggested that merchants were actually taking advantage of kleptomania to overcharge customers. The joke revolves around a dry goods merchant directing his bookkeeper to add additional charges onto a customer’s bill. The bookkeeper is reluctant fearing that the customer will complain of the fraud, but the merchant assures him that even if the customer

380 "Steals to Go to Prison," *Gazette*, 13 September 1913.
notices the discrepancy, he would not say anything to avoid embarrassment that his wife suffered from kleptomania.\textsuperscript{382}

In another joke, two men discuss how a woman arrested for shoplifting claimed kleptomania as a defense. One man asks the other, “But does she take anything for it?” To which the other man responds, “Why, in one day she took three dress patterns, a silk umbrella, a silver bouquet holder, eight spools of cotton, three pairs of gloves, and a frying pan.”\textsuperscript{383} The fictional conversation drew attention to the way that kleptomania had reconstructed the victimology of shoplifting. The victims were no longer the merchants, but instead the perpetrators of the theft.

Thefts not only occurred from shopping at retail spaces, but from employers. In 1890, Fannie Mae Alexander, who was described as “a good looking mulatto girl, twenty-one years old,” was charged with grand larceny. Alexander, a servant, was accused of stealing “more than $500 worth of jewelry, dresses and finery” from her employer’s home. According to the report, the police executed a search warrant at Alexander’s home while she was not there, and “found $150 worth of dresses, beaded goods, etc.” After being told about Alexander’s whereabouts by her mother, the police “found her at a dance gorgeously arrayed and sporting in prominence upon her person a very fine gold watch,” which had belonged to her employer.\textsuperscript{384} According to an article, “A

\textsuperscript{382} “Following Up the Fads,” Gazette, 26 August 1893.
\textsuperscript{383} Gazette, 29 September 1900.
\textsuperscript{384} “That Desire to Dress,” Gazette, 22 February 1890. Reports differ regarding the value of the stolen goods.
Thieving Negress" that appeared in the *Plain Dealer*, a search of Alexander's mother's home had turned up some of the stolen property. Despite being caught red-handed, Alexander initially denied the charges. After her mother's statement implicating her guilt, Alexander admitted to the thefts and having given away some of the stolen property as gifts to her "sisters and male friends."\(^{385}\) That same year, Ida Scott also attempted to satisfy her desire to dress by taking items from her employer's wardrobe. Scott "was arrested for stealing a silk dress and wrapper valued at $60."\(^{386}\) In both cases the women were shown leniency, receiving no jail time but minimum fines and court costs.

Irene Hardy, a domestic who migrated to Cleveland from Zanesville, Ohio was charged with larceny after being arrested in a downtown restaurant. Hardy had allegedly stolen "a great quantity of clothing and other articles" from homes in which she had worked.\(^{387}\) The items had been uncovered in her luggage by her employers when she failed to return to work. Cleveland's white press, the *Plain Dealer*, despite describing her "as a young colored girl of twenty-two," referred to her as an "old trickster" who had posed as a domestic to infiltrate homes in order to rob them. This painted a very different image of Hardy than the one that had previously appeared in the black press. Before her legal troubles, Hardy's name had often appeared in the society pages indicating that she was a respectable member of the community. Moreover, after Hardy's arrest had been

\(^{385}\) "A Thieving Negress," *Plain Dealer*, 18 February 1890.
\(^{386}\) "Contempt of Court," *Plain Dealer*, 13 August 1890.
\(^{387}\) "Trunks Filled with Plunder," *Plain Dealer*, 26 February 1902.
reported, “several of her friends” requested that the Gazette print that reports of her thievery had been exaggerated. Because of African Americans’ perceived criminality, it was easy for white employers to accuse the black women who worked in their homes with theft. Hardy also maintained her innocence, stating that she was being unfairly prosecuted. According to Hardy, “the goods were maliciously placed in the containers by her employers, with whom she had some words, in consequence of which she had decided to leave their employment.”

Several respected men in the community including a reverend, came to her defense testifying to her good character. In the end, Hardy was required to pay a fine and court costs totaling $13, which was paid by one of the men who testified on her behalf.

The desire to dress was not only potential demoralizing to women, but the men in their lives. James and Prudence Schuman, husband and wife, were charged with grand larceny for allegedly “stealing 60 yards of cloth, valued at $75 from the May Co.,” where James worked. Hoping to avoid arrest, the couple fled to Findlay, Ohio. After being captured, James confessed to the crime alleging that is wife was to blame for the theft, but she subsequently denied involvement. The Gazette feared the theft would have a negative effect on the employment of African American men and urged ministers to use their positions in the community to address the matter.

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388 Gazette, 8 March 1902.
389 Ibid.
was arrested for shoplifting in a downtown store, he implicated Mary Crawford as his accomplice. Crawford was subsequently arrested, but during her arraignment she let it be known that she was not at fault because Powell had kidnapped her from her home in Cincinnati and taught her to steal, resulting in a four month crime spree. Powell was subsequently sentenced to thirty days in the workhouse and fined $200. Crawford, for her role was also given a thirty day sentence, but only fined $25.\textsuperscript{391}

Whether or not these women were in actuality accessories to the crimes, men were able to place the blame on the women in their lives because women were perceived to be more susceptible to materialism than men. Women were constructed as willing to manipulate the men and situations in their lives to get the things they wanted, thus reinforcing the idea that consumer culture represented a danger to masculinity. Consumer culture threatened notions of male dominance because not only did it make room for women to control men, but men’s authority had been co-opted by the culture itself, as it became the dominant authority in women’s lives.

Conclusion

African American middle-class women mobilized the discourse of fashion in their ongoing struggles against racism and sexism. These women’s attempts to reject the negative images of black womanhood through the appropriation of

\textsuperscript{391} "Girl Taught to Steal," \textit{Plain Dealer}, 22 September 1908 and \textit{Gazette}, 26 September, 1908.
Victorian womanhood represented both protest and accommodation: a simultaneous acceptance and rejection of dominant culture’s assumptions about black inferiority. Moreover, as Higginbotham writes, “Respectability’s emphasis on individual behavior served inevitably to blame blacks for their victimization and, worse yet, to place an inordinate amount of blame on black women.” 392

This would play out as discrimination increased with the growth of the black population during the Great Migration. The established African American middle-class would situate the problem not with racism, but with those who failed to adhere to the “politics of respectability.” Still viewing appearance as crucial to the process of racial advancement, “[f]ashion would come to represent an opportunity to control the behavior and bodies of African Americans.” 393

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392 Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 202
Chapter 3
Migrating to Shop, 1915-1940

According to Alain Locke, often referred to as the “father of the Harlem Renaissance”, the New Negro was “a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city but from medieval America to modern.”¹ The New Negro embodied modernity’s emphasis on autonomy, pleasure, and consumption. Migrant women often linked the modernity of northward migration with the ability to participate more fully in consumer culture. This was because “[f]reedom could mean defying both material poverty and the expectations of racists by shopping for goods and displaying and enjoying them.”² African American women saw migration not only as an opportunity to enhance “their personal and collective social and economic status”, but also their wardrobes.³

The notion that moving to urban areas opened up possibilities for participation in the culture of consumption was not a new one. Even during slavery, “[o]pportunities for acquiring additional clothing were always more numerous in urban areas. Here, the scope for conspicuous display was larger and the ability to earn extra money great.”⁴ This continued to be the case during the Great Migration. The best advertisements for northern migration were “earlier

³ Stephanie Shaw, What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 118.
migrants who returned...looking prosperous and urbane" in their "new clothes."5 When Sara Brooks decided to migrate to Cleveland from Alabama to join her brother, she did not know much about the north. However, it was the memory of her sister-in-law's clothes, who had previously migrated, that ultimately pulled her north. She remembered her sister-in-law "had some nice-looking little clothes when she came back to Orchard to visit." Brooks noticed because the things the woman had brought with her were things that Brooks did not own, including brassieres, one of which she was kind enough to lend Brooks to wear to church.6 In addition, one of the nicest things Brooks owned was a suit that her brother had purchased for her in Cleveland.7 The lure of clothes to pull people north was also evident in the incentives offered by labor agents in their recruitment of migrants. It was not unusual for agents to promise migrants new clothes. However, these were often empty promises that never materialized.8

This chapter will examine African American women’s consumption in the context of migration. While African American women migrants saw moving to Cleveland as an opportunity to expand their freedoms in the space of consumer culture, established residents saw the movement as threatening to their social standing and policed the appearance and behavior of migrants in terms of the middle-class values of sexual morality, cleanliness, thrift, piety, and hard work.

7 Ibid., 183.
8 Grossman, Land of Hope, 73.
Shopping in the South

African American women in the south often saw their lack of decent clothing as an emblem of their material deprivation. This was because "[i]t was only rarely that rural women or their daughters obtained a new dress, and when they did such garments were likely to be cut of cheap materials."9 One teenage girl reported that "her worst problem is that they are so poor: she is ashamed of her mother's having only one dress, which she keeps clean but has to wear everywhere."10 Brooks recalled that when she married all she had was one small suitcase which contained only a few items: dresses for church, underclothes, nightgowns, shoes, and perhaps a pair of stockings. She said, "I didn't have much—nobody much had anything."11 Even moving to Mobile, Alabama, an urban center, did not alleviate her poverty. Brooks who was forced to "mov[e] around a lot" was able to carry all that she and her daughter owned, which was only a "few clothes."12 African American women's lack of clothing was not only a function of poverty, but the shopping experience itself. African Americans' experiences with consumer culture in the south underscored that, "Public spaces

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9 White and White, Stylin', 172.
11 Brooks, You May Plow Here, 156.
12 Ibid., 188.
had the possibility of liberation, but they also carried the possibility of exploitation and oppression.\(^\text{13}\)

Consumer culture centered around public spaces, which were the very spaces that segregation attempted to control. Segregation "provided a way to embrace modernism and also contain it."\(^\text{14}\) Segregation reflected white anxiety over the loss of control over the black body. This anxiety not only involved fear of racing mixing, but also African American progress which undermined notions of white supremacy by exposing it as neither natural nor real. White supremacy was a vast mythic construct maintained by demeaning blacks, promoting the racial superiority of whites, and curtailing the personal and physical freedoms of blacks through both legal and extralegal means. As social control, segregation worked to define, construct, and regulate public space in ways that reified racial inequalities. It operated under the premise that blackness and the threat it represented to the social order could be contained by restricting black mobility spatially, socially, and economically.

Shopping was a leisure activity and had associations with "pleasure" and "personal freedom," but for many African Americans in the south, this was often not the case.\(^\text{15}\) Whites tried to control blacks' access to consumption largely because African Americans became increasingly visible as lives became


increasingly public. Although, it was acceptable for black women dressed in their
servant’s uniforms to enter public spaces because their dress implied
subservience, well-dressed African Americans accessing these spaces
threatened whites by illustrating the achievement whites believed were reserved
for themselves.

Racial conflict often arose when African Americans were able to obtain
"economic symbols," including clothes, which suggested not only equality, but
superiority, challenging whites' privileged status.  
African Americans were quite
conscious of this. In literature of the period, "clothes...provide a means to control
and manipulate the white gaze, problematizing, indeed deconstructing the
binaries on which white race hierarchy depends."  
A study of African American
consumers in the south noted, "Wearing apparel entering into the consumption of
the urban South is, as a whole, is of better quality than the occupations of the
majority would suggest."  
However, since purchasing was viewed as a form of
political participation and associated with civic responsibilities such as voting,
African Americans also experienced disenfranchisement in this realm.  
As a
result, shopping was often not a pleasurable leisure experience for African
American women in the south.

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16 Allison Davis et. al, Deep South, 481. See also Kevin K. Gaines, Uplifting the Race: Black
Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North
17 Lori Merish, Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century
19 Charles McGovern, Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945 (Chapel Hill, NC:
Power relations were maintained by allowing differential access to consumer culture. According to Hale, "Having little control over what types of clothing African Americans with means could purchase, white merchants attempted to assert racial difference at least within the shopping ritual itself." Thus, shopping, for black consumers, became about ritualized humiliation. For example, "in Baltimore, Maryland, the largest and best department stores [did] not even permit colored people to enter the stores." Footmen were stationed at the stores' entrances to prohibit their entry. However, establishments could only practice segregation in so much as their own self-interests allowed. Where African Americans made up a sizeable portion of the population, as in the Black Belt, merchants could not afford to completely bar African Americans from their establishments for fear of losing profits.

Instead of prohibiting African Americans entry, stores practiced other means of subordination. Some many stores had separate entrances and water fountains, and virtually all prohibited African Americans from using the store's restroom facilities except in rare instances where separate facilities were provided. Annie Jamison remembered, "[I]t just was awful that you were in a store and couldn't use the restroom. Then the water was in the store but one was marked 'Colored Water' and it wasn't no black. It was 'Colored Water' and 'White Water'." According to Johnson, there was only one "colored" restroom available

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downtown. It was located inconveniently at the courthouse, "far" from the stores.\(^\text{22}\)

In many rural areas through the *de facto* system of segregation, whites also restricted African American shopping to certain days of the week, with the understanding that disobeying might lead to embarrassment, even violence. For example, according to Mamie Garvin Fields, her town in South Carolina only permitted African Americans to do their shopping on Saturday. She writes:

Those white folks didn't want you to come to town in the weekday at all. They wanted you to come on Saturday, as I came to know later. See in Ehrhardt they even segregated days of the week. So riding to the store the way we did was almost the same as if we'd walked in the diner and sat down for lunch. Saturday was the day all black people were supposed to go and shop…\(^\text{23}\)

In rural areas where African Americans worked under the tenant system, they were forced to go through intermediaries, usually the farm owner, to place orders for merchandise. Under this system, blacks lacked consumer choice. Reminiscent of earlier sumptuary laws, black purchases were restricted to articles of inferior quality. In one instance, a farmer placing an order for one of his


tenants requested “a shirt good enough for a darkey to wear.” Consumer transactions were also based on exploitative relationships in which African Americans were overcharged for items in order to keep them in debt and locked into the system.

While service was a hallmark of consumer culture, waiting on black customers was seen as an inversion of the racial order. White clerks attempted to reassert their racial dominance by refusing to give black customers the proper respect. Clerks were less formal with blacks, refusing to use titles of respect, such as “Mr.” and “Mrs.” Despite the order in which they arrived, clerks often waited on white customers before black customers. Blacks were also prohibited from trying on clothes and returning merchandise. Business owners felt that clothes were no longer saleable after having been in the possession of blacks, believing it would hurt their businesses if white customers discovered that they sold such merchandise.

Nevertheless, white store owners supposedly preferred African American customers because as one business owner said, “they are much easier to handle than whites.” However, the reason African Americans may have appeared as model customers was because they “[did] not feel altogether at liberty to protest or to return merchandise even though...[they] might be warranted in doing so.”

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25 Davis et. al, Deep South, 59.
26 Ibid., 59.
27 Hale, Making Whiteness, 191.
Moreover, whites sometimes resorted to violence in order to circumscribe black participation in the consumer culture. As a result, shopping for clothes was also potentially dangerous because it brought women out in public where they would encounter dangers, including physical and sexual assault. Smith argues, "[W]hite anxiety over social and economic equality with African Americans was so very often intimately intertwined with white violence upon the black body in turn-of-the-century American culture."²⁹ A manager of a shoe department reportedly said, 'I'd rather have Negro than white customers, they are so much easier satisfied. But if one of them ever gets fresh with me, I'll crack him over the head with a chair.'³⁰

As sites of gendered racial violence, public spaces made African American women sexually vulnerable. Author Richard Wright recounted an incident that occurred when he was working at a clothing store in which a woman was violently attacked by the store's proprietors for not paying her bill. He writes "the boss and twenty-year-old son got out of their car and half dragged and half kicked a Negro woman into the store...After a few minutes I heard shrill screams coming from the rear of the store. Later the woman stumbled out, bleeding, crying, and holding her stomach."³¹ The attack had not gone unnoticed; a policeman had observed the incident from the street corner. However, he did not intervene except to arrest the woman afterwards under the suspicion of

³⁰ Edwards, The Southern Urban Negro As a Consumer, 97.
drunkenness. Wright later disclosed to his fellow porters what had happened and they told him that the woman had been lucky that she had not been raped in addition to her beating.

For African American females the threat of sexual insult or assault was omnipresent in the shopping ritual. Contrary to popular opinion, dressing the part of a lady did not ensure that an African American woman would be treated as such. According to one African American woman living in the south, "It is commonly said that no girl or woman receives a certain kind of insult unless she invites it. This does not apply to a colored girl and woman in the South...I have had a clerk in a store hold my hand as I gave him the money for some purchase and utter some vile request; a shoe man take liberties." As the woman indicated, even young girls were victims. The racist discourse surrounding black female sexuality extended to all black females regardless of age. The Advocate reported a 1916 incident that occurred in Jackson, Florida in which an eleven year old girl was allegedly raped by the son of a department store proprietor. The girl had entered the store shopping for stockings. The son who was waiting on her took her to a secluded part of the store where he "outraged her." Even though the young man was arrested and jailed, the African American community was not satisfied and organized a boycott of the store. The proprietor of the store

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32 "The Race Problem–An Autobiography: A Southern Colored Woman," *Independent*, 17 March 1904. An article on Jim Crow discussed the sexual vulnerability of African American women. Drawing attention to the hypocrisy of the system, the article argued, "If there were any sincerity about the desire to keep the races distinct, the greatest protection of law would be thrown around colored women." See William Pickens, "The Central Aim of Jim Crow is Humiliation," *Call & Post*, 13 January 1938.
reportedly "crazed by the loss of his Colored customers" had "attempted suicide." These occurrences countered images of shopping as offering safe public space for females. This was because in the rural south stores remained largely part of the male public sphere. This was especially true of general stores, which "remained largely the preserve of white men." 

The danger of consumer space was underscored by the lesson, not to linger, that African American children were taught during Jim Crow. According to a woman who grew up in Kentucky, "One of the things I know my parents always taught us when we go into the stores, we just go in the store and get what we want and come on out of the stores." This not only helped African Americans to avoid sexual assault, but to avoid accusations of theft. African American oppression by the larger society and culture even attempted to deny them the right to look. According to Enstad, "conventions of looking have long operated as a way to signal dominance or deference." Dominant culture tried to subordinate blacks by structuring the way in which they looked, determining the who, where, when, what, and how of the African American gaze. In the south, blacks were expected to avert their gazes and never look directly at whites who perceived such actions as challenges to their authority. It was not unusual for men to do the

34 Ownby, American Dreams in Mississippi, 72.
shopping in order to protect the females in families. Leola Davis Williams whose father was a sharecropper, often went to town on Saturdays alone to shop. When asked if her father purchased clothing on credit, she replied, "I don't think he did. Like clothes he would buy from some of them Howell store down there. Because you know he never did ... We didn't never go to town. He'd mostly go and do what to be done."\(^{37}\) She also discussed how her mother who rarely accompanied her father preferred "to stay home and patch and get the clothes ready for the next week."\(^{38}\)

Some avoided what could be a demeaning or dangerous experience by doing their shopping by mail order catalog, which "represented modern consumption."\(^{39}\) Flipping through the pages of the catalog, women could leisurely browse through merchandise, avoiding white surveillance. As one woman attested, "Our people used to send off for certain items. That way, too, the crackers—or the 'poor buckrah,' as was sometimes said wouldn't know what you had in your house."\(^{40}\) As Hale argues, "catalogs placed the consuming practices of blacks beyond knowledge and control."\(^{41}\) In addition to bypassing the potentially humiliating experience of shopping, mail order enabled African


\(^{40}\) Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places*, 73.

\(^{41}\) Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 179.
Americans to avoid becoming indebted to local retailers.\textsuperscript{42} Catalog shopping also presented African American women with the opportunity to enter into a national market where there was a greater selection of fashions that made the inadequacies of southern consumer culture more apparent.\textsuperscript{43}

African Americans in the south also attempted to use the phone ordering option that department stores offered as part of their services. However, such attempts to circumvent the racist dimensions of the shopping experience were not always successful. While Cleveland's May Company had a relatively good reputation in regards to its treatment of African American customers, this was not true for other branches of the department store in the south. When a woman in Baltimore "ordered articles over the telephone from the May Company in that city and when the delivery boy called her at her home and found out that she was colored he told her that the package could not be left. She then called the department store office and was informed that was the policy of the store."\textsuperscript{44}

Home sewing also allowed African Americans some alleviation from the racism they encountered in stores. African Americans sewed not only out of economic considerations, but to avoid the humiliation of the shopping ritual. Unlike ready-to-wear clothing, fabric did not need to be tried on and thus they

\textsuperscript{42} Ownby, \textit{American Dreams in Mississippi}, 75.
\textsuperscript{43} Hale, \textit{Making Whiteness}, 179. Mail-order shopping was also an important source of employment for African Americans in the north. For example, "The country's largest employer of black clerical workers (1,050 in 1920) was Montgomery Ward, a mail-order establishment whose personnel had no direct contact with the customers they served." See Jacqueline Jones, \textit{Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present} (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 179.
\textsuperscript{44} Chester K. Gillespie, "The Fighting Lawyer," \textit{Union} (Cincinnati, OH), 24 September 1931.
would not be denied the privilege. This was reflected in an interview with a woman from New Orleans who described shopping for clothes as “the worst thing in the world.”

I hated to go shopping...I hated it 'cause you could look at something you could like it, couldn't put it on, and they had, places where you could go and try on clothes, the sign up there would say, for white only, the signs told you that you could not try on a hat, and you could not try on any clothes, so I hated to go shopping that's why Mama did most of our sewing for us...45

In a few cases, African American females even resorted to theft to avoid the racist dimensions of shopping. Singer Billie Holiday recounted that while growing up in in Baltimore, “I used to love white silk socks, too, and of course black patent-leather shoes. I could never afford them. But I used to sneak in the five-and-dime and grab the white socks off the counter and run like hell. Why not? They wouldn't let me buy them even if I did have the money.”46 As Holiday suggests, personal freedom could be achieved through criminal behavior. From this perspective, theft can be considered a subversive act that provided African Americans opportunities to engage with consumer culture in ways that were

normally denied to them. It also was another avenue through which to acquire apparel that could disrupt notions of white superiority.

For some it was not just about being able to access fashionable clothing, but about being able to enjoy it. Whites were not only irritated by the presence of blacks, but that they appeared well-dressed, which was "a breach of Jim Crow expectations." For an African American "[t]o publicly present one's self as successful, dignified, and neatly attired, constituted a transgressive refusal to occupy the subordinate status prescribed for African American men and women." As a result, well dressed blacks were the targets of white "hostility" and "violence." A female informant in a study reported that whites "seem to resent seeing a colored person dressed up and looking nice." She went on to say that "she often feels criticized by white eyes when she goes out in a tastefully designed dress." Whites expected blacks to look the part, believing that blacks' appearance should reflect racial distinctions, and therefore black inferiority. While it was customary to dress up to go shopping especially in downtowns, this often caught the ire of white shoppers. In a store, a white women reacted to the presence of a "well dressed child of a colored professional," loudly remarking, "It's a shame how these niggushs can dress their children all up. They fix them up better than we can afford to fix ours." Being uppity, which well-dressed blacks were often accused of being, was seen as enough reason to terrorize. According

47 Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 53.
49 Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, 90-91.
50 Davis et. al, *Deep South*, 474n12
to Fields, “Really, certain whites didn’t like to think you had the leisure to do anything but pick cotton and work in the field... If you were black, you were not supposed to have either time or money, and if you did, you ought not to show it...They’d whip a person or do something else humiliating maybe even lynch you.”

Southerners resorted to violence in order to impress the point that despite black economic attainment, whites were still socially superior; that despite the end of slavery, the black body, was still subject to white control.

This was often made clear in African American women’s acquisition of fashionable clothing from their employers through the practice of giving and borrowing. Bertha Cowan remembered as a young girl receiving clothes from her mother’s employer. However, her family would not wear the clothes “as is.” Her aunt “ripped them up and made us kids pretty little organdies and swiss, an all kinds of clothes that most Negroes didn’t get to wear because they didn’t have that contact.”

In another incident, Opal a cook, “borrowed a party dress and three dollars” from her employer. However, Opal did not “return for several days.” When Opal’s employer found out that she did not intend to return, she sent word that if Opal did not return the items, her employer would have her arrested.

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51 Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places*, 72
52 This was true for whites regardless of age. Even white children understood the racial hierarchy and made blacks the victims of their violence. In one instance, a black woman in Alabama was purposely kicked by a small white boy while window shopping. See Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 53.
However, this was not necessary because "[b]y the next morning the dress had been secretly returned and hung up in the closet and the three dollars came back with it. Opal was discharged and another cook hired." The husband of the woman who had employed Opal disapproved of the incident and saw it as evidence of the wife getting too close to the servants. It confirmed his fears that they were being taken advantage of by their black employees.

Sometimes, however, domestics rejected these gifts, not wanting to give employers any more control over their lives than they had to. Such gift giving or privileges by employers was not simply a matter of trust or affection, but reinforced black subordination. It allowed whites to continue the paternalism that characterized race relations during slavery reinforcing ideas of black dependency on whites. It gave whites control over what domestics wore even outside of work clothes and was reminiscent of the discarded benevolence that had characterized their enslavement. During slavery, "masters and especially mistresses took great pleasure in passing their used clothing on to the slaves and understood this gift relationship as maintaining if not widening social distance." This dynamic continued after the institution's demise, as "gifts of used clothing and other household items highlighted the economic inequality separating domestic and employer." The ability to construct one's own appearance meant that one had control over their own body. It also sent the

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54 John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, 107-108.
message that “cast offs” were not an appropriate substitute for inadequate wages.57

African American dress in the south was not just circumscribed by racism, but by geographical location. Consumer culture in the south lagged behind the rest of the country. According to Edward L. Ayers's post-Reconstruction study of the south, when compared to northern cities, “the South's patterns of consumption were laughable.”58 Despite the fact that the “eastern” or “northern” origins were used as selling points in the south, the newest and most popular fashions were not readily available in the region.59 This led a woman from Arkansas to believe that the south was the repository for fashions that proved unsuccessful in the north. As a result, it appeared the south had its own sense of fashion.60 In the early 1920s, “it took 27 months for a Fifth Avenue Style to get into the mail order catalogs for rural consumption.”61

Shopping in Cleveland

African Americans protested poor treatment by leaving the south, hoping that migration could resolve their consumer desires and transform their

57 While such gift giving may have reinforced the social hierarchy, it also undermined it. According to the Director of Home Economics at Hampton University, these gifts and modern advertising caused the "younger generation" to develop "expensive tastes" in things like dress. See Carrie A Lyford, "Home-Making Needs of the Negro," Southern Workman 50 (1921): 205.
59 Ownby, American Dreams in Mississippi, 8.
60 Ibid., 102.
61 Christine Frederick, Selling Mrs. Consumer (New York, NY: Business Bourse, 1929), 205.
identities. Even men cited the ability of their wives to participate more fully in consumer culture as one of the benefits of migrating north. A man who migrated to Chicago when discussing the "comforts and pleasures" he derived from his "higher wages" remarked, "My wife can have her clothes fitted here, she can try on a hat, and if she doesn't want it she doesn't have to keep it." His response echoed the fact that African American men had historically taken pride in their wives' fashionable appearance as it signified both "the legitimacy of their relationship and his role as family provider."

However, African Americans who migrated north to Cleveland, especially after 1915, would find that they could not escape racial oppression altogether. As the population of African Americans increased, the racial progressivism on which Cleveland had prided itself began to diminish. As the Call & Post reported, "Daily it becomes more apparent that the virus of southern race prejudice is bearing its malignant fruit in this cosmopolitan city of Cleveland. With amazing rapidity it is spreading through the very arteries of this city—once famous for its liberality to minority groups." While racism was not as severe in northern states like Cleveland, as discussed in the last chapter, it nevertheless existed and helped to shape the everyday lives of African Americans in the city, including how they

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62 The belief that urban migration could open up the possibilities for accessing the material goods essential to the creation of modern identities was widely held by those residing in rural America. See Susan J. Matt, Keeping Up With the Joneses: Envy in American Consumer Society, 1890-1930 (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 96, 126.
64 Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow, 69.
experienced consumption. Despite the passage of the state’s Civil Rights Law, African Americans found their opportunities to participate in the culture of consumption increasingly limited as racism and discrimination intensified. Recalling discrimination in the city’s downtown, Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes stated, “In Cleveland, a liberal city, the color line began to draw tighter and tighter.” However, the fact that racial discrimination was not evenly practiced, especially in those establishments that sold apparel, made it difficult to anticipate. As a result, African American women were never certain of the treatment they would receive when they went shopping.

In 1920, the Gazette reported “Euclid Ave Shoe Store Tries Out Segregation.” According to the story, “An unexpected case of discrimination occurred in Hannan & Sons shoe stores” when two African American women were asked to sit in the rear of the store. The women obliged and “observed a number of Colored people seated there.” One of the women believing this was evidence of discrimination left the store without making a purchase. The following week one of the women, “who [had] been a patron of the store for eight or nine years” returned to the store and again was asked to sit in the rear of the store. When she inquired “if they discriminated by segregating Colored patrons,” she was allegedly told, “We surely do, the white people would not stand for Colored patrons sitting where they sit.”

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One of the golden rules of customer service, "first come, first served" did not appear to apply to African Americans. When Mrs. Charles C. Ailers went into McAn's shoe store on Euclid Avenue, she waited over forty minutes while she was ignored by staff who helped other customers who had come into the store after her. As she walked out of the store, she reportedly overhead one of the store's employees say, "There is one gone."69

The city's department stores also racially discriminated by not permitting African Americans to try on items. It was complained that the department the Higbee Company, did not allow African American women to try on gloves.70 Even the May Company's more liberal attitude seem to wane, as one migrant recalled that the store did not permit African American women to try on hats.71 The inability to try on items was compounded by the difficulty that blacks faced when attempting to return items. When a woman went to exchange a shirt she had purchased for her husband, "the clerk at the store refused to make the change. Then after an embarrassing wait, took the shirt, looked it over carefully and then smelled it, before giving her what she paid for."72 Some stores restricted access, not allowing African Americans to ride the elevators.73 Often times it was

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69 "Dr. Ailer's Wife Sues Shoe Store," Call & Post, 13 August 1936.
70 "Annual Report of the Cleveland Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for the Year Ending December 1st, 1924," National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Cleveland Branch records, 1924-1967, MS 3520, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, 1.
71 Murtis Taylor, interview by Erlynne Davis, 17 October 1986, transcript, St. James Oral History Project, MSS 4536, Container 2, Folder 36, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, 55.
72 "Cleveland Social and Personal," Gazette, 8 September 1923.
73 Christopher G. Wye, "Midwest Ghetto: Patterns of Negro Life and Thought in Cleveland, OH, 1929-1945" (PhD diss., Kent State University, 1973), 36.
purportedly individual employees and not store policy that resulted in discrimination. While the fixed pricing of these stores had been an attractive option for African Americans trying to avoid discriminatory pricing, the denial of services and amenities that were used to justify the higher prices meant that African Americans were still in effect paying higher prices for goods.

The lack of department store advertising in African American newspapers also seems to suggest that stores were not interested in actively soliciting African American patronage. Department store advertisements were more prevalent and elaborate in the city's white newspapers. The majority of department store advertisements that appeared in Cleveland's African American newspapers were for stores' bargain basements which were created as a way of maintaining social boundaries (fig. 5). Signifying this, basements had "inferior in merchandise and decoration to the rest of the store." They also did not offer the same level of service as the main store, as they were primarily self-service. This meant that interactions with the clerk were primarily limited to the point-of-purchase. While bargain basement shopping was an attempt to marginalize African American consumerism, it did have its advantages. Bargain basements which had lower price points compared to the rest of the department store allowed women to obtain less expensive clothing. This would have been particularly attractive for many with limited budgets. Also, while much of the merchandise was of a poorer

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75 Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 78.
In The May Co.'s Bargain Basement

Women's Spring Coats

$35.00 Values
$37.50 Values
$39.50 Values
$42.50 Values

75 New Styles

A startling sale event just before Easter—over 1,400 women's stunning new coats—every one a brand new style—the latest designs from well-known New York manufacturers, to go on sale at a radically lowered price.

The stylish new straightline, flare bottom, side button effect with all the latest features—beautifully trimmed.

Fashioned of—

Suede

Foreshaven

Kasha

Twilltloom

Brilliant Colors—

Chile

Arab

Shrimp

Navy

Powder Blue

Actual $35.00 to $42.50 values—to go on sale Tuesday in the Bargain Basement at...

Misses' Sizes 14 to 30
Women's Sizes 36 to 44
Stylish Stout Sizes 44 1/2 to 52

Figure 5. May Company Bargain Basement Advertisement, Gazette, 4 April 1925.
quality (often irregular or stock worn), basements sometimes offered salesmen samples for sale. Because these samples were made in lesser quantities than other ready-to-wear clothing, purchasing such items allowed women to obtain more unusual items.

Wm. Taylor & Sons had one of the worst reputations in regards to its treatment of African Americans. The Gazette reported that a woman who “went into Wm. Taylor, Son & Co...was told that her people’s patronage was not wanted.” There was also a rumor that the department store did not allow black passengers to use its shuttle service which provided transportation between the store and its parking lot. Articles in the Gazette urged African Americans and their “white friends” not to shop at the department store.

While African Americans in Cleveland had previously faced discrimination when attempting to patronize downtown eating establishments, during the Great Migration this worsened. George A. Myers claimed, “There is scarcely a restaurant or café downtown that we are permitted to enter and be served, no matter how respectable, with or without families.” As previously discussed, those restaurants that did not all together refuse African American customers

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76 This poor treatment extended to the store’s African American employees, who were prohibited from using the employee dining and restroom facilities. See Gazette, 14 July 1917.
77 “Cleveland Social and Personal,” Gazette, 2 June 1923.
discouraged their patronage by serving them food that was inedible. Restaurants also overcharged African Americans, requiring them to pay service charges.

Passing

Some African Americans avoided discrimination in the marketplace by racially passing. As a tactic, African Americans were able to subvert the spatial limits that racial discrimination and segregation attempted to impose. While passing occurred both in the north and in the south, it was primarily a northern urban phenomenon. This was because passing was usually only effective in areas where people were relatively anonymous.79 Passing, for those whose complexions permitted, allowed a degree of personal autonomy that was otherwise impossible.

African American literature of the period often connected passing to accessing consumer culture. In the novel *Plum Bun* by Jessie Redmon Fauset, the main character, Angela Murray, learns the “joy and freedom” of passing in shopping trips with her mother. Angela’s mother loves to shop and patronizes Philadelphia’s fashionable shops, including Wanamaker’s Department Store. One of the things that Mrs. Murray enjoys about shopping is the ability to “look on.” However she realizes, “Much of this pleasure, harmless and charming thought it was, would have been impossible with dark skin.”80

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In Nella Larsen's novel, *Passing*, the characters also pass to participate in consumer culture. Irene Redfield renews her acquaintance with childhood friend, Clare Kendry, after a chance meeting in a hotel tea room while enjoying an afternoon of shopping. Later, embarrassed when one of her friends finds out that she has been passing, she justifies it by confessing that she does it "for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theater tickets and things like." While Irene passes on a temporary basis, Clare does so permanently. For Clare, it is the material deprivation that she experiences as a child that develops in her a materialism that ultimately leads to her decision to pass. Having married a white man, Clare possesses not only the complexion, but the economic security that enable her to participate more fully in consumer culture.

Passing was not only dependent on complexion, but one's entire self-presentation, including dress. In the above novels, clothing is essential to the characters' racial masquerades. In the *Plum Bun*, the mother and daughter duo are described as a "modish pair, the well-dressed, assured woman and the refined and no less assured daughter." In *Passing*, when Irene Redfield suspects her racial identity has been detected, she believes that something must

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82 In her youth, Clare had developed "no allegiance beyond her immediate desire." When she was younger this resulted in her taking money to buy fabric to make a red dress. The choice of a red dress further implies that there is something immoral about her desire to dress. See Larsen, *Passing*, 172.
be amiss with her self-presentation. To make sure, she quickly checks her hat, make-up, and dress.  

Documented cases of passing in Cleveland mostly connect the practice to employment. The summer after high school, the light-skinned Murtis Taylor was able to secure a job in the stockroom at the May Company, but only by keeping her racial identity a secret. Taylor did "so well" that her supervisor wanted to promote to a salesperson in the store's exclusive "French Room, where they sold hats and French Dresses." However, on the day she was supposed to begin her new job her supervisor said, "I'm sorry, we know some things about you we did not know when we hired you. Your services are no longer needed." Taylor assumed that the reason she was let go was because it had discovered that she was African American. What was interesting is that before being let go, Taylor had observed that one of the other women working in the department was also passing. It was not unusual for blacks to pass as white in order to gain employment opportunities and it was sanctioned in part because of the lack of employment opportunities available to African Americans. As the Taylor incident shows, "In most cases white businesses steadfastly refused to hire Negro

85 Taylor, interview, 26-27.
86 Ibid., 26. French rooms offered an exclusivity that gave wealthy women the distinction that they craved. The rooms were "special showrooms that admitted only the most elite clientele—offered a refuge for wealthy customers repelled by the 'democratic' tendencies of the department store." See Wendy Gamber, The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930 (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 195.
An editorial in the *Chicago Defender* discussed that many blacks passed to work in the city’s “big department stores.” However, the article noted, “It is a shame and a disgrace that we must be forced in order to make a livelihood, to live this life each day, but there is not another way.” Passing was not confined to downtown stores. Discrimination worked to limit African American employment even in their own neighborhoods. A gossip column drew attention to the fact that a young woman was passing to work at a store located on Woodland Avenue, a shopping district located in the heart of the black community. While African Americans often protected the identity of those who passed, the columnist felt that the young women’s failure to acknowledge him/her in public was “too much” and threatened to divulge the young women’s identity if her manners did not improve.

Passing involved race as performance and therefore was subversive act that exposed race as neither natural nor stable. It challenged the notion that race was somehow knowable. Many whites believed that despite the seemingly white appearance of some African Americans there were still tell-tale signs that indicated their racial identity. Murtis Taylor was told by a white employer that they

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87 Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape*, 196. As before the Great Migration, African Americans being employed as clerks continued to be newsworthy. In 1919, the Gazette reported that the W.B. Davis, a Euclid Avenue menswear department store, “conspicuously placed” two African American women as clerks. The newspaper saw the employment as “refreshing as well as encouraging” and also noted that the store also “employed elevator, bundle and stock girls of color.” See *Gazette*, 1 February 1919.
89 For more on the African American community’s protection of those who passed, see Ibid., 67.
were able to “tell a nigger” by the “white marks on their fingernails.” But the fact that Taylor’s employer did not realizing that Taylor herself was passing, indicated the unreliability of the supposed physical markers of race.

While passing resulted in individual gains, it did little for the race or to alter the prevailing racial discourse. Moreover, it had “heavy psychological and cultural consequences.” For instance in *Plum Bun*, while Mrs. Murray has no desire to be white, it teaches her daughter Angela “that the great rewards of life—riches, glamor, pleasure—are for white-skinned people only.” Angela ultimately decides to pass permanently. Those who decided to pass also lived in fear that their secret would be discovered. The *Call & Post* in discussing how “a certain manicurist who is passing, found it difficult to keep her boss from taking her home, but...finally succeeded,” and noted how “[t]he road is not easy always for even those who are passing. There’s always fear of racial identity.”

Even after Taylor’s dismissal from May Company, she again passed and got a job at a local restaurant, whose owners were racists and did not allow black patronage of their establishment. Taylor recalled one incident, which she observed in silence, where two African American women at the owner’s direction were served “sandwiches that they couldn’t eat.” Despite the fact that their food was inedible, the women tried to pay for their meal and were told that payment was unnecessary as their patronage was not wanted. Upon the women leaving

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90 Taylor, interview, 29
93 “Skippy,” *Call & Post*, 4 February 1937.
the restaurant, the owner broke the plates off which the women had been eating. Working in that environment, Taylor "came home and cried every night." However, her desire to work so she could "buy some clothes and...go back south" outweighed the psychological toll.

Policing Dress

The Great Migration exposed class tensions within Cleveland's African American community. The established African American community blamed the erosion of economic, political, and social opportunities on newly arrived migrants. Migrants were not welcome, but instead were considered an "undesirable presence." Their behavior was constructed as morally and socially irresponsible even dangerous, and subject to intense surveillance. The Gazette reprinted an editorial that appeared in the Cincinnati Union which stated, "Too little class, rather than too much color, is the greatest cause of our segregation, ostracism and persecution." For instance, the discrimination that African Americans faced on streetcars was not attributed to racism, but to their own behavior. Despite being well dressed, two women were criticized for talking too loudly on a Scovill Avenue bound streetcar. According to the article, such public

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94 Taylor, interview, 28.
95 Ibid., 25.
96 Kusmer, A Ghetto Takes Shape, 252. Migration after 1915 also represented a shift in the demographics of the black population as it was primarily from the lower south Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi.
behavior was "making and multiplying enemies of the race." \textsuperscript{99} Murtis Taylor recalled how her white employer came into work one day complaining because a "nigger" sat down next to her on the streetcar. \textsuperscript{100} Sometimes this unwillingness expressed itself in violence. In 1919, Reverend O.W. Childers of St. James A.M.E. Church recounted, "four ladies of my congregation, some children and I were stoned on a streetcar of this city for no apparent reason than that we were colored." \textsuperscript{101}

However, whites' unwillingness to share public space did not begin with the Great Migration. In fact, the city's streetcar system had initially been designed to limit African American access. According to Gerber's study of race in Ohio, "racial animosity" had been successful "in blocking the construction of a streetcar line between Central and Cedar avenues in 1906." \textsuperscript{102} This represented attempts to limit the mobility of blacks. Residential patterns of segregation meant that the majority of the black population was confined to the east side of Cleveland in the Central Avenue area. \textsuperscript{103} This segregation affected African Americans' access to consumer opportunities because much of the city's "stores and other services concentrated along streetcar lines," which added to the respectability of shopping

\textsuperscript{99} "'Raisin Jack' and Too Much Mouth," \textit{Gazette}, 27 May 1922.
\textsuperscript{100} Taylor, interview, 29.
\textsuperscript{101} William W. Giffin, \textit{African Americans and the Color Line in Ohio 1915-1930} (Columbus, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 45.
\textsuperscript{102} Gerber, \textit{Black Ohio and the Color Line}, 317.
\textsuperscript{103} In order to restrict African American property ownership, some property deeds even had covenants that prohibited the selling of the house to African Americans.
giving it the aura of safety and convenience. As a result, even though the area was bounded by two major shopping thoroughfares, Euclid Avenue on the north and the downtown on the west, limited transportation services made accessing them difficult. Streetcar service in the Central Avenue area suffered from the number and locations of stops, which were few and far between. The streetcars were also of poor quality, usually the city's oldest. According to Gerber in his study of race in Ohio, "Only at Cleveland did poor streetcar connections isolate many black shoppers," not only from shopping downtown but near their own neighborhoods.

In the 1920s, despite already being poor, service grew "steadily worse." The Gazette reported that a reduction in service would result in longer waits for Central Avenue riders. Even during the "holiday season" when "extra service" was added to the city's various lines, the Central Avenue line did not benefit. In 1929, the Central Avenue area was again threatened supposedly because of "poor patronage." However, the previous year, "it was the second best paying line in the city!" Lack of taxi service also restricted African American travel.

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106 Gerber, Black Ohio and the Color Line, 317.
around the city. In the 1930s, only one company permitted African American patronage.  

As transportation services suggest, power relations in Cleveland, as well as other urban areas, were consciously and unconsciously structured around spatiality. The unwillingness of whites to share space with blacks was further reinforced in the exclusion of African Americans from other forms of recreation. Blacks were excluded from some hotels, theaters, and amusement parks. At the popular Luna Park resort, “blacks could enter only on designated ‘Jim Crow’ days; even then, they were not permitted to use the bathing facilities, which were consistently ‘out of order’ on those days only.”

Even an African American owned skating rink restricted African American patronage. The owner had been directed to institute a policy of segregation if he hoped to retain white customers.

Even if consumer culture did not play a role in women’s impetus to migrate, it certainly played a role in their migration experience as they attempted to adjust to life in the urban north. From the moment migrants arrived in Cleveland they were constructed by their dress. Newly arrived migrants were described as “poorly clad.” According to one observer, “Many...came with only

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113 Gazette, 12 May 1917.
the clothing that they were wearing."¹¹⁴ In some cases, the lack of clothing was because labor agents "would frequently confiscate the newcomer's baggage until she paid the "debt" incurred to pay for her transportation north.¹¹⁵ In the book, The Bluest Eye, the character Pauline Breedlove migrates from Kentucky to Lorain, Ohio (which is located not far from Cleveland). Upon arriving, Pauline begins to develop feelings of inferiority largely as the result of her appearance: "Their goading glances and private snickers at her way of talking (saying "chil'ren") and dressing developed in her a desire for new clothes...The sad thing was that Pauline did not really care for clothes and makeup. She merely wanted other women to cast favorable glances her way."¹¹⁶ In order to overcome feelings of inferiority, Pauline obtains employment as a domestic so she is able to afford the clothes she believes are necessary to "fit in." Although fictional, Pauline's experience illustrates how appearance was essential to adjusting to urban life. It also demonstrates how "popularity and social acceptance depended at least to some degree, on ownership of the right objects."¹¹⁷

Dress was viewed as important because improper dress could bar African Americans from the opportunities they hoped to enjoy by migrating north

¹¹⁵ Kusmer, A Ghetto Takes Shape, 258.
¹¹⁶ Toni Morrison, The Bluest Eye (New York, NY: Vintage Books, [1970] 1998), 118. Despite the book's later publication date, it is still useful here. The novel is considered the quintessential migration narrative. Moreover, its author, Morrison, would have first-hand knowledge of this period as she was born in Lorain, Ohio in the 1930s. Like Cleveland, the northeast city of Lorain, Ohio experienced the Great Migration, as African Americans settled there to work in the factories of the small industrial city.
to Cleveland such as education and employment. The children of one woman who migrated to Cleveland were sent home from school for "improper dress."\textsuperscript{118} Her husband was unemployed and she was unable to afford the purchase of new clothing. Appearance was considered an important aspect of employability. It was necessary to have appropriate attire for work. When Ella Mae Sharpe was informed that she had gotten a job as a schoolteacher, her father that took her "downtown to get a hat some shoes" so that she would look the part.\textsuperscript{119} However, Catharine Fisher recalled that sometimes looking too nice could work against a woman when applying for employment. Wearing a business suit, Fisher had been turned away from a nursing job for looking like she did not need a job.\textsuperscript{120}

In an effort to stem the tide of growing racial discrimination and rid their neighborhoods of vice, middle-class and religious women attempted to reform the behaviors of the new migrants.\textsuperscript{121} Helping migrants adjust to urban life included instructing them on proper dress. Reformers believed that such dress "challenged negative stereotypes about African Americans as unclean, unruly, and undeserving of respectable treatment."\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{118} W. O. Walker, "Down the Big Road," \textit{Call & Post}, 28 September 1939.
\textsuperscript{119} Ella Mae Sharpe, interview by, 22 September 1986, transcript, \textit{St. James Oral History Project}, MSS 4536, Container 2, Folder 34, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, 15.
\textsuperscript{120} Catharine Fisher, interview by Louise Vilar, 9 December 1986, transcript, \textit{St. James Oral History Project}, MSS 4536, Container 1, Folder 13, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, 11.
Unattached African American women were perceived as particularly vulnerable. Despite the fact that many had migrated from southern cities, it was believed that migrants did not know much about urban living, and were in need of assistance. Of the difficulties women faced “the greatest …were in finding proper lodgings and a place to spend their free time, and in obtaining employment.” The situation was more acute for African American women on account of racism and discrimination.

This type of policing was not unique to the African American community, but was part of the social welfare and reform movements that characterized the Progressive Era. However, unlike their white counterparts, because of patterns of residential segregation, African American female reformers did not have far to travel to reach the portions of the city in need of uplift. There was an over-representation of vice and crime in the Central Avenue area: “Speak-easies, dope-dealers, drunken men and women, prostitutes innumerable with their ‘Johnnies’ are in evidence thruout [sic].” Authorities did little to respond to the problem and in many ways condoned it. The area became referred to as the “Roaring Third,” in reference to the ineffective policing in the precinct.

123 “Home for Colored Girls is Provided,” Plain Dealer, 10 March 1918.
124 Patterns of residential segregation made it difficult for the African American middle-class to maintain a spatial distance between themselves and the new migrants. This was especially problematic because “segregated spaces…tended to collapse intraracial distinctions,” making it difficult for members of the African American middle-class to distinguish themselves and enjoy the privileges of their class status. See Martin Summers, Manliness and its Discontents: The Black Middle Class & the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930 (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 3-4.
125 “The Roaring Third, Again,” Gazette, 8 October 1927.
126 Giffin, African Americans and the Color Line, 94-95.
Reform efforts were an expression of moral concern over the emerging consumer culture that contradicted the Victorian values of thrift and self-control. Consumer culture was increasingly linked to women’s immorality. “Shopping” became code for those engaged in illicit behavior. This was reflective of the fact that “[a]lmost any place an unchaperoned woman might come into contact with men was considered dangerous” and “harbored threats to a… reputation.”\textsuperscript{127} The wife of a doctor used shopping as a ruse to carry on an extra-marital affair. According to the gossip column, the married woman “goes shopping in the vicinity of 105\textsuperscript{th} st. [sic], but invariably ends up in a certain home in ‘Green Pastures’ with the same young man and they ‘go shopping all afternoon.’”\textsuperscript{128} A mother whose daughter had connections to prostitution, unwilling to divulge such information explained, “she shops for wealthy women.”\textsuperscript{129}

\textit{Dressed to Dance}

The dancehall and other amusements associated with “street” culture, along with the dress associated with them, became targets of reform. This was because cultural practices associated with black migrant women of the working-class were thought to be the source of demoralization. Many of these practices centered on the street, therefore “the street became the metaphor for all that was

\textsuperscript{128} “Skippy Warnings,” \textit{Call & Post}, 11 February 1937.  
\textsuperscript{129} Jane E. Hunter, \textit{A Nickel and A Prayer} (Cleveland, OH: Elli Kani Publishing Co., 1940), 67.
unwholesome or dangerous."\textsuperscript{130} The "street" also was troubling for reformers because Victorian life was defined by strict gender guidelines, men and women had separate spheres, but "the street signified male turf, a public space of worldly dangers and forbidden pleasures...Women who strolled the streets or attended dance halls and cheap theaters promiscuously blurred the boundaries of gender."\textsuperscript{131}

As early as 1911, a discussion by Reverend Frye of Springfield declared modern dance, "too sensual...hence counter spiritual and very sinful." He located its immorality in its sensory pleasures, including "the beautiful and often costly attire of the participants." He concluded the discussion by saying, "Dancing is a modern foe to virtue, economy and religion."\textsuperscript{132}

Dressing up was an important part of going out, as resident Geraldine Daniel recalled.\textsuperscript{133} Dressing up was "fun and pleasurable" and essential to constructing images of black dignity, in part because it "was a way of shedding the degradation of work."\textsuperscript{134} Much like dressing up did for the enslaved, it

\textsuperscript{130} Higginbotham, \textit{Righteous Discontent}, 201.

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 204.


\textsuperscript{133} Geraldine Daniel, interview by Kim Green, 28 October 1986, transcript, \textit{St. James Oral History Project}, MSS 4536, Container 1, Folder 8, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, 31.

enabled African Americans to see themselves as something other than laborers. In this time and space they had control over their bodies and their selves. However, the fashions displayed in these public spaces of leisure often stood in contrast to the modesty that was central to notions of middle-class respectability. The immodest fashions that women wore while patronizing nightclubs, cabarets, and dancehalls added to the immorality of these places. These public amusements, associated with the street, contradicted “Victorian prescriptions that women should reveal little of themselves in the street.” Women were often scantily clad, suggesting their sexual availability. When Count Basie performed at one of Cleveland’s night spots, a gossip columnist could not help but notice “Hattie Badger in a daringly short dress.” A few weeks later the same columnist was even inspired to compose a poem, “Final Word on Hattie,” about the inappropriate length of Hattie’s attire, which read: “Hattie has a little skirt/It keeps on getting shorter/If she ever has it washed/It won’t cover what it arter/Confidentially it shrinks.” Woodliff Hall was described as “the resort of bad women.” According to one goer, while “the music was good...there was not a little in the conduct and appearance of the guests to cause me uneasiness—

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135 See Kelley, Race Rebels, 50 and Joel Dinerstein, Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 22.
136 An article suggested that women’s wearing of immodest clothing was not simply a matter of morality, but health and provided statistics that immodest dressing was the cause of ill health and women’s shorter life expectancies. See “Women’s Method of Dress Unhealthful,” Advocate, 4 March 1916.
137 Schorman, Selling Style, 147.
138 “On the Avenue with TDS,” Call & Post, 16 March 1939.
139 “On the Avenue with TDS,” Call & Post, 6 April 1939.
women with heavily painted faces and indecently short skirts." The risqué fashions added to the already sexual charged atmosphere where the dancing in itself was considered a sexual act.

Reformers did not have a problem with dancing in and of itself, but the type and venues. Dances were quite popular activities for the middle-class and elite. Dancing was considered an acceptable form of recreation for respectable "old settlers," like the Chesnutts. When the Chesnutt daughters "told their parents that they wanted to learn to dance...a dancing club was formed," and was considered "a family affair." However, African American migration brought new forms of dancing that took place in morally questionable environs. For example, the dancing at Woodliff Hall, was not considered socially acceptable. The Gazette reported the following concerning a dance at Woodliff Hall, "The deportment of some of our young people in public is very disgraceful...McAfee, who conducts the dancing school was compelled to stop a dance and demand that the vulgar and immoral actions of some of the participants be stopped at once. It is a shame that young men and women show so little respect for themselves and others." Such dancing was considered a public nuisance, as evidenced when Juanita Brown received a $10 fine for publically dancing "in an immodest way."

140 Hunter, A Nickel and A Prayer, 68.
142 Hunter, A Nickel and A Prayer, 69.
143 Gazette, 13 August 1904.
144 "Charged $10 For Immodest Dance," Call & Post, 22 September 1934.
The dances "represented rebellion, sensuality, and sexual liberation." This was because African American dancing "challenged Euro-American conceptions of proper bodily etiquette," including "lingering physical contact." Popular dances, like the Charleston, also had connections to African American's enslaved past, tracing back all the way to Africa. All of which, were contrary to the "politics of respectability." As a result, despite the fact that black dances were emblems of modernity for white America during the Jazz Age of the 1920s, dancing remained problematic for racial uplift.

Dancing was also considered dangerous because it threatened notions of marriage and domesticity. Nightlife was associated with premarital and extramarital sexual relationships. A mother worried that because of her daughter's love of dancing, she would never make a good wife. It seems the mother's fears were not unfounded, as a man suing for divorce blamed his wife's love of the nightlife for the demise of his marriage. He had come home one day to find her in bed with another man drinking and wearing nothing but "a negligee.

145 Dinerstein, Swinging the Machine, 13.
146 Hunter, To 'Joy My Freedom, 170-175. See also Dinerstein, Swinging the Machine, 16.
148 According to Ian Hoskins, "By the mid-1920s, black music and dance had been cast in a symbolic paradox. Its 'primitivism' represented a dangerous sexuality and hedonism indicative of the condition of humanity before rationalized civilization, while its 'discordance' and rhythm was emblematic of the discordance and pace of modernity and the city." See Ian Hoskins, "Colonising the Margin: The Historiography of African-American Music and Dance," Journal of American Studies 10.2 (1991): 58.
149 Gwendolyn Stokes Williams, interview by Margaret Butcher, transcript, St. James Oral History Project, MSS 4536, Container 3, Folder 42, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, 6.
and bathrobe." He charged that her preference for "cabarets and nightclubs" over him had led to her infidelity. As this man's complaints points out, behavior in these venues was associated with sexual freedom and had the potential to confirm assumptions about black female sexual promiscuity.

Dressing up was also important for performers. Because entertainments were a "physical mode of presentation," dress played into the overall quality of the performance. This was because, "In African American culture, the element of dress in musical performance is as important as the musical sound itself." Costumes had to meet audiences' expectations, representing the "latest fashions." However, performers also contributed to the disreputability of these morally questionable environs. Female performers were viewed as problematic because they "had broken out of the boundaries of the home and taken their sensuality and sexuality out of the private and into the public sphere." Floor show entertainments displayed a highly sexualized image of femininity. Female dance performers appeared in various states of undress, focusing attention on the feminine form. According to one description, "Here to the tune of St. Louis voodoo blues, half-naked Negro girls dance shameless dances with men in Spanish costumes...The whole atmosphere is one of unrestrained animality[sic].

150 "Cabarets Took Wife From Him," Call & Post, 31 March 1938.
152 Ibid., 330.
153 Ibid., 331.
154 Qtd. in Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent, 204.
the jungle faintly veneered with civilized trappings. 

An “On the Funny Side” column in the Advocate drew attention to the immodesty of nightclub performers in a fictional conversation between two men entitled, “Leaves Off All She Can.” A man makes a generalization that “All women think about is something to put on their backs.” The other man in disagreement replies, “…there is a certain type of dancer, if she has to cover up her back she would die of chagrin.” The connection between lewd dancing and female sexuality was made clear when a review of a male exotic dancer framed him as an anomaly, noting that “he does the only male strip tease that we have ever seen.”

Various types of racy female dancers showcased their talents at Cleveland’s night spots. One of the main attractions of the floor shows was the chorus girls. Known for their costumes or lack thereof, they were referred to as “ponies in short skirts.” Performer Helen Dorsey, who appeared at both the Elite Club and Cedar Gardens, was referred to as “the best known soubrette in the country” and appeared in a revealing costume that left little to the imagination (fig. 6). Exotic dancer, “Valda the Great” appeared at Cedar Gardens performing a strip tease. According to a description of her performance, “She didn’t have on but three pieces and she threw two of them away before the dance ended.” It seemed the show caused some controversy because after the

155 Hunter, A Nickel and A Prayer, 132-133.
156 “Leaves Off All She Can,” Advocate, 13 January 1917.
first night, the show was “tamed...down a bit.” A preacher referenced Valda in a sermon and admonished his congregation not to attend the show. However, it seems his warnings went unheeded because the show remained popular. According to the review, the sermon was perhaps one of the best advertisements for the show.\textsuperscript{160}

In 1935, it was announced that “Upper Cedar has gone strictly fan dance.”\textsuperscript{161} Fan dancing was a sexually titillating performance in which a woman who was either nude or created the illusion of being so danced with strategically placed fans. Shake dancers, popular for their gyrating performances, also received lots of attention. One named Louise, was known to “shake everything except her eyebrows.”\textsuperscript{162} An announcement for shake dancer Ruth Holiday’s upcoming engagement at the Heat Wave was accompanied by a revealing photo of Holiday in short shorts and a mid-drift top.\textsuperscript{163} Because so much attention was focused on their bodies during performances, dancers were expected to be in shape. Ruby, a shake dancer, received criticism when it was noticed that she had “put on a lot of weight.”\textsuperscript{164} According to the review, because of the extra pounds, her skimpy costume was no longer appreciated.

Figure 6. Helen Dorsey, Nightclub Entertainer, *Call & Post*, 19 December 1935.
Female impersonators, who were one of the most popular acts during the 1930s, also reinforced the connection between nightlife and a more public female sexuality. They were a huge draw of the floor shows at many of the night clubs located in the Cedar Avenue area. According to an article discussing the invasion of female impersonators on the nightclub circuit: “Most of those who go to the New Heat Wave, go out of curiosity. It is interesting to note that the feeling of ill-will that used to be shown toward the ‘girls’ has vanished. The populace seemingly takes them in their stride; the same way they witnessed the performances of the fan dancers and strip tease artists.”

Their popularity seemed to cut across class lines. As one report suggested, “call them what you may you’d be surprised at the names of our gentry who have and are paying them suit.” The popularity of the performers was such that they were often held past their initial engagement. Female impersonators at the Heat Wave were held over for twenty four weeks.

Physical appearance was essential to the success of their performances. Advertisements and reports of female impersonators drew attention to their dress and hair, even mentioning when the entertainers would be appearing in new costumes. An advertisement for female impersonators appearing at the Heat Wave read, “The World’s Best Looking, Best Dressed and Most Entertaining

165 "Puleeze, I’m a Lady,’ Is the Female Impersonator’s Theme,” Call & Post, 17 November 1938.
166 "In the Groove with Jimmie Evans, Call & Post, 14 March 1940.
167 Advertisement, Call & Post, 20 April 1939.
Female Impersonators in the Country. The clothes of these impersonators made women envious, and added to their reputations as trendsetters.

Cross-dressing as entertainment was not restricted to female impersonators. Female performers dressed in masculine clothes. Night club performer, Detroit Red, who served as mistress of ceremonies at the Heat Wave appeared in men’s evening attire. While acknowledging that her on stage persona did not conform to traditional notions of femininity, an article about her assured readers that offstage she was a respectable woman. Detroit Red, whose real name was Laura Livingston Elliott, was a mother and grandmother. Her engagement was touted as her return to the city. At a younger age Elliott had migrated from Knoxville, Tennessee to Cleveland. She had previously been employed in the city as a stock girl in a downtown department store and a clerk in the law office. After leaving Cleveland she had made a name for herself as a nightclub performer in Detroit and New York. Such assurances were necessary because while all female performers were morally suspect, those who masquerading as the opposite sex were more so. Female to male cross-dressing was associated with lesbianism which was considered a bigger threat to female sexuality than promiscuity because it did not affirm heterosexuality, the basis of respectable femininity.

168 Call & Post, 27 October 1938.
Cross-dressing embodied consumer culture's possibilities for self-fashioning. For female impersonators, femininity was an inimitable commodity, which destabilized gender–underscoring its performative aspects. Female impersonation emphasized that the visual was increasing unreliable in a modern society, as consumer culture blurred the lines between authenticity and artifice. Reports insisted on the realism of the portrayals. Despite the fact that these performers were not what they seemed to be, reports mentioned how heterosexual men were attracted to them, even attempting to date them.

The 1930s female impersonation craze is sometimes interpreted as the African American community's more tolerant attitude towards homosexuality. In 1935, it was announced that the Douglass, a popular night spot, was going all male. Admitting this might be the trend, "girls at the other spots were warned "to take heed."

However, the acceptance of cross-dressing was confined to venues associated with commercial leisure. The practice was still a criminal offense subject to arrest on the street. In 1936, Irwin Stanhope "was arrested by police...when they found him walking on E. 77th St in women's clothes." His marginalization by society was further suggested because it was noted that he was "homeless" at the time of his arrest. As punishment, Stanhope received a $50.00 fine and thirty days in jail. Not only was cross-dressing criminal, but potentially dangerous. In an article titled, "Dressed in Ladies Clothes, Man

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171 "On the Avenue with TDS," Call & Post, 26 December 1935.
172 "Man Arrested in Woman's Clothes," Call & Post, 18 June 1936.
173 Ibid.
Discovers Fooling Men Doesn’t Always Pay,” a cross-dresser was the reported victim of violence. According to the report, the night before Halloween, “John Tinsley... bedecked himself up in the choicest garb of the ladies, applied the necessary powder and then strutted his male form attired in feminine clothes out on the avenue” where he “attracted” the attention of “three white men.” However, when the men followed Tinsley back to his room “they found out what they thought was a she was in reality a he in a she’s clothes.” One of the men, unappreciative of the masquerade responded by shooting Tinsley, who had to be taken to the hospital.174

The acceptance of female dancers and impersonators as entertainers may have been indicative of African Americans more open rejection of white middle-class values during the 1930s. During this decade, African Americans became “disillusioned” with the “politics of respectability,” as it had resulted in few gains for the race.175 For many, these values were increasingly viewed as repressive and oppressive, and were no longer the solution, but the problem. This reflected not only an acceptance of a more open sexuality, but the realization of the limited employment opportunities available to African Americans, especially in white-collar jobs. A review of the performance of female impersonator Sam Fouche, drew attention to the fact that he was not a homosexual. Describing Fouche as “one of the cleverest female impersonators,” the writer noted that despite

174 Call & Post, 10 November 1934. Tinsley had tried to defend himself to no avail, pulling a knife on the men.
175 Wolcott, Remaking Respectability, 8.
Fouche's on-stage persona, he was "a rough and ready he-man who makes a living easier this way than by manual labor." Fouche's on-stage persona, therefore, becomes "a trickster strategy for outsmarting white oppression." Night clubs were an important source of employment for African Americans. When the city's Cotton Club temporarily closed its doors, the black press drew attention to the fact that the night club employed a number of African Americans.

For those who held steadfast to the "politics of respectability," these performers remained problematic. Not only did they represent the relaxing of Victorian sensibilities, but impersonators exhibited an exaggerated version of femininity that was often hypersexual and therefore threatening. The Gazette, which was associated with the established middle-class, featured no announcements or discussions about the entertainments.

The biggest threat that night life venues posed, however, concerned prostitution. Its entertainments were "perceived as immoral and leading young women into prostitution." This was because these spaces were often recruiting stations. The two were not mutually exclusive enterprises. Proprietors of establishments, like night clubs, were often involved in prostitution. The arrest record of Hattie Smith who was referred to in the white press as "the queen of

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176 "Female Impersonator," Call & Post, 15 August 1935.
Cleveland's colored night clubs" and in the black press as the "famous 'vice queen' of the 'Roaring Third'" included several charges of "keeping a house of ill fame." When she was arrested on federal charges for violating laws against prohibition, the newspaper wondered what would become of 'her girls.' Albert Boyd, better known as "Starlight," operated or utilized various commercial leisure establishments in the Central Avenue area, which were "recruiting stations" for prostitution. Boyd was described as "'The Great Mogul of organized vice. Suave, impressive, impervious to shame, and gifted with the art of leadership, he was a born political henchman; and any a young colored girl, misled by hopes of an easy, glamorous existence, became the victim of his false promises and found herself, too late, a hopeless prisoner of shame and degradation." He even had his own wife engaged in prostitution. While his connections to vice were well-known, it was believed that his connections to the city's political leaders insulated him.

The association of nightclubs with prostitution was also related to the music. It was at a whorehouse in Baltimore that singer Billie Holiday first became familiar with jazz music. Holiday would "run errands" for the women working there in exchange for the opportunity to listen to music playing on the victrola in the

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180 "Hattie's Place Dark for the First Time in Years," Gazette, 29 January 27. See also "U.S. Holds 'Queen' of Night Live," Plain Dealer, 30 March 1929 and "Hattie Smith Goes to Prison," Plain Dealer, 30 May 1929.
181 "Hattie's Place Dark for the First Time in Years," Gazette, 29 January 27.
182 Hunter, A Nickel and a Prayer, 122.
183 Ibid.
parlor. In her autobiography she says, “I guess I’m not the only one who heard their first good jazz in a whorehouse. But I never tried to make anything of it. If I’d heard Louis and Bessie at a Girl Scout jamboree, I’d loved it just the same. But a lot of white people heard jazz in places like Alice Dean’s, and they helped label jazz “whorehouse music.” The association of the music with sexual immorality was evidenced in the lyrics which were sexually suggestive if not sexually explicit. Mabel Cooper who was a torch singer at Cedar Gardens was known for her “risque’ numbers.” One of the songs in her “gigantic” repertoire included, “There Ain’t Nobody’s Hands Been On it But Mine.” Blues singer, Margaret Watkins, who appeared at the Elite Club, was quite popular. She received “two or more encores every night,” singing “renditions of such songs as ‘Shake Your Can,' ‘If I Can’t Sell It,' and ‘He’s Such a Handy Man.’” Like prostitution, black music commercialized black female sexuality. Female night club singers projected a highly sexualized image and had a penchant for the sartorial excesses that reformers found demoralizing.

It was not just the behaviors that bothered reformers, but that they were on display for whites. White patronage of African American commercial leisure venues suggested, as reformers believed, that “the behavior of blacks was

184 Holiday, Lady Sings the Blues, 9.
185 Ibid., 10.
186 “For the Moon,” Call & Post, 19 August 1937.
188 “On the Avenue with TDS,” Call & Post, 26 December 1935 and “Sings the Blues,” Call & Post, 30 January 1936.
...ever visible to the white gaze."\textsuperscript{190} Since interracial socializing was largely confined to these spaces where highly sexualized behavior was on display, reformers feared this would confirm racist stereotypes and undermine racial progress. Because of the acceptability of racial mixing in these venues, Cedar Avenue where most of these places were located, was known as the "Great Black and Tan Way."\textsuperscript{191} This mixing, however, had its limits. Like Harlem's Cotton Club, some clubs had Jim Crow policies, which allowed blacks to be part of the entertainments on display but restricted black patronage by excluding them from the audience.\textsuperscript{192} The \textit{Call & Post} drew attention to this in an article refuting the notion that African Americans were more susceptible to vice. According to the article, "if night clubs in our section of the city are bad, they are made so by the white patrons who flock to them night after night to the almost total exclusion of Negroes. Most of these places are owned and operated by whites, who simply employ Negroes to give them what they love to call 'Harlem Atmosphere.'"\textsuperscript{193} For example, Cedar Gardens "restrict[ed] black patrons Thursday through Saturday...until after World War II."\textsuperscript{194} This exclusion of black spectators prevented such displays from being "a threat to white society...as blacks

\textsuperscript{190} Higginbotham, \textit{Righteous Discontent}, 196.
\textsuperscript{191} John Fuster, "Night Life Leaps as Autumn Season Opens," \textit{Call & Post}, 7 September 1939.
\textsuperscript{192} Geraldine Daniel recalled, that some clubs treated white customers better, giving them preferential treatment, including seating close to the stage. See Daniel, interview, 30. Interestingly, Cleveland's Cotton Club did not have a policy of discrimination. See \textit{Gazette}, 15 December 1934.
\textsuperscript{193} "Vice in Negro Neighborhoods," \textit{Call & Post}, 4 May 1935.
\textsuperscript{194} Hazzard-Gordon, \textit{Jookin'}, 144. The club did not completely restrict black patronage, but restricted them to certain sections of the club.
remained objects to be stared at, denied the ability to return the look.\textsuperscript{195} Such displays also fell short of promoting any real social change because whites could observe black culture at a distance without having any real meaningful contact with its purveyors.

The behaviors associated with nightlife were also troubling to reformers because their influence was no longer confined to places associated with commercial leisure. Sandra, described as a "TANTALIZING SHAKE DANCER A BEAUTY IN HER OWN RIGHT," was a spokesperson for Palmer's Skin Whitener.\textsuperscript{196} The use of Sandra as a spokesperson was part of a larger trend in of using celebrity endorsements in advertising products. Using Sandra to advertise the skin whitener suggested that she was a person of authority and an acceptable individual for other women to emulate.\textsuperscript{197} These entertainments also had an influence on other forms of amusement. Social clubs hosted "short dress" parties, where a prize was awarded to the guest wearing the shortest dress.\textsuperscript{198} Parties were also given where nightlife entertainments were mimicked. At a

\textsuperscript{195} Lori Harrison-Kahan, "Her 'Nig': Returning the Gaze of Nella Larsen's 'Passing,'" \textit{Modern Language Studies} 32.2 (2002): 119.
\textsuperscript{196} "Advertisement," \textit{Call & Post}, 22 January 1939.
\textsuperscript{197} For more on African American emulation of black entertainers, see Jack Schwartz, "Men's Clothing and the Negro," \textit{Phylon} 24.3 (1963): 227 and Frazier, \textit{Black Bourgeoisie}, 127. The use of celebrity endorsements was essential to modern advertising where a personality was a commodifiable image. It was also reflective of the "culture of personality," which will be discussed in Chapter 4. See Warren I. Susman, \textit{Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century} (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 282-283.
\textsuperscript{198} "12 Blue Mooners Social Club," \textit{Call & Post}, 13 June 1935; "Social Eight Bridge Club, Call & Post, 4 July 1935; and "Advertisement, Call & Post, 19 January 1939. At the Blue Mooners club party the girls accessorized their dresses with ribbons which made them appear child-like.
holiday party, a female partygoer decided "to liven things ... by giving her interpretation of a fan dance."  

While middle-class reformers were loath to accept the dancehall and nightclubs as acceptable places of leisure and recreation, they recognized the importance of dance and sought to provide respectable alternatives. To remove some of the stigma associated with dance, "In the early 1920s, many high schools 'instituted dances, in an effort of varying success to take the play away from commercial dance halls and road houses.'" 

The Boy's Chef Club and the Girl's Homemaking Group co-sponsored a "Personal Appearance Dance" dance. The primary focus of the dance was "to encourage" attendees "to be appropriately dressed for the occasion." Girls were supposed "to be dressed in simple, neat, and attractive clothes." However, at some of these dances, "guests were admitted by invitation only, so this endeavor had no hope of reaching masses who frequented the saloon dance halls."

*Sex for Clothes*

Moral panic surrounding prostitution was not confined to spaces associated with leisure. Prostitution seemed to be omnipresent and therefore loomed as one of the largest threats to the respectability that the black middle-

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199 "With the Young Satellites," *Call & Post*, 6 January 1934.
202 Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin*, 132. To create a safe space, these private dances singled out invitees who were "socially responsible." See Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 172.
class women sought to cultivate. Houses of prostitution even operated next door
to churches.203 Places of residence, work, and even schools were all believed to
be potential avenues to prostitution. Many boarding houses in the Central
Avenue area had connections to prostitution. As such “land lady” was often a
euphemism for madam. Young girls were not safe at school or in their journeys to
and from school, as they were often approached in its vicinity and lured into
prostitution with “promises of...a life of luxury.”204

Newly arriving migrant women were viewed as especially susceptible to
prostitution. Some employment agencies served as fronts for prostitution. For
those arriving alone, men lay in wait at bus stations and train stations promising
them clothes to transform them from country bumpkins into urban sophisticates.
The promise of new clothes played on women's insecurities concerning their
southern backwardness, and some jumped at the chance to gain new clothes
that would help them looked as if they belonged in their new northern
environment.

Despite being the “world's oldest profession,” prostitution was seen as a
consequence of the culture's commodification of women's sexuality. Thus,
prostitution figured prominently in concerns about the morality of consumer
culture. It was widely held that women's desire for commodities had the potential
of transforming women themselves into commodities. The desire for material
possessions, such as clothes, was believed to be the real reason that women

204 Hunter, A Nickel and a Prayer, 122.
entered into sexual immorality. In William Hannibal Thomas's indictment of
African Americans, he argued that women of the race "without remorse or
shame, for the sake of obtaining luxuries without labor...will traffic in their bodies,
which is the most marketable commodity they possess." 205

If in fact, as Thomas suggested, the body was African American women's
"most marketable commodity," it was not because of their inherent immorality,
but because of the limited employment opportunities available to them. As one
woman related, "In the 1920s my mother and my five aunts migrated to
Cleveland, Ohio, from Indianapolis and, in spite of their many talents they found
every door except the kitchen door closed to them." 206 This was because "race
prejudice...exclude[d] many a capable Negro girl from positions in offices,
department stores, etc." 207 This was especially true for the larger downtown and
Euclid Avenue department stores. In 1917, it was reported that William Taylor &
Son "discharged its six male Afro-American employes [sic]...and ha[d] been
gradually letting out its eight female Afro-American employes [sic]." 208 These
dismissals were attributed to racial discrimination because the employees had

197.
207 Hunter, A Nickel and A Prayer, 157. The lack of employment opportunities was also apparent
because the hiring of and promotion of women in fields outside of the realm of domestic service
was considered newsworthy. For instance, when Ruth Anderson was promoted to office clerk
from stock girl at William Taylor Sons, it made news beyond Cleveland. See "Girl Wins
Promotion," Chicago Defender, 7 July1917.
208 "Cleveland Sixth City," Gazette, 3 February 1917.
been “informed that no fault was found with them or their work.” Department stores continued hiring only African American women of light complexions. As Henry Pointer recalled, “[W]e had Black girls in the department stores but they were real fair.” However, they were not hired as sales girls, but as "bundle wrappers, stock girls, and elevator operators." Even in domestic service which was often the “extent” of employment, African Americans faced discrimination because many employers expressed a preference for light-skin.

Prostitution was more lucrative than many of the other employment opportunities available to African American women. As a result, prostitutes were able to achieve an economic security that many African American women lacked. Singer, Billie Holiday, who worked as a prostitute after migrating to Harlem, was able to make more in a week than she would have made in one month as a maid. Prostitution enabled Holiday to earn enough money to purchase the things she “always wanted”. These things were her “first honest-to-God silk dress and a pair of spike-heeled ten dollar patent-leather pumps.”

For some working-class women, prostitutes were not social outcasts, but commanded their admiration. Prostitutes had a reputation for being well-dressed and were considered arbiters of fashion. Holiday expressed as a kid she wanted

209 Ibid.
210 Pointer, interview, 14.
211 Phillips, Alabama North, 86.
212 Margie Glass, interview by Antoinette Kindall, 12 December 1986, transcript, St. James Oral History Project, MSS 4536, Container 1, Folder 16, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, 4.
213 Holiday, Lady Sings the Blues, 25.
her mom to have a hat that "all the big-time whores had." When Madie Clay a.k.a. Madie Messiah, a Cleveland madam, was reported murdered by her husband, it was noted that despite being involved in a disreputable enterprise, she was "one of the ‘most ladylike’ madams...Always tastefully dresses and extremely modest in demeanor [sic]." However, sometimes their self-presentation transgressed the bounds of femininity. Chester Himes in his autobiography describes a Cleveland madam who wore Stacy Adams shoes which were associated with African American male street culture.

In sum, prostitution represented women’s ability to enter into the marketplace as both commodity and consumer. Because prostitutes traded on their bodies appearance was important. Prostitution often depended on one’s ability to make oneself into an attractive commodity. Women involved in prostitution were often compensated with dress items. One woman through her association with prostitution received "lovely silk hose." A fifteen-year-old prostitute testifying against her madam in court said, "[T]hat her only recompense were a few clothes given to her and shelter." However, clothes were poor

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214 Ibid., 14
215 "Murder Reveals Marriage of ‘Landlady,’” Call & Post, 29 December 1938.
217 Hunter, A Nickel and A Prayer, 67. It is not clear if the woman in question was actually a prostitute. She might have simply run errands for prostitution. However, it is clear that she was able to reap fashionably from the association.
compensation considering the high rate of sexually transmitted diseases among
prostitutes.\textsuperscript{219}

Prostitution was considered problematic because it was a rejection of
middle-class morality. The trade in sex symbolized freedom from black middle-
class respectability and domesticity. It represented a departure from traditional
notions of gender, not only for females but for males. Prostitution undermined the
idea that men were supposed to protect women from sexual exploitation. Despite
the fact that prostitutes were financially dependent on men to earn a living, much
of the discourse on prostitution drew attention to the fact that men involved in
prostitution were dependent on women for their livelihoods. In an article
discussing the immoral conditions that existed in the notorious “Roaring Third,” it
was noted that “Johnnies” (a term for pimps) relied on prostitutes for “food and
clothing.”\textsuperscript{220} This type of dependency was an inversion of traditional gender roles
in which males were supposed to be the providers, serving as further proof of
blacks’ inability to conform to middle-class respectability.\textsuperscript{221}

It seems prostitutes were not the only women willing to compromise their
self-respect in order to obtain material possessions. Even those who were not
formally involved in prostitution were not adverse to trading sexual favors for

\textsuperscript{219} "Reviews Vice Arrests," \textit{Call & Post}, 7 July 1938.
\textsuperscript{220} "Roaring Third, Again," \textit{Gazette}, 8 October 1927. Even the term “pimp” connected sex with
consumer culture. According to the \textit{Call & Post}, the term not only applied to “someone who
provides the means and opportunities for libidinous gratification,” but also referred to “dressing
\textsuperscript{221} Marcy Sacks, “To Be a Man ad Not a Lackey”: Black Men, Work, and the Construction of
Masculinity in Gilded Age New York City,” \textit{American Studies} 45.1 (2004): 46, 59. While pimps’
financial dependence were seen as an inversion of traditional masculinity, their control over the
women who worked for them reinforced ideas of masculine authority.
clothes. Women associated independence not only with a more expressive sexuality, but one that was more remunerative. This changed the expectations of dating. Women used treating as a tactic to gain access to the pleasures of consumer culture and stave off economic insecurity.\(^{222}\) Sarah Brooks recalled, "Some men would buy things and then they would take you out, and just because they had been doin little favors for you, they would look for you to favor them some. They would want you to go to bed with em."\(^{223}\)

Sometimes being a mistress was better for one's wardrobe than being a wife. A gossip column noted that a certain man kept his mistress better dressed than his wife.\(^{224}\) Buying clothes for a woman whom one was not married to was often an indication of infidelity. In alleging "gross neglect of duty and extreme cruelty" by her husband, Mrs. Lucille Dalton noted that her husband "bought a coat from a Euclid avenue clothing store for one, Geraldine Washington."\(^{225}\)

As Dalton's complaint indicates, even in marital relationships women placed a greater emphasis on having one's consumers desires met. Women often cited their husbands' failure to provide adequate clothing as reason for divorce. In Mrs. Lula B. Holmes' divorce petition, as proof of her husband's failure


\(^{223}\) Brooks, *You May Plow Here*, 206-207.


\(^{225}\) "Buys Coat for Other Girl," *Call & Post*, 22 July 1937.
to provide support, claimed: "Her clothes were all purchased by herself...her husband never having bought her any."²²⁶

Not everyone, however, accepted the new expectations of romantic relationships. A man who wrote about the "funny ways" of a woman was told by an advice columnist, was told by an advice columnist, "By giving this girl money and clothes she has lost her respect for you and cares only for things that you can buy." The columnist advised him to remedy the situation by finding another woman and not to repeat the pattern in the new relationship.²²⁷

While the discourse on treating suggested that it had changed the nature of heterosexual relations, it reinforced traditional notions of females' economic dependence on males. The expectation was still that women go through men to fulfill their material desires. Therefore, despite treating's associations with female "autonomy and pleasure," it was also "cause of their continuing oppression."²²⁸

Treating was not only associated with women's economic vulnerability, but their sexual vulnerability. Attributed with encouraging sexual promiscuity, treating was problematic for African American women. It undermined notions of respectability and had the potential to reify negative stereotypes concerning black female sexuality.

²²⁶ "Hit with Mirror Asks Divorce," Call & Post, 19 April 1937.
Tempt Them with Decency and Clean Fun

The Phillis Wheatley Association (PWA), established in 1911, attempted to provide an answer to the problems facing black female migrants. The organization was founded Jane Edna Hunter, who "embraced Booker T. Washington's advocacy of segregated self-sufficiency." She was also active in the club women's movement and "saw herself as the self-appointed defender of morality among black women." Hunter was well aware of the challenges facing African American female migrants, as she herself had been one. Upon arriving in the city, she faced difficulty finding appropriate housing, employment, and recreation opportunities. In establishing the organization, Hunter hoped to help migrant women avoid the "dangers and pitfalls awaiting her."

However, regulating the sexual and moral behavior of African American women was no easy task. According to a newspaper report, "The area in and around the Phillis Wheatley Association ha[d] become 'hot' territory for 'mashers.'" As a result, women traveling "to and from the Association's Building" were subjected to "persistent molestation." To curtail such activity, Jane E. Hunter requested police protection, which had some success, as it resulted in several arrests. While Hunter had set up the PWA to offer better accommodations than the rooming houses which often had ties to prostitution.

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229 Jones, Jane Edna Hunter, 121. This was the title of a January 1931 advertisement that listed the Phillis Wheatley Association's various activities.
232 Holiday, Lady Sings the Blues, 77.
either operating as brothels or "serv[ing] as the places where parasitic pimps and their fast-talking agents of both sexes recruited unwitting and lonely, or simply impoverished girls," she was unable to completely do so.234 There was an instance in which the PWA was infiltrated "by a light mulatto women named Dora, who was fairly well educated, had pleasant manners, and dressed like a Paris fashion plate."235 However, her appearances were deceiving, as she was actually there to recruit young women into prostitution.

Despite the challenges, the PWA tried to "tempt" young woman with wholesome activities. Lillian Fitch recalled that "in those days for entertainment and recreation everything was centered around the Phillis Wheatley."236 While a devotee of Booker T. Washington, it seems at least in terms of recreation, Hunter agreed with W.E.B. Du Bois.237 Writing in 1897, Du Bois while recognizing that recreation was not "one of the more pressing of the Negro problems," acknowledged that it was "destined...to become more and more so and at all places, the manner, method, and extent of a people's recreation is of vast importance to their welfare."238 Limited recreation was connected to the proliferation of vice in African American neighborhoods.

234 Gerber, Black Ohio and the Color Line, 281. The association of rooming houses with prostitution was also suggested in the use of "landlady" as a euphemism for madam.
235 Hunter, A Nickel and a Prayer, 128.
236 Lillian Adkins Fitch, interview by Inez Buntyn, 10 October 1986, transcript, St. James Oral History Project, MSS 4536, Container 1, Folder 14, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, 4.
237 For more about Hunter being a proponent of Booker T. Washington's ideology, see Jones, Jane Edna Hunter, 34.
Many of the activities were concerned with encouraging females to “take responsibility for their self-presentation.” For instance, PWA offered an “urban living skills” course, which included lessons in sewing. The course was a guise for domestic training, as a way of securing employment in domestic service. The ruse was necessary because despite the fact that this was the type of employment widely available to African American women, there was widespread resistance to it. However, Hunter hoped that by providing them with a skillset, they would use their training and not their bodies “to solve their economic problems.”

Ironically, in attempting to elevate African American females she pushed them into the low paying and low skilled jobs which reinforced both race and gender subordination. Moreover, securing women employment as domestic laborers did not equate to the protection of black women’s sexuality because they were often subject to sexual harassment in the homes in which they worked.

Outside of this course, to further encourage self-sufficiency and influence consumption habits, PWA offered classes on millenary and dressmaking. Geraldine Daniels recalled receiving instruction at PWA and making her first dress at the age of eleven. She also helped make costumes for the stage shows

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239 Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 19. Activities encouraged girls not only to care about just their own self-presentation, but that of others. When the Let Us Be Friends (LUBF) Club, which was under the auspices of Phillis Wheatley, “learned that Katie Allen, a little school girl who worked in the Phillis Wheatley, was badly in need of winter underwear the girls set to work in less than two weeks Katie was supplied with several suits of warm underwear, stockings, a suit, a muff and a pair of shoes.” See “Phillis Wheatley Holds its Annual Meeting,” *Advocate*, 13 January 1917.

The association's training school for homemakers "grew out of the 'The Unemployed Sewing Circle'" which was formed "to assist women and girls of the neighborhood who were out of jobs." The circle instructed women about "making-over of old garments," which was important for women who could not afford to purchase new clothes. Making-over clothes was a way to maintain personal appearance during times of economic instability. Mrs. Lovejoy, who had migrated from Georgia kept her family "neatly dressed" by "mak[ing] over old clothes she had received from the Hiram House, a settlement house.

The Young Girl's Department of the PWA offered a charm school that lasted several weeks which included "demonstrations on make-up and dress." During the program, the department began a "campaign to improve each girl's personal appearance." In 1925, the organization hosted a "Find Yourself" conference, which included a talk on dressmaking.

Wearing uniforms was a requirement for participation in some of the association's activities. As part of the homemakers school, "girls were given uniforms of green Indian Head, attractively made and so becoming they were an

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241 Daniels, interview, 7-8. Resident Gwendolyn Stokes Williams also recalled sewing classes at PWA. See also Brooks, interview, 6.
243 Marion Elderton, ed., *Case Studies of Unemployment* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1931), 346-348. Lovejoy's family faced financial hardship after her husband had been terminated from his carpenter job because of race prejudice. The husband was let go after he joined a union which required his employer to pay him the same wage as white employees. After which, he was only able to find employment doing odd jobs.
244 Dorothy James, "Resume of the Work of the Younger Girls Department (Sept 1940-April 1941)," *Phillis Wheatley Association Records, 1914-1960*, MSS 3527, Container 13, Folder 16, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH. The department was quite popular, 300 girls were enrolled.
inspiration and a great aid in restoring self-resect." The health and physical education committee, in addition to encouraging physical hygiene, also listed "pride in the appearance of the suits worn on the floor" as one of its main objectives. The committee hoped that this would extend into the participants' everyday lives. Even at its camp, uniforms were required. Uniforms, in addition to encouraging pride, were also about disciplining the black body and encouraged conformity. Also, wearing uniforms during recreation was supposed to socialize young women to accept them in their professional lives, as African American women often expressed a disinterest in wearing uniforms as part of domestic service. Uniforms worn by domestic servants served as badges of their servility, masking the individual and rendering them virtually invisible. Women, instead, preferred to wear to their own clothing and maintain an identity separate from their labor. As a result, women often expressed a preference for day work and were loath to accept live-in domestic work because it offered them few opportunities to wear clothes of their own choosing, as it gave them little free time. Domestics also avoided wearing clothes associated with their servitude in public. Despite the PWA insistence on uniforms, the organization also realized the importance of dressing up. At the PWA camp, on the final night, girls "were

246 Hunter, A Nickel and A Prayer, 156.
allowed to lay aside their bloomers and middies for their frilly organdie and silk frocks.\textsuperscript{249}

In policing black women's self-presentation there was also a tendency to focus on personal cleanliness.\textsuperscript{250} Cleanliness was also associated with respectability. Poverty was not seen as an excuse for uncleanliness. It was not just enough for a woman to possess stylish garments, these garments were also supposed to be neat and clean. Even if a woman did dirty work, she was supposed to bring a change of clothes so that on her way to and from work, she did not go into public looking unkempt and run the risk of inviting criticism not only on herself but the race, reinforcing stereotypes of African Americans as unclean. Women were encouraged to know their fabrics and consider their maintenance when making purchases. Cleaning clothes was even connected to their durability. The Empire Dry Cleaning Company advertised, "Clean Clothes Last Longer."\textsuperscript{251} The link between dress and cleanliness was evident in the business enterprise of Ethel Goodson who ran a combination laundry and dressmaking shop.\textsuperscript{252}

Phillis Wheatley offered laundry classes and Hunter was even able to get some of the area schools to institute them. However, this was not appreciated by all. When Hazel M. Barnett's mother found out she was washing her teacher's clothes as part of her coursework at Central Junior High, she became so upset

\textsuperscript{249} Mabel G. Harris, "The Phyllis Wheatley Summer Camp," \textit{Southern Workman} 5 (1921): 556.
\textsuperscript{250} Cleanliness was associated with the "politics of respectability" because it was "embodied in the behavior and attire of African American women." See Wolcott, \textit{Remaking Respectability}, 38.
\textsuperscript{251} Advertisement, \textit{Call & Post}, 20 January 1934.
\textsuperscript{252} Advertisement, \textit{Call & Post}, 17 September 1936.
that she withdrew her daughter and transferred her to another school. Barnett's mother did not believe that laundry should be part of school curriculum because that was something that could be taught at home. However, it was increasingly common that home economics training at schools "emphasized laundry work." This trend towards industrial education in the city's public school system was instituted to structure racial inequality, as it was only apparent at schools that where the student body was predominantly black. According to Kusmer, this less academic curriculum "lowered the expectations of black students and oriented them, at an early age, toward lower-paying, less prestigious occupations." As Barnett's mother actions indicate, she wanted more for her daughter.

The focus on the cleanliness of African Americans was ironic considering that African American women, many of whom were employed as domestics and laundresses, were responsible for the cleanliness of whites. Moreover, working-class migrants recalled cleanliness and neatness as being important even in their impoverished situations in the south. According to Sarah Brooks, "My mother would see that we went to the field on time, plus she would see that we went clean—we had to go clean even if we have on homespun dresses."

However, cleanliness also seemed to present a problem because a wife's failure

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253 Hazel M. Barnett, interview by Marjorie Witt-Johnson, 11 January 1987, transcript, St. James Oral History Project, MSS 4536, Container 1, Folder 2, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, 3.
254 Kusmer, A Ghetto Takes Shape, 184.
255 Work as a laundress was often preferred to that of a domestic, because "it...gave women more autonomy and flexibility." See Hunter, To' Joy My Freedom, n.p.
256 According to Kelley, "Working class women demonstrated as much vigilance as their middle-class counterparts in enforcing the general principle cleanliness is next to Godliness." See Kelley, Race Rebels, 40.
257 Brooks, You May Plow Here, 85.
to do laundry was often cited in divorce petitions. These husbands did not understand that cleaning one’s clothes was not always a simple matter. Laundry was a time consuming task and since economic circumstances forced many African American into the workforce which often left them with little time for their own domestic chores. Laundry was also an added expense to the already limited incomes of migrants. It was not unusual for boarding houses to charge extra for the use of laundry facilities. Having clothes professionally cleaned could also get expensive. Unclaimed laundry sales seemed to indicate that financial hardship prevented people from paying to retrieve their clothes once the services were rendered.

Cleaning clothes was even a potentially dangerous undertaking. Washing clothes could result in their theft. Sara Brooks recounted how in Cleveland her clothes were stolen as they were drying on the line. "When I had been in Cleveland a couple of years [,] I made a big wash—I had done got me a used washin machine—I was comin along then, you know. I had washed and had clothes hanging up and I want out to get my clothes, I had nothing. I tell you!" Washing could also result in faded clothes which also reflected negatively on one’s self-presentation.

It was not just the cost, the potential loss of clothes, or the loss of their appearance that made keeping clothes laundered difficult. In 1940, three women described as “housewives” were almost sexually assaulted while doing laundry at

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258 Ibid., 187.
the Outhwaite Homes housing project. The assailant was reportedly a thirteen year old male. These series of attacks made women "openly fearful of using the basement laundry rooms in the project after dark," which because of other demands this was often the only time some women had for accomplishing this chore.259 In another instance, when Nellie Hundley went to a dry cleaning establishment to have some clothes cleaned to wear for Easter, she was not satisfied and requested that the items be re-cleaned. When the items had not been delivered on the agreed upon date, Hundley went to the store to retrieve them, but was told that she would have to pay an additional amount. When she refused, she was physically assaulted by the operator and forced at gunpoint to vacate the premises.260 Hundley had to seek medical treatment for the injuries she sustained during the altercation. In a similar incident, Mrs. Itherine Blair, who was bed stricken, was brutally attacked by a delivery man from the Society Cleaners during an argument where she refused to pay for a "dressing gown" that had not been properly cleaned. The company offered to compensate Blair for the garment which was destroyed in the struggle, but she refused, choosing instead to sue for damages.261

259 "Youthful Prowler Attacks Housewives at Outhwaite Homes," Call & Post, 20 July 1939.
260 "Nellie Hundley Sues Pressman for Assault," Call & Post, 29 April 1937.
Churches, as the major institutions in the black community, provided assistance to African American migrants and served as important mechanisms of social control. As previously mentioned, African Americans had a long history of basing their acceptance by dominant culture on their acceptance of Christianity. Accordingly, “The church played the single most important role in influencing normative values and distinguishing respectable from non-respectable behavior among working class blacks during the early twentieth century.”

Migrants could receive important advice about where to shop from the church. Bertha Cowan who migrated to Cleveland in 1917 recalled, “They were beautiful church people...They took a lot of interest in us. Told us where to shop, what stores to go to shop and how to buy clothes.” The church taking such a prominent role in the self-presentation of migrants was a continuation of its historical role: “[I]t was within the welcoming sanctuary of the black church, as well as during their Sunday journeys to and from it, that they discovered their most frequent opportunity for aesthetic display.”

Dressing up was an essential part of church-going ritual. African Americans had a long tradition of denoting sacred spaces by the wearing special clothes. An examination of black dandyism notes, “The spiritual has always had a sartorial dimension for black people in America, as many slaves were

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262 Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 204.
263 Cowan, interview, 3.
264 White and White, *Stylin’*, 172.
allowed to dress in their finest clothes but once a week, on Sunday. It was important to "distinguish Sunday clothes from work clothes. If for whatever reason different clothes could not be worn 'special care' was given to clothes." Not having the proper attire was excuse enough not to attend church. In a study of black urban life in Chicago, one person commented, "I don’t attend church as often as I used to. You know I am not fixed like I want to be—haven’t the clothes I need." Another commented, “At one time I was active in church, but now I can’t dress well, so I don’t go to church, only at night, because I haven’t got anything to wear.” However, dressing up for church had different meanings across denominations. Dress codes often dictated proper dress for followers and did not always consider fashionable clothing appropriate.

Consumer culture because of its relationship to commercialism and materialism also became a source of concern. The Christian Church had a long history of advocating sensibility and thrift in dress as a way of discouraging vanity, which it considered immoral. Moreover, dress could serve as visible and powerful symbol of religious devotion and Christian morality. For African American Baptist women, consumer culture’s emphasis on satisfying individual desires was not only potentially sinful, but it undermined the struggle for racial progress which depended on a great deal of self-denial and self-control.

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The AME Church, which was more associated with Cleveland's black elite, encouraged frugality and self-denial among its members and therefore discouraged extravagant dressing. Members were supposed to avoid "costly array" and "needless ornamentation." This included the wearing of jewelry and embellishments such as lace and ruffles.\textsuperscript{270} Pastors were directed as part of their duties to "read the general rules in every congregation once a year; especially thoughts on dress."\textsuperscript{271} Pastors were also directed to follow the same precepts concerning dress as failure to do so could result in suspension.\textsuperscript{272}

While the Sanctified Church, which attracted many migrants, allowed for a freer expression in religious worship, the same cannot be said of dress. Many Sanctified Churches were storefront churches which were a phenomenon of black migration, transforming places of consumption into places of religious worship. Centered in commercial districts, these churches often preached against the temptations of the very places they inhabited, labeling many of the activities associated with modernity as sinful. Members of Sanctified Churches were directed not to attend motion pictures, listen to secular music, or attend public dances. Strict dress codes encouraged modesty and had a tendency towards plainness. Advocating a natural unadorned feminine beauty, women were forbidden to wear make-up and jewelry.\textsuperscript{273} Women were also directed not to

\textsuperscript{270} R.R. Wright, \textit{Doctrines and Disciplines of the AME Church} (Philadelphia, PA: AME Book Concern, 1916), 56.
\textsuperscript{271} Ibid., 185.
\textsuperscript{272} Ibid., 185-186.
\textsuperscript{273} James Edward Blackwell, "A Comparative Study of Five Negro 'Store Front Churches in Cleveland" (MA thesis, Western Reserve University, 1949), 77. The focus of the Sanctified
wear “short dresses.”274 One church required women to wear dresses so long that they almost swept the floor.275 However, the Sanctified Church was not as concerned with modifying behavior to be more acceptable to whites, but making themselves pleasing and wholly acceptable to God. This emphasis on God rather than man was attractive to working-class migrants who were disenchanted with or perhaps recognized the futility in structuring their lives around a racialized and classed standards for behavior that held “white is right.”276

In the 1920s, one of the most predominant Sanctified denomination, the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) which admonished members to “be in the world, but not of it,” instituted purity classes. Like other church programs, these classes were directed at the youth under the biblical premise of Proverbs 22:6, “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” The focus on youth was also because the classes were a direct response to the flapper, which in the 1920s became the image of the modern women, epitomizing the female consumer. The flapper also owed its popularity to the fact that its fashions were more accessible. The design of the dress made it “simple enough to be made by the most amateur dress maker of any class” and the dress could also be made of inexpensive materials. More so than the fashions of the Victorian period, “[h]igh fashion appeared to be democratically Church on fashion is not surprising considering that the congregations usually had a female majority. Moreover, many of the Sanctified Churches, except the COGIC, were often presided over by women. Women pastors often wore white, as a symbol of their purity. See Ibid., 277, 94.

274 Ibid., 114.
275 Ibid., 129
open to all.\textsuperscript{277} However, "Flappers were consumers, and they were white. Black women were servants; thus, they couldn't possibly be flappers."\textsuperscript{278}

While African American women had adopted the earlier racialized image of idealized femininity, the Gibson Girl, as a means of uplift, the same cannot be said of the flapper.\textsuperscript{279} Despite the popularity and accessibility of the flapper, it was an image that religious and middle-class African American reformers believed that the race could not afford, as it had the potential of confirming negative stereotypes of African American women. The flapper was associated with a more expressive sexuality. The flapper also represented freedom and independence, and challenged traditional notions of femininity.

Flapper fashions made the body more and less visible than fashions of previous decades and simultaneously represented a more masculine and more sexualized image of femininity. The dress of the flapper was shapeless deemphasizing the female form drawing attention away from the waist, hips, and breast as the corset had done. However, the shorter length and the absence of sleeves left the body's limbs exposed. The fabrics used, also gave the dresses the illusion of being "see through." This was contrary to the church's focus on the modesty. However, it was not just women's reputations that were at stake, as they were believed to be a potential moral danger not only to themselves, but to

others. Women “were expected to exemplify sexual control,” regulating not only their own sexuality, but that of men. There was believed to be a direct link between women’s immodest dress and men’s immorality. As such, “[W]omen were expected to carry the burden of maintaining COGIC sexual morality.”

The flapper was also associated with unwholesome leisure which the church preached was immoral. The dances characteristic of the flapper were also associated with negative aspects of black culture, as they had originated in southern black roadhouses and jook joints, places that the church had deemed as sinful and had prohibitions against. In fact, the very characteristics of flapper dress were seen as less restrictive, allowing for the freedom of movement essential for the dance. Not only did the design of the dress enable movement, it also accentuated it. According to Hannel, “The loosely hanging strips of fabric provide[d] extra swing and movement to the dress.”

While Flapper dress is often attributed to Bohemian fashion that developed in Greenwich Village, it also had an African influence. The “fringe

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281 Butler, Women in the Church of God in Christ, 85. The COGIC was not the only denomination to hold women responsible for men’s sexuality. At a 1914 International Sunday School convention held in Chicago, Illinois girls were told to “Make the boys clean minded and wholesome by the way you dress.” See “Says ‘Spooning’ Is a Crime,” Gazette, 4 July 1914.
282 Hazzard-Gordon, Jookin’, 83-84.
283 Susan L. Hannel, “The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion,” in Twentieth-Century American Fashion, ed. Linda Welters and Patricia Ann Cunningham (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2005), 70. While fashion historians argue that the dress of the flapper did not actually emerge until 1925, the Gazette was talking about flapper fashion as early as 1923. The newspaper featured an article, attributing flapper fashion to the fashion forwardness of the Haitians.
284 Ibid., 70.
285 Attributing flapper fashion to the Greenwich Village, it is argued, “Bobbed hair, loose-fitting dresses with short skirts, rolled hose, beaded necklaces and slouch hats with brims pulled down on the forehead were the hall marks of bohemian dress in Greenwich Village prior to the roaring 228
that swayed imitated African dress." The flapper's fringed dress was often beaded and accompanied by jewelry that mimicked the "various...rattles that adorn the bodies of dancers" in African cultural traditions. These percussive sounds were "important" because they enabled the music and dance to become one, reinforcing "the incorporation of body motion as an integral part of the music making process." As Levine argues, "In the Americas as in African Negro music, both vocal and instrumental, was intimately tied to bodily movement." Music and motion were so integral to the culture that enslaved blacks found ways for the two to continue exist alongside each other in spite of European Christian notions that dancing even in the context of religious worship was sinful. Enslaved blacks who converted to Christianity combined both music and motion in religious expressions by arguing that they in fact were not dancing because their worship practices did not involve the crossing of the feet.

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288 Wilson, "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing," 165.
Even the fabrics used in flapper fashions had African-inspired motifs. While the flapper’s association with an African heritage was embraced by dominant culture, it remained problematic for the black church. Associations with Africa suggested that the flapper had heathen origins and was therefore un-Christian, and as previously mentioned, it was African Americans’ adherence to evangelical Christianity on which they based their acceptance into mainstream society.

The Negro Welfare Association

In 1917, the Negro Welfare Association, concerned with “human uplift and social betterment” was established. Its offices were originally located in the Phillis Wheatley Building. The association, which eventually became an affiliate of the Urban League, represented a “united” effort to address the needs of migrant population. In other cities, like Chicago and Detroit, the Urban League took a very direct role in shaping the self-presentation of migrants. The leagues gave explicit instructions to migrants on how to dress, distributing literature on the do’s and don’ts of what to wear. In Detroit, the Urban League also comprised membership of the Dress Well Club. Believing that inappropriate

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292 While African inspired folk traditions had often been accepted by African Americans, after emancipation a stricter sacred/secular divide developed.
293 "Welfare Association to Look After Race’s Needs, Advocate, 12 January 1918.
dress was the cause of racial “discrimination and segregation,” the club organized “to create a better impression of the Negro by attention to dress, personal appearance, and public behavior.”296 In Cleveland, however, there is no evidence that the Negro Welfare Association took on this role. The organization, instead, directed most of its efforts towards the economic needs of migrants. To this end, the association provided job placement assistance. In its first year of existence, it was able to place African Americans in over a thousand positions. These placements included employment at a “large ribbon factory” for several young women.297

The association was able to exert some influence over dress in its attempts to change consumption habits among migrants. In 1918, the association established the Bureau of Home Economics “to give advice on household management with the view of preventing waste of time, energy and money and of decreasing expenditures for food, clothing, furnishing and general household expenses.”298 Its establishment was the result of surveys, home visits, and interviews that had been conducted indicating that there was such a need in the community.299

As a way of disseminating information, the association also created portable exhibits to be displayed at various places in the community.

296 Ibid., 56.
including schools, settlement houses, and churches. In 1925, an exhibit on health presented information on various topics including “proper clothing.”

The consumer habits of migrants often drew criticism because they defied notions of thrift. African Americans often received criticism for spending a large part of their disposable incomes on dress. This is because “the implication is that people of low incomes who put this much expenditure into clothing are making some kind of mistake. They do not fully understand what ought to be their proper priorities.” The Welfare Association believed that the intervention of the African American middle-class would help “migrants...develop middle-class savings and consumption habits” and improve their standard of living. Like other areas of reform, the emphasis on budgeting encouraged migrants to exercise self-control. To encourage participation, one of the volunteers in charge of home visits “started saving and thrift competitions among families.”

Budgeting was important not only to avoid financial disaster, but to protect marriages, which as previously discussed were central to notions of middle-class respectability. Marital problems were often linked to financial problems. While a women’s dress was viewed as an important responsibility of marriage, women’s desire for clothes was blamed for rising divorce rates. Clothing often figured

303 “To the Board of Trustees of the Negro Welfare Association, 1918,” 5.

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prominently in domestic arguments.\textsuperscript{304} In \textit{The Bluest Eye}, it is arguments over money that lead to the demise of Pauline’s marriage to Cholly: “When Cholly began to quarrel about the money she wanted she decided to go to work. Taking jobs as a day worker helped with the clothes, and even a few things for the apartment, but it did not help with Cholly. He was not pleased with her purchases and began to tell her so. Their marriage was shredded with quarrels.”\textsuperscript{305} Harry E. Murray in his divorce suit cited that “his wife bought unnecessary dresses, etc.”\textsuperscript{306} However, it was not just the cost, but the act of a wife spending money on herself that was problematic. This was because, “All too often, female extravagance—especially when unleashed on personal adornment—embodied more than a hint of wifely subordination.”\textsuperscript{307}

An article in the \textit{Advocate} by F.W. Harris of Chicago argued that the number of divorces would decrease if married men did not have “to carry the full burden” of purchasing their wives wardrobes. Harris believed that a new law would solve the problem. The law would put the burden back on the woman dictating “that whenever a man who was earning less than $100 a month decided to marry the woman should have some certain amount of money saved up—say $1500. After buying her own clothes from this amount she could then put away about $1,200 or $1,300, or invest in some good security.”\textsuperscript{308} The interest on it each year would be enough to buy her own clothes, instead of making her

\textsuperscript{304} See Gamber, \textit{The Female Economy}, 119.
\textsuperscript{305} Morrison, \textit{The Bluest Eye}, 118.
\textsuperscript{306} “Cleveland Sixth City,” \textit{Gazette}, 22 July 1916.
\textsuperscript{307} Gamber, \textit{The Female Economy}, 120.
\textsuperscript{308} F.W. Harris, “Number of Divorces Greatly Increasing,” \textit{Advocate}, 18 September 1915.
husband bear the full financial responsibility. For Harris this was the least a woman could do “if the man [paid] all the rest of the expenses.”

Despite the consequences, convincing African Americans to change their consumption behavior was no easy task. For many migrants, as indicated earlier in this chapter, dress was a symbol of northern success. Dress was evidence of the opportunities available in the north and their ability to access them. Migrants would return south for the “city show.” After working in Cleveland for a year doing domestic work, Sara Brooks returned to Alabama. In her own words, “I wanted to go back South for awhile just because I had come up on a visit and I had worked, I had some nice clothes and new shoes and a big hat, and I wanted to show them off.” Clothes were easily portable and because racism was often about restricting black mobility, African American migrants prized status symbols that were not only highly visible, but portable. Having most of their wealth invested in clothing also made it easier to extricate themselves from oppressive economic or romantic situations. According to Ownby, “taking one’s clothes was the clearest sign of leaving...The location of their clothes signified where they intended to stay, at least for a while.” In 1931, when Mrs. Olive Joyce decided to leave her husband, she did not take her clothes, but instead sent a clear

\[\text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{Cowan, interview, 4.}\]
\[\text{Brooks, You May Plow Here, 200.}\]
\[\text{Ownby, American Dreams in Mississippi, 117.}\]
message that the relationship was over by “destroy[ing] their clothing.” Her husband did not see or hear from her, again.³¹³

Policing in Print

Policing was not restricted to social and religious organizations, but also included print culture. African American newspapers in addition to offering fashion advice and proffering positive images, were important sources of surveillance. The Call & Post gossip columnist, Skippy warned readers to be careful “we warn all to be careful Skippy’s got eyes on you.”³¹⁴ Despite criticism of the tabloid or sensational aspects of black newspapers, they helped to regulate African American public behavior, telling blacks how to or how not they ought to behave. In the late Victorian period, with the expansion of public spaces, newspapers developed a more local focus and served as an important mechanism of social control. By devoting considerable attention to local news, newspapers provided a “disciplinary gaze.”³¹⁵ The names and addresses of those arrested for being involved in criminal activity, such as shoplifting, were published so there could be no confusion about the identities of those involved. Such indiscretions were also sometimes worthy of front page news, such as in the case of Agnes Thomas and Elizabeth Davis who were arrested for shoplifting, after allegedly “stealing seven dresses from the May Company,

valued at $27.00." Sometimes, the shame was not confined locally, but made it into the national news. When Rosie Cunningham and Marie Brown were "charged with the theft of two fur coats valued at $1,145 from a downtown department store," it was reported in the national edition of the Chicago Defender. The women who had "hidden the coats beneath their skirts" did not get very far, as they "were seen and arrested at the door of the store." Such undesirable publicity was not only humiliating for those who committed such infractions, but was also meant to deter others. By reporting on the unsuccessful attempt of these women to steal, it could dissuade others from engaging in similar behavior. Readers might also be discouraged by the punishments meted out for extralegal activities. As discussed in the previous chapter, in addition to being required to pay for the stolen merchandise, shoplifters faced fines and potential imprisonment.

The newspaper also suggested borrowing clothes was not good practice. Reports depicted borrowing as a source of discord among friends, sometimes resulting in physical violence. An argument between two women "over clothes" resulted in a physical altercation in which one of the women was left injured with "[a] bit left arm and forearm, a right eyelid bit through and a left ear partly bit

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316 “Shoplifters Arrested,” Call & Post, 6 April 1935. In that same article, other instances of shoplifting were also mentioned, including one which involved a man stealing a dress from the May Company.
In another incident, a woman who "borrowed clothes" from a friend and "deliberately destroyed them," was stabbed when confronted by the friend.

Behavior did not need to be illegal and/or violent to warrant mention. A reporter complained about "a woman...sitting on her front porch, with both shoes off, nonchalantly picking her bunions." This policing included paying close attention to what people wore. People were put on notice for not dressing appropriately. A "certain girl" who attended John Hay High School received disapproval for repeatedly wearing the same faded clothing. The girl was also admonished for inquiring into how much others paid for their clothing and bragging that she could have gotten the clothes for much cheaper. The columnist believed that if the girl was able to access such discounts, she should appear better dressed. The black press's policing of dress not only focused on the negative, but also the positive. While conceding that Athenette Mak may not be the best dressed, the "Town Gossip" commended her "ensembles" for being "well chosen and very conservative."

African American etiquette books represented another way that print culture could be utilized to regulate the behavior of African Americans. There was

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318 “Bites Woman’s Ear Partly Off in Fight,” Call & Post, 3 December 1936.
319 “Women in Knife Battle Over Clothes,” Call & Post, 18 November 1937.
321 Christine Harris, “Christy Chats,” Call & Post, 1 June 1940.
322 June Williams, “Town Gossip,” Call & Post, 2 February 1939.
323 “Jolly Jots by Jean,” Call & Post, 24 October 1935.
a "flurry of conduct books between 1916 and 1920." It is probably no coincidence that this "flurry" coincided with the onset of the Great Migration, when the behavior and appearance of southern migrants was a source of anxiety for established residents. The books advised readers how to conform to middle-class standards of behavior, which was especially timely considering that the influx from the south also resulted in the expansion of the black middle-class. New members needed to know the expectations of their new status including what it meant to be well-dressed. Despite the middle-class orientation of this prescriptive literature, it suggested that people regardless of class had the potential for self-improvement. According to *The Colored Girl Beautiful* (1916), "We are a poor people but we can be quiet, clean, becomingly and fittingly dressed." 

The favorite book of Cleveland teacher, Bertha Blue, was the *The Correct Thing to Do, to Say, to Wear* (1940). Blue understood the importance of such advice having written for the women's department of the *Cleveland Journal* earlier in the century. According to the book, "To be able to dress well and appropriately is a satisfaction beyond measure to any one of feminine form." It

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325 Ibid., 798.
327 Charlotte Hawkins Brown, *The Correct Thing to Do, To Say, To Wear* (Sedalia, NC: Charlotte Hawkins Brown, 1940), *Bertha Blue Family Papers*, MSS 4630, Folder 3, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH. Despite being published after the heyday of this type of prescriptive literature and during a period when traditional notions of respectability were on the decline, its presence suggests that certain standards of conduct were still expected to be maintained.
advised that the two most important things to consider when dressing was enhancing one's attractiveness and dressing appropriately for the occasion. To address the latter, the book offered advice on what to wear for specific occasions, one of which was shopping. For the occasion, the book suggested wearing a "practical street dress" that was distinct from house or work clothes. To facilitate trying on clothes and to make sure one's self-presentation did not suffer for it, the book recommended that readers "wear a dress that [could] be easily removed and put on, one without many buttons, snaps, sashes, etc." and did "not easily wrinkle." The outfit was to be accessorized with hat, gloves, purse, and comfortable low-heeled or flat walking shoes. The book also seemed to echo sentiments against clothes borrowing. However, the book did not discourage the practice to avoid violence, but argued, "[c]lothes have distinct personality and, however attractive, may show the one for whom it was not bought up at a disadvantage."

Conclusion

Migrating to Cleveland did not bring an end to the discrimination that African American women faced in the realm of consumption. Growing segregation and efforts to police the behavior and appearance of migrants contradicted claims of an unregulated modern life. Despite attempts to circumscribe the freedoms of migrant women, life in the urban north also

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329 Ibid., 39.
330 Ibid., 7.
represented new opportunities. Migration reconfigured African American access to consumer culture, but also to display. These "[n]ew ways of displaying their bodies hinted, above all, at the possibility of personal liberation, an improvement of their position as both women and African Americans in the South."\textsuperscript{331}
Chapter 4
Fashioning Blackness, 1920-1940

Cleveland's established African American community resented any exclusion from urban life and saw the growing segregation that resulted from increased black visibility and mobility during the migration in primarily negative terms. However, as long time resident Margie Glass reflected, "There is always a way to turn adversity into something good."\(^1\) Despite the growing restrictions that resulted from migration, there were also new opportunities. While segregation oppressed African Americans and attempted to limit their participation in American consumer culture, it was never completely successful as its restrictions on black behavior were never absolute. Furthermore, "Separation...did not necessarily mean racial inferiority. It could also signify the creation of relatively autonomous black spaces, even autonomous black bodies."\(^2\) Within these racialized spaces that were a part of everyday life, African Americans created opportunities that enabled them to participate more fully in the burgeoning world of fashion as both work and leisure, "subver[ting] from within"\(^3\) consumer culture and the racism which gave it shape. Moreover, these spaces allowed African

\(^1\) Margie Glass, interview by Antoinette Kindall, 12 December 1986, transcript, St. James Oral History Project, MSS 4536, Container 1, Folder 16, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, 15. When Glass makes this statement she is referring specifically to the Great Depression, however, it applies more generally for the experience of African Americans in Cleveland during the period in question.


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Americans to engage in the self-fashioning of positive and self-affirming individual and collective identities that were central to constructions of the New Negro. Just as display was vital to modern consumer culture, it was also important to the New Negro Movement. The Movement sought to transform the images of African Americans. As such, dress served as a “key signifier” of this new racial consciousness. Focusing on dressmakers who were integral in constructing images for African American women and the various modes of display connected to dress, this chapter will explore racialized spaces, like the dressmaker’s shop, as important sites of cultural production where African Americans fashioned blackness through consumer culture.

_African American Dressmaking_

The Great Migration and the subsequent patterns of segregation that emerged allowed for parallel institutional development which expanded entrepreneurial opportunities for African Americans. As Charles W. Chesnutt wrote, “The reaction to the barrier of segregation which confronts the Negro almost everywhere has resulted, in Cleveland as elsewhere, in the effort to supply among his own people many of the opportunities which he is denied.”

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5 While Harlem may have been considered the capital of the New Negro, the emerging racial consciousness was not restricted to Harlem and flourished across the nation in response to black migration and urbanization. See Davarian L. Baldwin, _Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life_ (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).


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These new enterprises, small and "inadequately financed," catered almost exclusively to the needs of their communities.\(^7\)

Providing services for a predominately black clientele represented an important shift in African American entrepreneurship. Prior to the Great Migration the majority of black businesses in Cleveland were oriented towards providing services for white clientele. This reorientation was not simply the result of growing racism, but the growing size of the African American population and recognition of their consumer desires. While major manufacturing and advertising insiders debated whether or not African Americans represented viable and lucrative consumer markets, African Americans had already taken notice of the power of African American consumerism and emerged as entrepreneurs. Drake and Cayton argue:

> The Great Migration created the "Negro market." Both white and Negro merchants, as well as the Negro consumer, became increasingly conscious of the purchasing power of several hundred thousand people solidly massed in one compact community. The rapid growth of the Negro community between 1915 and 1929 was accompanied by the expansion in all types of Negro-owned businesses.\(^8\)

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\(^7\) Charles Chesnutt, "The Negro in Cleveland" (1930), in *Charles W. Chesnutt Essays and Speeches*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. et al (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 541. In some cases, these entrepreneurs added to a growing black middle-class which was changing in composition, no longer defined by its proximity to whiteness either through ancestry or business involvement.

Women were an important aspect of this growing trend of African American entrepreneurship, as the owners of a variety of businesses including dressmaking shops.

Despite the increasing availability and affordability of ready-to-wear clothing by the 1920s, custom made clothing continued to play an important role in African American women’s participation in consumer culture. As such, dressmaking also represented one of the limited ways African American women could enter into the fashion industry in Cleveland. In fact, ready-to-wear clothing and dressmaking continued to exist side by side and were not always mutually exclusive enterprises. For example, the Ross Sisters operated a Fashion Shoppe on Quincy Avenue that sold ready-to-wear garments and also offered “dressmaking and designing” services.9 Despite the fashion industry’s increased dependence on female labor, between 1920 and 1930 the number of African American women involved in textile trades in Cleveland had declined by more than half. However, African American women did not let this stop them from pursuing fashion related jobs. Women found employment as dressmakers and seamstresses outside of factory work and as a result the number of black women employed in these capacities increased by more than thirty-percent.10

9 Advertisement, Call & Post, 26 November 1940. The New York Dress Shop located on Woodland Avenue in Cleveland’s black belt also recognized African Americans preference for custom-made clothing. While advertising ready-to-wear clothing, the store also advertised: “We will make a dress to your own measurement any of four fall styles, when you furnish your own material for...$5.” See Advertisement, Gazette, 18 September 1926.
10 Kenneth L. Kusmer, A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930 (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 287. This was at odds with the national trend in which the numbers of African American dressmakers and seamstresses, not employed in factories, had
The majority of African American dressmakers and seamstresses were self-employed, often the proprietors of their own establishments, which gave them an autonomy that was often lacking in other employments available to them. As a career choice, it meant that African American women were not subject to white supervision, insulating them from the racism and sexism that characterized other means of employment. Dressmaking, therefore, was quite popular and "with the possible exception of prostitution, no trade contained larger numbers of female proprietors." Unlike prostitutes who traded on their sexuality and were therefore considered deviant, dressmakers operated within the bounds of proper femininity and were considered "genteel and respectable." So respectable in fact that it was acceptable employment for a wife of a minister. In 1921, Howard University graduate Mrs. C.W. Neloms, also a wife of a reverend, began operating a dressmaking establishment on Quincy Avenue. The association of dressmaking with respectability would have been especially attractive to African American women hoping to construct themselves in accordance with middle-class values. The respectability a woman derived from dressmaking was in part due to the fact that their places of business were dominated by women. As "proprietors, workers, and consumers," the shop was female space. As female space, it was a place where few men dared to tread. In the short story that appeared in the Competitor entitled, "His First Wife's...
Photo" set in Lima, Ohio, a woman instructs her servant to tell her husband that she is going to her dressmaker in an effort to surprise him with a gift. The woman "knew this old grey-headed alibi rarely failed since no man has ever had the courage to approach his wife's dressmaker, not even by telephone, for fear she might inform him of a past due bill which he never heard of before."\textsuperscript{13}

The absence of men offered African American women protection against the sexual harassment and exploitation to which they were often subjected in other employments.\textsuperscript{14} African American women dressmakers, as their own bosses and because of the nature of their work, were able to set their own hours and have more flexibility concerning the standardization of the work week. Dressmaking also tended to be more profitable than other forms of employment available to African American women. In addition to being economically lucrative, dressmaking presented women with "rare opportunities to exercise skill and creativity."\textsuperscript{15} It was one of the few "semi-skilled" or "semi-professional" employment opportunities available to African American women during the inter-war period as many of the war-time industries that had drawn African Americans to Cleveland were now closed to them.\textsuperscript{16} The term "semi-skilled" obscures the amount of skill that dressmaking actually entailed. Dressmakers had to have

\textsuperscript{13} Edward Davenport, "His First Wife's Photo," \textit{Competitor} 1 (1920): 42
\textsuperscript{15} Gamber, \textit{The Female Economy}, 123.
extensive knowledge of both fashion trends and fabrics.\textsuperscript{17} Moreover, the professionalism that dressmaking demanded is often marginalized by the fact that it usually has been viewed as an extension of the domestic sphere. However, African American women who chose to enter the profession "did not simply transfer domestic skills to the market place," but had been trained in educational and professional settings.\textsuperscript{18} Writing in the early 1900s, Margaret Murray Washington noted that at Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, "Learning to sew, with the ultimate end of becoming a full-fledged dressmaker, has been the ultimate height of ambition with the major part of our girls." Young women studying dressmaking "spent the day from seven until have past five making the blue uniform dresses, filling orders for tailor-made dresses in silk and cloth, measuring drafting, cutting, and fitting."\textsuperscript{19} Hazel Mason Williams who migrated to Cleveland after graduating high school in Charleston West Virginia, left the city and traveled to Detroit where she developed her interest in sewing and dressmaking. There Hazel took "several advanced courses in Tailoring and Dressmaking at the Cass Tech Institute." Upon "returning to Cleveland, Mrs. Williams became self-employed as a dressmaker and seamstress."\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{18} Gamber, \textit{The Female Economy}, 5.
\textsuperscript{20} Anita L. Polk, "Tuna-Salmon Casserole by Lakeview Matron," \textit{Call & Post}, 21 March 1959.
African American women dressmakers created new identities for themselves as workers, as well for other African American women as consumers. The services dressmakers provided placed them on the forefront of African American women's self-presentations. Dressmakers enabled African American women to acquire fashions that would have otherwise been unaffordable. Mamie Garvin Fields, who migrated from South Carolina to Boston, opened a dressmaking shop with two other migrant women to provide women with recreations of dresses that appeared in major fashion magazines. The women realized a business opportunity when they shrewdly observed, "Very few if any of the neighborhood ladies could afford to buy the dresses Vogue Magazine advertised, but they did have the taste for them, and some of them had enough money to buy nice material and the various trimmings."21 In the Call & Post, a dressmaker located on Folsom Avenue advertised, "Any design copied at very low price."22 Like home sewing, dressmaking not only made fashions more accessible, it also allowed the consumer to have more input in the style, fashion, design of their clothing. Although ready-to-wear clothing represented convenience and affordability, women who visited a dressmaker "exerted a degree of control over production."23 Clothing made by dressmakers may have delayed the immediate gratification that ready-to-wear clothing provided, however, it was the ultimate in showcasing individuality as women working in

22 "Dressmaking," Call & Post, 28 May 1936.
collaboration with their dressmaker could determine the color, fit, and quality of their garments. Home sewing afforded similar advantages, but only in so much as a woman’s requisite skills and time allowed. Moreover, as opposed to ready-to-wear garments where manufacturers had no idea of their eventual customers, dressmakers often had a more intimate relationship with their clientele, since they were acquainted with them on a face to face basis. While this relationship had its own set of challenges, it meant that the dressmaker in constructing the garment had a better idea of what would be the most flattering to their customer and could therefore tailor it appropriately.24 The sign of a good dressmaker was that even when a customer requested a garment of the latest fashion, the dressmaker was able to make the necessary modifications to the style to ensure a successful self-presentation.

The dressmaker’s ability to make these sorts of changes underscored the notion that being well dressed was not simply about following the latest fashion trends, but about wearing clothes that were becoming to the individual complementing their age, skin and hair coloring, and body type. The growing discourse on individuality was reflective of the culture’s growing emphasis on personality, for which dress was an important “vehicle.”25 Underscoring this point,

24 The nature of the relationship meant that there was more onus on the dressmaker to satisfy the customer.
a 1930s fashion column that appeared in the *Call & Post* advised, “Personality First, Dress Second.”\textsuperscript{26} An advertisement for one dressmaker urged, “Have your dresses, suits and fur coats made to suit your personality.”\textsuperscript{27} This was especially important for women whose dress was not just about fashion which implied conformity, but style, which defined individuality. A gossip column noted, “Ah has been observing de women when dey am done bought a new hat or a new dress or something dat no one else has and den dey step in pride til dey somebody else wid de same kinda garments on, den oh my goodness, dere feathers flop like a wet hen. Den dey begin to DYE.”\textsuperscript{28} Although written in dialect and meant to be humorous, this column illustrates the importance of individuality in dress. Even when forced to dress alike or wear the same colors (usually club colors) to demonstrate group membership at social events, women tried to make their self-presentation somewhat unique. At the social debs pre-Halloween party it was reported that the “gay young debs were dressed in a unique style of their own although all of them wore short frocks and ribbons adorned their hair.”\textsuperscript{29}

The dressmaker's shop gave women more freedom concerning employment and dress, but the shop itself also represented freedom.

Patronizing African American dressmakers not only gave African American

\textsuperscript{26} “Personality First, Dress Second, Stylist Believes,” Gazette, 14 November 1936. Since "women's clothing discourse displayed much more concern with individual identity and expressiveness," personality styles were largely considered feminine. See Rob Schorman, *Selling Style: Clothing and Social Change at the Turn of the Century* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 66.

\textsuperscript{27} “Dressmaking,” *Call & Post*, 28 May 1936.

\textsuperscript{28} “Mose of the Roaring Third,” *Call & Post*, 15 September 1934.

\textsuperscript{29} “Fuzz and Fizz,” *Call & Post*, 3 November 1934
women more autonomy concerning their wardrobe, it also allowed them to engage in consumer culture without fear of experiencing racial discrimination. This was especially important when it came to service. In a black-owned dressmaker's shop, service was not limited to the act of purchase. African American women did not have to worry about not being waited on or not being able to try on certain items, services that had come to be expected but that African American could never be certain of when patronizing white-owned shops even in their own neighborhoods. The existence of African American dressmakers meant that “[t]he African American woman could proudly rely on the premise that she had no need to go where she was unwanted.” Instead she could give her business to the African American dressmaker who not only understood how dress should reflect her social, cultural, and economic needs, but could also show her “the regard [she] deserved.”

Cleveland’s most successful African American dressmaking enterprise was the Clarke Style Shop, which later became the Clarke School of Dressmaking and Fashion Design. Its proprietor, Amanda Wicker, was born in Sandersville, Georgia in 1900. Wicker’s aptitude for dressmaking had been displayed at an early age when she much to her mother’s chagrin would take fabric reserved for quilt projects and make doll clothes. Following high school where she was “encouraged” to pursue a career in dressmaking, Wicker attended Tuskegee Institute on scholarship with the hope of returning to rural

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Georgia to teach home economics. In 1923, after graduating from Tuskegee with a teaching certificate, she chose instead to go to Washington D.C. where she took a course in dressmaking under the instruction of Addie Clarke, after whom she would later name her dressmaking enterprise. Wicker felt very indebted to Clarke to whom she had “learned more from... in one year” than she “did during three years at Tuskegee.” According to Wicker, Clarke “taught [her] everything, including how to run a business.”\(^\text{31}\) As Wicker alluded, operating a successful dressmaking enterprise “required craft expertise as well as business acumen.” This was because “dressmakers...were makers as well as sellers; in contrast to prevailing commercial trends, the typical establishment evinced little separation between production and retailing.”\(^\text{32}\)

After finishing the course in dressmaking, Wicker migrated to Cleveland with her husband who was employed as a barber. In 1925 she “started a dressmaking shop” in her home located at 9402 Cedar Ave. Her “aim” was “to offer the first service of its kind in Cleveland—designed to meet the needs of the most fastidious and discriminating people.”\(^\text{33}\) Part of Wicker’s philosophy was that, “it didn’t matter what material [she] used, cotton or silk, [she] worked just as hard to make that dress the most beautiful dress.”\(^\text{34}\) While Wicker was no longer


\(^{33}\) “Presenting the Book of Gold Fashion Theater” (1942), Clarke School of Dressmaking, MSS 4490, Folder 1, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH.

living in the south, she drew on the connections she had formed there, when she launched her dress shop. Wicker's first customer was a woman who ran a boarding house, who wanted some house dresses made. The woman had been referred by Margaret Poindexter, a friend of Wicker's from Sandersville, Georgia, who worked for the boarding house proprietor.35

Although Wicker chose to pursue a different career path, she did not let the teaching certificate she had earned at Tuskegee go to waste, in addition to operating the dressmaking shop, she offered sewing classes in her bedroom. Her first student was a woman named Carrie who boarded with her while taking classes. According to Wicker, "[Carrie] stayed with me and I taught her all I knew about dressmaking."36 The classes became so popular that Wicker moved to a rented space at 8923 Cedar Ave where she operated out of for the next five decades. Wicker's role as teacher was not restricted to the classes she offered. A dressmaker "was seen as teacher in the African American community for her knowledge of fashion and her ability to enhance images and change self concepts" and her shop was a "school that imparted middle-class mores and consumerist values to its willing pupils."37

It was quite common for African American women in Cleveland to operate businesses out of their homes, which has obscured the number of women that involved in this type of work. As a result many of them remain unknown, lost to

35 Wicker, interview, 11-12.
36 Ibid., 2.
the passage of time. Cleveland resident, Hazel Murray Barnett, drew attention to the invisibility of this type of work in an interview. Barnett when asked if her mother was employed responded in the negative, even while acknowledging that her mother ran a successful home based sewing business. Barnett’s mother, who she does not name in the interview, used the skills she had developed as a tailor in New York offering sewing services and classes out of her home. Her mother’s clientele included one of Cleveland’s prominent white families, which was a departure from other African American businesses whose clientele was restricted to members of their own race.38 For married woman such as Barnett’s mother, home based dressmaking ventures allowed women the opportunity to remain home fulfilling their domestic roles and still contribute to the household economy, which was a necessity for many African American women. It also allowed their husband’s to carry on the pretense that they were the sole providers keeping with middle-class notions of respectability.

The other economic incentive to operating a home business was that there was not the added expensive of paying for retail space. However, confined to the domestic space, these businesses added to the already crowded conditions that typified African American urban life in the north. Before moving to

38 Hazel M. Barnett, interview by Marjorie Witt-Johnson, 11 January 1987, transcript, St. James Oral History Project, MSS 4536, Container 1, Folder 2, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, 2. In the interview Barnett refers to her mother as a “bright woman who was innovative in making money.” In addition to dressmaking, she was also involved in real estate. For more on African American women and home based businesses. See Eileen Boris, “Black Women and Paid Labor in the Home: Industrial Homework in Chicago in the 1920’s,” in Homework Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Paid Labor at Home, ed. Eileen Boris and Cynthia R. Daniels (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 33-52.
her home on Cedar Avenue, Wicker had attempted to earn a living sewing, but found it difficult because she and her husband were “confined to one room” and her landlady thought that Wicker’s sewing machine used too much electricity.\footnote{Wicker, interview, 4.}

Bertha Weaver and Louise Hafley, however, found a way to make it work. They operated the Bertha-Louise Dressmaking Shoppe for over ten years out of the home they shared at 8613 Quincy Avenue with Hafley’s two teenage sons and Weaver’s parents.\footnote{Clarence L. Simmons, “Gets $150 at Haltnorth,” \textit{Call & Post}, 30 May 1935.}

While dressmaking was associated with economic self-sufficiency, being self-employed could be a “perilous undertaking.” Dressmaking ventures, regardless of race were often “[h]ampered by insufficient capital, limited credit, and customers who habitually refused to pay their bills.” Moreover, unlike their counterparts involved in beauty culture, African American dressmakers did not enjoy the luxury of a “protected consumer market” since the clothing demands of African American women were not significantly different from the larger society. Therefore, African American dressmakers faced considerable competition from white retail establishments and as a result many went out of business, failing in the first few years.\footnote{Robert L. Boyd, “Race, Labor Market Disadvantage, and Survivalist Entrepreneurship: Black Women in the Urban North during the Great Depression,” \textit{Sociological Forum} 15.4 (2000): 653-655 and Gamber, \textit{The Female Economy}, 21.}

Illness could also be especially devastating. Wicker was quick to take out an advertisement in the paper announcing she was back to work after being ill for almost a month, as not to lose any additional business.\footnote{Advertisement, \textit{Call & Post}, 17 November 1938.}
She had also done so a year earlier, when she returned after a three week absence attending to her ill mother in Sandersville, Georgia. Dressmakers also sought to minimize potential negative impact to their businesses by expanding the services they offered. In addition to making custom garments, dressmakers often offered alteration services. According to Gamber, "as the twentieth century progressed, alterations constituted an increasing proportion of [dressmakers'] business." These services helped to bridge the gap between ready-to-wear clothing and custom clothing, and pointed towards the continued importance of fit in determining successful self-presentation. However, the offering of alteration services also allowed ready-to-wear industry to ultimately dominate the fashion industry.

The importance of alteration services was demonstrated during the commencement exercises at Tuskegee in 1911. The Gazette reported:

A young woman discussed "The Negro Dressmaker in the Community."

This especially caught the audience. The student told how the dressmaker might help the people to wear more becoming and less expensive clothes, and to illustrate she brought in a girl who wore a good dress which was somewhat out of fashion. The dressmaker committee proceeded to change this out-of-date pattern, a transformation accomplished by a little cutting and stitching.

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43 "Back at Work," Call & Post, 3 June 1937.
44 Gamber, The Female Economy, 197.
In addition to enabling women to “make over” outmoded fashions, alterations also meant that women did not have to settle for “ill-fitting” ready-to-wear or secondhand garments. Dressmaker, Mrs. Mildred Jacobs advertised, “Plain and fancy sewing, and alternations neatly done” at “reasonable prices.” Clarke Style Shoppe eventually specialized in renovations referring to itself as a “dress hospital.” The advertisement claimed, “We make your old clothes look like new.” While these services were “far less remunerative than the production of new garments,” they could still be quite lucrative especially during the Depression when women had less expendable income, but still desired to appear well dressed.

To counter economic instability, it was not unusual for dressmakers to have other means of employment or to operate other businesses. Wicker took in boarders to supplement her income. As previously mentioned, Mrs. Ethel Foster Goodson, who operated out of her home on Cedar Avenue, offered laundry services in addition to dressmaking. Mme. Louise's, located “over Hinst's pharmacy at the corner of E. 86th Street and Quincy Ave.,” was a combination dressmaking and beauty shop.

One of the few women who did not operate a business out of their home was Mary Rush Poe of Rush Dressmaking Shoppe on Cedar Avenue. Like Julia

46 Gamber, The Female Economy, 197.
47 "Dressmaking," Call & Post, 10 August 1039.
48 "Clarke Style Shoppe and Dress Hospital," Call & Post, 11 January 1941.
50 “Mrs. Ethel Foster Goodson," Call & Post, 3 September 1936.
51 “Cleveland Social and Personal," Cleveland Gazette, 6 April 1935.
Ringwood Coston of *Ringwood's Afro-American Journal of Fashion*, Poe chose not to operate her entrepreneurial endeavor under her married name. Her shop offered both "fashionable and plain dressmaking," but she specialized in making "funeral apparel and accessories."\(^{52}\) Poe was quite the promoter, frequently advertising in Cleveland's African American newspapers, the *Call & Post* and the *Cleveland Eagle*. Her advertising slogan, "Smart women still want clothing to fit their individuality," pointed towards the difference between custom made and ready-to-wear clothing. When she put the shop up for sale in 1936, the advertisement read, "For Sale, Rush Dressmaking Shop, well established and well advertised."\(^{53}\) During the 1934 Christmas season, she advertised a dress give-a-way promotion in which customers who patronized the dress shop during the month of December were eligible to enter in a drawing where three winners would be selected. The winners would be "awarded dress material of the latest vogue, and dresses from the material [would] be made to order without charge at the Rush Dressmaking Shoppe."\(^{54}\)

As further enticement for potential customers to visit "the style specialists," the material was displayed in the shop window.\(^{55}\) Poe's use of newspaper advertising and window displays were an indication of her understanding of modern selling techniques. The shop window arose in the early

\(^{52}\) Advertisement, *Call & Post*, 17 November 1934.

\(^{53}\) *Call & Post*, 30 July 1936. It seems that Poe traded in her career as a dressmaker for a career as a beautician.

\(^{54}\) "Dressmaker to Give Away Dresses," *Call & Post*, 8 December 1934.

\(^{55}\) Advertisement, *Cleveland Eagle*, 14 February 1936, Clippings, Chester K. Gillespie Papers, MS 3671, Scrapbook 5, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH.
twentieth century, as a new “aesthetic” based on display. This type of showing off helped “to stimulate new and underdeveloped desires” which was essential to the profitability and sustainability of the emerging culture. Shop windows were invaluable to consumer culture because they possessed the “visual power to create desire” in ways that were not possible with words or in one-dimensional representations that “lacked: the color, texture, and depth of the real thing.” Therefore, “nothing competed with them for selling power, not the poster or billboards, not even the early electrical signs.” In addition to being more visually satisfying, the display of goods in shop windows allowed for perpetual consumption. Shop windows, unlike the shops themselves, were never closed. Available to the public at all times of day, meant that people were inundated with consumption whether or not they meant to be purposefully engaged in the activity. Even if people had not seen or had ignored the advertisement for Rush’s dress give-a-way promotion in the Call & Post, it would be difficult for strollers to miss the display of the material in the shop window located on Cedar Avenue, one of the main thoroughfares of Cleveland’s African American neighborhood.

Newspaper advertising and the shop window were not the only modern selling techniques adopted and adapted by African American dressmakers. With the rise of the department store, “tradeswomen faced intense pressure to imitate

57 Ibid., 277.
58 Jan Whitaker, Service and Style: How the American Department Store Fashioned the Middle Class (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2006), 109, 110.
59 Leach, Land of Desire, 55.
During the 1920s, the fashion show also surfaced as a way for African American dressmakers in Cleveland to showcase their talents and promote their businesses.

Fashion shows had their origins in department stores during the early 1900s and like the shop window embodied the culture of consumption’s obsession with display. After World War I, the fashion show was removed from the sole auspices of the department store. The fashion show became a “vital part of American culture” as establishments and organizations across racial lines “claimed the fashion show as their own.” Emphasizing this point, the fashion show has been referred to as “the clearest and most important example of the setting up of a black institution that paralleled those in white society.”

In 1922, dressmaker Sarah Hill Johnson, described as a “fine designer” hosted one of the earliest African American fashion shows in Cleveland. During the show, she demonstrated “the Jordan System of Dressmaking,” a technique in which a gown could be “made on the stage in 15 minutes.” In 1940, the Clarke Style Shop began sponsoring its fashion show, “The Book of Gold.” The idea had originated with Harold G. Nixon who “was so impressed with excellence of the work produced in the little shop that he persuaded Mrs. Wicker to produce

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60 Gamber, The Female Economy, 301.
63 "Additional Locals," Gazette, 1 April 1922.
64 "Cleveland Social and Personal," Gazette, 11 March 1922.
65 There is some discrepancy concerning what year the fashion show began. Some sources indicate 1939, while others 1940. It was not until 1941 that the fashion show began receiving considerable coverage in the Call & Post.
the first of what was to become a series of annual fashion shows." The purpose of the show was "to acquaint the Public with the excellent quality of work which the Clarke Style Shop provides the women of our community." The "exclusive and intimate setting of the Fashion Theater" provided space to showcase the "other resources available to the lady and gentleman who would be dressed in the best of taste." Originally the show was staged at Phillis Wheatley Home where Wicker had shown her students' creations in the 1930s. Within a few years, however, the show outgrew the auditorium of the Phillis Wheatley Home to become one of Cleveland's most popular social events. The fashion show coincided with the release of a publication, of the same name, which contained a list of Cleveland's African American who's who. In later years, the fashion show also became a vehicle for awarding scholarships to the Clarke School of Dressmaking and Fashion Design.

The show had taken its name, "The Book of Gold," from a Middle Eastern inspired work by English poet, Henry James Leigh Hunt, entitled "Abou Ben Adhem." Wicker's naming of the fashion show also reflected her knowledge of current merchandising trends. Her choice reflected the West's fascination with

66 "Memoirs ...of the Golden Years," MSS 4536, Container 3, Folder 41, St. James Oral History Project, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, 1. Harold G. Nixon was an insurance salesman who later became a Reverend. He was somewhat familiar with fashion shows, having served as commentator and master of ceremonies for different ones.

67 "Presenting the Book of Gold Fashion Theater" (1942).

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid. The poem "Abou Ben Adhem" by James Henry Leigh Hunt (1784-1859), tells the story of the poem's namesake. Abou was visited by an angel in a dream and told that his name was not written in the Book of Gold, a book that lists those who love the Lord. In response, Abou requested instead that his name be listed as one "who loves his fellow man." The next night the angel returned in a dream and revealed that Abou's name topped the list of those "whom love of God had blessed."
the Orient, which was most evident in consumer culture, where it was a popular theme.\textsuperscript{70} While this othering and exoticizing was a way of constructing Western dominance, an imagined Orient, associated with color, mystery, exoticism, and romance, offered a vehicle through which to express values encouraged by consumer culture that were not traditionally accepted.\textsuperscript{71} African Americans perhaps were drawn to the Orient for similar reasons. As in the larger culture, Orientalism was a tactic used to develop modern subjectivities. The Orient provided space for African American identification and disidentification with Western civilization, allowing them to convey alternative values that might have otherwise confirmed their racial inferiority. As Helen H. Jun argues, black orientalism represents "an entire range of black imaginings of Asia that are in fact negotiations with the limits and disappointments of black citizenship."\textsuperscript{72}

Just as the shows helped to establish department stores as fashion and cultural authorities, it did the same for African American dressmakers. The authority that African American dressmakers derived from the fashion show, helped to further solidify their positions as "trendsetters" in the African American community.\textsuperscript{73} The status of these women was not only based on the styles they created for other women, but their own self-presentation. Next to prostitutes,

\textsuperscript{70} Leach, \textit{Land of Desire}, 104-110. The city's African American newspapers document the influence of the orient on consumer culture, particularly in fashion. A 1936 fashion column declared, "New Frocks are Inspired by Fashions from Orient." See \textit{Gazette}, 27 June 1936.
\textsuperscript{72} Helen Jun, "Black Orientalism: Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Race and U.S. Citizenship," \textit{American Quarterly} 58:4: 1050. For more on black Orientalism, see Bill V. Mullen, \textit{Afro Orientalism} (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
\textsuperscript{73} Lewis-Mhoon, "Adoring Adversaries," 138.
dressmakers were considered to be the most “fashionable” of “female wage earners.”74 Dressmakers’ personal styles showcased their comprehension of fashion trends and demonstrated to their community the latest styles to which women should ascribe, which furthered dressmakers’ positions “as arbiters of fashion and makers of beauty.”75 The Call & Post used the adjective “fashionable” to describe dressmaker Amanda Wicker when reporting on what she wore to social events.76 Her status in the community was further evidenced by the fact that she was listed among Cleveland’s African American Who’s Who in 1938 and 1939. But as Lewis-Mhoon points out, “Seamstresses were respected by their community, not simply because of their stylish nature, but dressmakers were also considered viable economic contributors to the African American community.”77

The fashion show did not stay long under the sole purview of dressmakers. In 1935, Fay Lee Dress Shoppe, an African American ready-to-wear shop owned by Olivia Robinson, hosted a fashion show. The show was advertised as a “parade of inducements” in which “10 beautiful and shapely models will parade the advance spring models of evening, sports, street, and housewear before the appreciative eyes of Cleveland’s femininity.”78 Even establishments with no relationship to fashion retail sponsored fashion shows.

74 Gamber, The Female Economy, 74.
75 Ibid., 106.
77 Lewis-Mhoon, Adorning Adversaries, 139.
78 “Style Show and Dance Will be Sponsored by Fay Lee Dress Shoppe,” Call & Post, 1 March 1935.
The Spotlight Club, a nightclub managed by Mrs. Reba Pettigrew, included as part of its “swank” grand opening, a fashion show. The models appeared in gowns provided by the Kitty Fears Bargain Shoppe, an African American dress shop. However, fashion shows presented by business establishments represented a relatively small portion of Cleveland’s African American fashion shows, as the majority of them were sponsored by middle-class organizations.

**Fashion Shows and the African American Middle-class**

Over the course of the 1930s, the fashion show as both consumption and display were central to ideas of modernity. The fashion show emerged as an important site for the performance of modern black middle-class female identity, “[becoming] the means by which an African American middle-class defined itself.” In contrast to the shows sponsored by dressmakers or other retail establishments, the purpose of these fashion shows was typically not to sell clothes. Instead, as material and visual displays, the focus of these shows was on creating an image of the African American middle-class as “role models,” establishing them as “a standard to emulate and…to envy.”

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79 “New Spotlight Club as Swank Opening,” *Call & Post*, 12 October 1939.
80 White and White, *Stylin’*, 212.
81 Ibid., 212-213. Dressmakers continued to play an important role in these shows. Shows often utilized their expertise calling on them to assist with fashion shows, serving on committees and designing clothes.
Envy played an important role in the developing consumer culture. Prior to 1915, envy as it related to consumption had been condemned as "sinful." After 1915, however, women's envy became not only accepted but encouraged by consumer culture. The culture, mainly through advertising, used envy to legitimize consumption and vice-versa. As a result, "[w]omen's envy...came to be seen as a powerful economic stimulant and as a 'natural' part of femininity in twentieth-century America." But fashion shows not only revolved around getting women to desire what others had—envy, they also revolved around getting women to desire what they saw. In fact envy did not exist without sight, which was one of consumer culture's strategies of enticement. It was in the viewing of these displays that women experienced the mixture of both "appreciation" and "inadequacy" that was necessary for envy. As a result, while there were no overt attempts to sell the clothes that were on display, the shows were not completely removed from the commercial arena as they induced women to consume. One reporter surmised that after having experienced the Proto Club's style show, "more than one young lady has definitely planned to restock her wardrobe." African American women in Cleveland were not only encouraged to envy the items that women were wearing in the show, but the fashion show itself. Announcements suggested that attending made you part of an elite group,

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83 Ibid., 393.
84 White and White, Stylin', 210.
including statements such as "all of the smart people will be there" and "charming and fastidious women will come."\textsuperscript{86}

Fashion shows can be included as part of the public sphere of African American women "in which they could articulate their concerns and develop innovative reform strategies."\textsuperscript{87} This was evidenced by the fact that the rise of the fashion show in African American communities is in many ways connected to the proliferation of African American voluntary associations, which included "social clubs, recreational organizations, lodges, fraternities, and sororities, civic improvement societies, self-improvement societies, occupational associations, and other organizations" in response to the influx of African Americans. These associations tended to be middle-class or represent middle-class aspirations.

The prevalence and purpose of social organizations among African Americans was criticized in early examinations. In \textit{American Dilemma}, Gunnar Myrdal criticized the prevalence and the purpose of social organizations among African Americans deeming them as a "poor substitute" for political participation. He dismissed African American participation in these organizations as "wasted effort" because of what he perceived as their ineffectiveness to affect any real social change. However, Myrdal's analysis, underestimates the importance of such social activity as civic engagement. As discussed earlier, African Americans in Cleveland, as elsewhere, were barred from other forms of leisure by both economics and segregation. These organizations were political because they

\textsuperscript{86} "To Present Coiffure Review," \textit{Call & Post}, 8 July 1937.
\textsuperscript{87} Wolcott, \textit{Remaking Respectability}, 165.
created alternative social spaces in which African Americans could engage in commercial leisure without experiencing racial discrimination.  

In addition to providing much needed recreation, the fashion show was also "an important agency for standardizing and disciplining public behavior." It should therefore come as no surprise that one of the earliest non-dressmaking establishments to produce a fashion show was the Phillis Wheatley Association, which staged its first show at the Zimmerman Academy in 1923. Activities, such as the fashion show, provided important learning moments, teaching young women the nuances of race, class, and gender as performance. Reflecting, Catharine Fisher spoke of the important role of these organizations, discussing how by keeping young people busy they kept them out of trouble as there was always an adult present to police their behavior. For example, the Early Hour Club’s fashion show given in conjunction with a prom was held under the "auspices of the Mother’s Club." Young women could thus engage in heterosocial recreation without being perceived as socially or morally degenerative. According to Wolcott, "Social clubs... may have provided opportunities for young working class women to engage in recreation without

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88 Myrdal, An American Dilemma, 952. However, while these social clubs may have insulated African Americans from discrimination from dominant culture, it could not insulate them from intra-racial prejudice. As before the Great Migration, membership in certain clubs was sometimes restricted by color prejudice. According to Murtis Taylor, there was a "division between the social clubs." She recalled an incident in which she wanted a friend to join a club she was involved in, but her friend was rejected membership into the club because "she was too dark." As a result, Taylor who was fair enough to pass, withdrew her membership and started another club with her friend. See Murtis Taylor, interview by Erlynne Davis, 17 October 1986, transcript, St. James Oral History Project, MSS 4536, Container 2, Folder 36, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH 30.

89 Drake and Cayton, Black Metropolis, 692.

90 Gazette, 18 April 1931.
being seen as 'suspect' by neighbors or family members, keeping their own respectability intact while enjoying commercial leisure."\(^91\) Moreover, they groomed young women to be ladies. Focusing specifically on the fashion show, Fisher recalled, "We had Reviews, where we dressed up and became ladies."\(^92\)

Recreation was therefore not merely fun, but could also be didactic. Fashion shows provided yet another opportunity to impart middle-class values and shape feminine tastes. Fashions shows as public performances proved just as prescriptive as any fashion magazine, serving as a powerful visual guide for woman on how to dress.\(^93\)

Fashion shows emphasized respectability, serving as important examples of appropriate dress for everyday life.\(^94\) In addition to illustrating what was in fashion, shows sought to curb sartorial excess and inappropriateness and served as an extension of middle-class policing efforts. Shows reinforced the idea that being 'well dressed' meant being "appropriately dressed for the occasion."\(^95\)

Shows advised what was considered appropriate attire for various times of the

\(^93\) Without calling them fashion shows, African American colleges and universities featured lectures on proper dress which were accompanied by live displays. Included as part of Hampton Normal and Agriculture Institute's anniversary exercises, was a talk entitled, "Good Taste in Dress." The lecture was illustrated by eight living models who served as good and bad examples of how to dress under different circumstance." See "Hampton Incidents," *Southern Workman* 50 (1921): 231.
\(^94\) In looking at displays in the Jim Crow South, Steven Hoelscher argues that "performances also inform the everyday by providing models for behavior and cultural understanding." See Steven Hoelscher, "Making Place, Making Race: Performances of Whiteness in the Jim Crow South," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93.3 (2003): 661.
day featuring scenes of morning, afternoon, and evening dress. This was a matter of concern because as one columnist observed “the girls stroll Up Cedar in the Afternoon in long flowing gowns when they should know better.” In doing so, fashion shows not only directed women how to dress for specific activities, but also indicated what sorts of activities it was acceptable for African American women to engage in. These included middle-class leisure activities such as horseback riding, tennis, skating, cocktail parties, etc.

Shows also promised to anticipate the future of fashion, previewing what the well-dressed woman would be wearing during the upcoming seasons. One article reported, “Not to be outdone by New York and other cities, Cleveland has decided that it needs to know what the well dressed person is wearing this spring.” In 1940, the Femme Unique Club constructed themselves as trendsetters for the coming year by billing their show as a “1941 Fashion Review.”

Fashion shows also increased the visibility of the groups that sponsored them. Since there were so many groups in existence, it was necessary for them to distinguish themselves in order to remain viable. Fashions shows were used to garner interest and increase participation or membership in group activities. For instance, the Adult Activities Department of the Phillis Wheatley Association

96 “Jay Jake Man About Town,” Call & Post, 18 July 1935.
97 “Plan Style Show in Cleveland,” Chicago Defender, 16 April 1927.
sponsored a Fall Fashion Show with the hope of “interest[ing] more young women in the department.”98

Fashion shows grew to become one of the most popular forms of entertainment among Cleveland’s African American community. In 1930, the Cleveland section of the Pittsburgh Courier announced, “The open season of social revelries is now here—style shows—many, and now!”99 The article went on to provide details about the three fashion shows that were planned for that same week. A few years later, fashion shows had become so popular that there sometimes was not room for all of them in the social calendar. In 1935, La Barthany Social Club was forced to abandon their plans for a fashion show “because of the many style shows soon to be produced.”100 Places such as community centers, lodges, churches, dance halls, schools, private residences, and even funeral homes all served as venues for fashions shows. The displays often appeared before “crowded houses” with audiences numbering in the hundreds. The City Hospital Review exceeded expectations attracting a crowd of over a thousand people.101 Organizers of fashion shows provided further inducement to attend by giving away door prizes. The clubs also attempted to ensure their shows were well attended by offering prizes for ticket sales. The Amarse Girls Club awarded “two gift certificates amounting to $7.50 and

100 “Society News,” Call & Post, 30 March 1935.
101 Majorie Drexel Ison, “The Social Ladder,” Call & Post, 1 June 1940.
redeemable at some department store downtown for the greatest ticket sales."\(^{102}\)

However, fashion shows did not have to be large extravaganzas. The ALW Club’s fashion show was a relative small affair given at a private residence.\(^{103}\)

Fashion shows owed their popularity, in part, to fact that they represented "the new American fascination with show and display—with colors, lights, and spectacle."\(^{104}\) While in form the fashion shows were not that different from those staged by dominant culture, as spectacles centered on blackness, however, they were very different from dominant culture's modern displays of African American bodies. In dominant culture black spectacles had been relegated to displays that centered on their dehumanization. In order to enact racial difference, people of African descent were represented as the victims of brutal racist violence (i.e. lynching), human oddities, or as exotic fetishized objects. In contrast, the fashion show like other black controlled public displays, resisted white attempts to define what the black body meant, offering images of black dignity, reiterating that racial progress hinged at least in part on appearance.

The combining of "consumerism with theatricality" added to the spectacle of the fashion show.\(^{105}\) The lighting, the colors, the scenes, the other entertainments, and the "living models" all served to heighten the "dramatic

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\(^{102}\) "Amarse Girls Club, Call & Post, 17 June 1937.

\(^{103}\) "A.L.W. Club," Call & Post, 30 March 1939. The Club had formerly been formerly named the Magnolia Circle of Bethany Baptist Church.

\(^{104}\) Leach, Land of Desire, 219.

\(^{105}\) Joselit, A Perfect Fit, 25.
effect" of the fashion display.\textsuperscript{106} In 1935, the Unique Club's fashion show was described as "one of the prettiest affairs of the season." It featured "[c]olors of all description...on display blending beautifully with the soft lights and sweet music."

The Proto Club's fashion show utilized "a manner of presentation that was distinctly novel."\textsuperscript{107} According to the report:

\ldots all of the models stepped from a large silver bandbox which was on the platform, then descended the steps with the assistance of a white gloved uniformed usher...The models then strolled leisurely to the center of the floor where she was flooded by a spotlight as she turned before the audience.\textsuperscript{108}

The lighting while adding to the drama of the fashion display was also a matter of practicality, allowing the audience to clearly see what was being presented on stage. A writer reporting on the Messiah Baptist Church's fashion show expressed appreciation for the show's spotlight referring to it as a "real treat" because it "gave a beautiful close-up view of each participant as they passed in review."\textsuperscript{109} Those who attended the Queen's Bid Club's show were not so fortunate as it was reported the "lighting system was very poor."\textsuperscript{110} The Economic Art Club avoided the need for artificial lighting by hosting their annual style show

\textsuperscript{106} Leach, \textit{Land of Desire}, 102. It was not unusual for fashion shows to be described as "colorful." Whether this referred to the colors of the fashions, to the event itself, or both, is difficult to ascertain.


\textsuperscript{108} Ibid. By the 1920s all the visual components of desire—color, glass, and light—were more accessible to the general public. It was "after 1915 spotlighting and floodlighting slowly came into vogue." See Leach, \textit{Land of Desire}, 105, 111.

\textsuperscript{109} "Messiah Baptist Church," \textit{Call & Post}, 5 May 1938.

\textsuperscript{110} "Queen's Bid Club Gives Style Revue," \textit{Call & Post}, 1 August 1935.
outdoors in combination with a garden party at the "beautiful home of Mr. and Mrs. William Thomas." However, this did not dampen the dramatic effect of the show as the "background of fuchsias, geraniums, golden rods, daisies and many other beautiful flowers, with beautifully gowned ladies going to and fro, was indeed a lovely picture to behold."111

Music was also a major component of any fashion show. If as Leach described, light and color were the "visual materials of desire," then music was the auditory material of desire.112 As Tyler argues, "music played a prominent role in this new drama of consumption, accompanying the rituals of shopping and often taking center stage in an expanding repertory of merchandising strategies."113 Early on in their development, department stores begun utilizing music as a way of enticing customers to come inside and spend more time within their confines. Department stores also pioneered the use of musical accompaniment to fashion shows. Music was integral to the drama, glamor, and overall success of the fashion show, as it "underscored the motion of the 'living models' and distinguished the shows as performance rather than displays."114 While the use of musical accompaniment did not originate with African Americans, it resonated with pre-existing African American cultural traditions,

111 "Introducing Membership of Cleveland's Economic Art Club," Call & Post, 17 August 1939.
112 See Leach, Land of Desire, 102.
114 Ibid., 98.
discussed in the previous chapter, in which music was integral to movement and vice-versa.115

Orchestras both local and national were huge draw for audiences. Announcements for fashion shows usually mentioned the name of the orchestra hired to perform. Given the time period, swing groups were the most popular. In 1940 when the Women's Auxiliary of the Forest City Medical Association hosted their first fashion show, they decided to do something different and hired Les Hite to make its Cleveland debut. The novelty of Les Hite was not just that the band never performed in the city, but that in addition to swing, their musical repertoire included waltzes, rhumbas, and congas.116 This became a major selling point in advertisements leading up to the show since they not only furnished musical accompaniment for the show, but for the dance held afterwards. By bringing dance within the regulated space of the fashion show, dance lost some of its association with vice and other immorality and could be deemed a respectable form of recreation and socializing. For instance, an advertisement for the Fay Lee Dress Shoppe, indicated that the men in attendance would have an opportunity to "mingle" with the "beautiful models" afterwards during the dance which was included as part of the evening's entertainments.117 However, the advertisement also made it clear that the men's interactions with the women would involve no sexual impropriety as the models were described as "matrons of Cleveland's

115 White and White, *Stylin'* , 178.
117 "Style Show and Dance Will be Sponsored by Fay Lee Dress Shoppe," *Call & Post*, 16 March 1935.
younger married set," which attested to their respectability.\textsuperscript{118} Despite the perceived respectability of the fashion show, this did not stop some from worrying about what type of element certain musical groups would attract. There was some concern that Les Hite would attract jitterbugs who would be “toggled out in sweaters and skirts and moccasins,” but much to the relief of the reporter they had “dressed to suit the occasion.”\textsuperscript{119}

To ensure that attendees received a full evening of entertainment, fashions shows, both small and large, often featured a variety of acts by local women showcasing their talents and creativity. These entertainments were included during the fashion shows as part of scenes or between scenes, and/or held in conjunction often preceding or following the show. The 19\textsuperscript{th} Ward Go-Getters style show featured the vocal talents of a local woman named Martha Spearman who had achieved fame as a vocalist on “Wings Over Jordan,” a national radio program.\textsuperscript{120} Her daughter Grace also performed during the fashion show, “render[ing] 2 lovely numbers.”\textsuperscript{121} Grace, who at the time was attending Payne College in Georgia, was considered one of the city’s “best amateur pianist.”\textsuperscript{122} The Progressive Club’s fashion show was also a musical during which the show’s finale, the entire cast sung “The Show is Ended, but the Fashion Still Lingers On”, a parody of Irving Berlin’s “The Song is Ended, but the Melody

\textsuperscript{118} “Style Show, Dance a Success,” \textit{Call & Post}, 16 April 1935.
\textsuperscript{119} Bennie Patterson, “Younger Set Doings,” \textit{Call & Post}, 1 June 1940.
\textsuperscript{120} While the program was referred to as gospel in the press, the choir actual performed concert spirituals like those popularized in the late nineteenth century by the Fisk Jubilee Singers.
\textsuperscript{121} “19\textsuperscript{th} Ward Go-Getters Sponsor Successful Style Show,” \textit{Call & Post}, 22 June 1939.
\textsuperscript{122} June Williams, “Town Gossip,” \textit{Call & Post}, 18 February 1937.
Lingers On” (1927). The Morgan and Maxwell Dancing class at the Euclid Dancing Academy held their style show with a dance revue, which included demonstrations of the Apache and Charleston dances. Popular dances were not the only dances to be featured. One of the Phyllis Wheatley fashion shows featured as part of its scenes, the “Pirouette,” a ballet dance. In addition to showcasing women’s talent in music and dance, women also displayed their talents in other areas. Women sometimes gave readings, demonstrating their mastery of literature and elocution. In 1925, the Phillis Wheatley Association’s fashion show featured a callisthenic demonstration, highlighting the Association’s attempts to promote healthy lifestyles. Women also used the fashion show to exhibit their acting skills and add to the drama of the spectacle. The Daughter Elks of Glenara Temple No. 21 hosted their style show in the form of a three-act comedy entitled, “Style Parade-Spring Cleaning.” Similarly, the Girls League of Central High taking advantage of the school’s diversity staged their fashion show “in the form of a play” in which the girls played characters that represented various nationalities. According to the same report, the Spanish character was considered “one of the outstanding representations” because of its supposed authenticity. The character played by a Mexican girl featured a Spanish dance and song. The Girls League hoped that their creativity would “stir public interest” and showcase their successful efforts “to get as many girls as possible to

125 Amanda Mae Coleman, “Cleveland, Ohio,” Pittsburgh Courier, 4 May 1927.
126 Call & Post, 28 April 1934.
improve their personal appearances."127 Fashion shows were also included as part of other entertainments. In a subsequent effort, the Daughter Elks staged another comedy, "The Great Defeat on Arrival," which included as part of the evening's entertainment, a style parade.128 Triedstone Church's production of "The Unexpected Guest" included "a pre-Holiday Fashion Stroll."

The "Fifth Avenue Fashion Show" followed a mock King Solomon Wedding.130 Phillis Wheatley's "pageant of music and evolution" featured a style show as one of its scenes.131

As a creative outlet, the fashion show expanded African American women's opportunities for self-expression. Since many of the entertainments featured had been learned in classes or as part of extra-curricular activities, shows served as important public demonstrations for African American women's attempts at self-cultivation and self-improvement. According to Victorian notions of femininity, the development of young women's talents was a sign of their gentility and a "part of their preparation for marriage and motherhood."132

Moreover, the fashion show provided space for women to display their talents in public avoiding the negative stigma that often applied to other female performers, such as the blues woman and the chorus girl, who transgressed traditional

127 Thomas Shields, "Girls' League, Central High School," Call & Post, 23 January 1936. The fashion show at Central High is included here because during the 1930s, the majority of the student body was African American.
128 "Glenara Temple No 21 Daughter of the Elks," Call & Post, 19 March 1936
129 "Jolly Twilight Social," Call & Post, 24 November 1934
130 "Doings of Society," Call & Post, 20 May 1937.
131 Thelma Louise Taylor, "Cleveland Squibs," Pittsburgh Courier, 26 April 1930.
132 Tyler, "Commerce and Poetry in Hand," 103.
notions of feminine decency. The fashion show created respectable performance space for women even when they were held in venues associated with immorality. Women’s onstage presence in fashion shows did not signal their degradation, but their uplift.

While the color, lights, and entertainments all added to the spectacle, they were meaningless without the fashions. Although shows displayed a range of dress, including that for men and children, it was the women’s fashions garnered the most attention and it did not matter whether they were purchased or homemade. The fact that clothes presented in the fashion shows were owned or created by the models attested to models’ personal sense of fashion and their material achievement. When the clothes worn were actually made by the models themselves, they also showcased the self-sufficiency, the industriousness, and the creativity of the wearer. In the Girl’s League fashion show, “The most beautiful grown was...a blue velvet which was worn and made by Miss Margaret Foote.”

Many of the homemade items that were displayed in shows had been made in sewing classes, often by the models themselves. Miss Elizabeth Peden, who was featured in a Triedstone Baptist fashion show, received special mention for modeling an outfit that she made in school. Entire shows were sometimes dedicated to showcase these efforts. As a testament to its name, the Industrious Matrons club sponsored a fashion show displaying “dresses and suits” that had

\[133\] Shields, “Girls League.”

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been "made under the supervision of Mrs. [Ella] Hawkins."\textsuperscript{134} The year before, Mrs. Hawkins had sponsored a fashion show at the Alexander Hamilton Community Center where she taught dressmaking and designing. Under her "fine" tutelage, the class had been "growing in leaps and bounds."\textsuperscript{135} It had over thirty members and was referred to as "one of the best sewing classes ever in the city." The showcase of "new spring styles" featured members of the class as models in some of the "wonderful garments" that they had made.\textsuperscript{136} Fashion shows featuring items that had been produced in classes served as public demonstrations of the successful efforts of domestic training and education. Moreover, they promoted domesticity and thrift as important aspects of consumption, femininity, and respectability.

Of the fashions modeled, evening dresses or gowns were generally considered "the most outstanding features" of fashion shows.\textsuperscript{137} These fashions epitomized "dressing up," which was an important aspect of black public self-presentation. In the case of the Church of the Living God's fashion show, the "many beautiful" evening gowns were apparently the only fashions worth mentioning.\textsuperscript{138} Making this point, columnist Marjorie Drexel Ison declared, "Evening wear is always so attractive and outstanding." She went on to describe the final scene in the City Hospital Review, reporting the various evening wear that was showcased in seemingly greater detail than she had any of the other

\textsuperscript{134} "Industrious Matrons," \textit{Call \& Post}, 13 April 1939.  
\textsuperscript{135} "Alexander Hamilton Center," \textit{Call \& Post}, 10 February 1938.  
\textsuperscript{136} "C. W. Hawkins of YMCA, Has Very Unique Job," \textit{Call \& Post}, 31 March 1938.  
\textsuperscript{137} "Girls' League Central High School," \textit{Call \& Post}, 23 April 1936.  
\textsuperscript{138} "Church of the Living God, CWFF," \textit{Call \& Post}, 7 April 1938.
fashions that appeared in previous scenes. In order to build the audience's anticipation, formal attire was often featured in evening and wedding scenes that were usually reserved for the show's finale.

Fashion shows not only presented the latest in fashions, they also paid tribute to the fashions of the past. The Unique Club's fashion show featured forty years of fashion showcasing "styles from 1898 to 1938." According to the report, "The old fashioned scenes were interesting to the audience, laughs and applauds were immense." The Proto Club used a similar tactic when they interspersed displays of modern fashions with fashions from the "very gay nineties." The "stylish costumes" included "frills, laces, petticoats, and more petticoats..., and high top shoes." The inclusion of these old fashions was not for comic relief or simply to add to the show's dramatic effect. During the 1930s, there was a revival of fashions from the late 19th century. Fashion columns that appeared in Cleveland's African American newspapers announced the return of Victorian-era inspired fashions. A 1936 article that appeared in Call & Post reported, "it seems as though the styles and fads of the 1800's [sic] are returning with leaps and bounds. First the young ladies step out in ruffled petticoats and petite bustles and now they are storming Cedar Avenue with bicycles." The fashion column in the Gazette proclaimed, "To be modern is to be old-fashioned." Nichols, the author, attested to the veracity of her statement by discussing how the fashions of earlier

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139 "Unique Club Gives Annual Style Show," Call & Post, 2 June 1938. The fashions of 1898 were particularly popular. The Women's Auxiliary of the Forest City Hospital Association also featured a gown made in the style of 1898.
periods could be viewed in "window displays, in style revues, [and] romantic daguerreotype." 142 This fact was also made evident in articles concerning how the Gibson Girl was once again in fashion and could prominently be seen in the styles of blouses and millinery.143 The return of the "separate skirt and blouse" which had characterized the fashion of the Gibson girl was associated with the thrift that had become necessary in the 1930s during the Great Depression. The "back to Gibson movement" was perfect for those with "a limited income." According to one fashion advice column, "You buy yourself a well-cut wool or silk skirt and a half dozen blouses. You can ring all sorts of combination and make your wardrobe look much larger and more elastic than it really is. Nice for girls with jobs."144

The resurgence of these styles may also be indicative of an ambivalence towards modernity, in which people experiencing material deprivation during the Depression were nostalgic about the past longing for simpler times. The 19th century had become a repository for all the values that were seen as lacking in modern society, including those concerning traditional gender roles. Some even saw the Depression as punishment for the immorality of the previous decade which was primarily attributed to women. These fashions were heralded the

“return of femininity.”

Suggesting modesty, lingerie of the decade was Victorian-inspired and was considered multi-purpose wear no longer “restricted to wear in one’s boudoir.”

The return of Victorian ideas of femininity, as expressed in fashion, reinscribed notions of patriarchy that had been undermined in the 1920s by the independent and sexually liberated image of the new woman, and then again by the Depression’s high unemployment threatening men’s roles as providers.

Despite the negative aspects of patriarchy, some women who were struggling financially might have also found this return to a time where men supposedly took care of their women appealing. African American women involved in the national clubwomen’s movement would have been particularly excited by the return of the Victorian era as the period had been the basis for the “politics of respectability.” These women had “wanted no part of the new sexuality” that emerged in the 1920s and “rallied against it.”

However, clubwomen could do little to turn back the clock. Ironically, participation in fashion shows subverted the traditional notions of femininity and sexuality that they desired to protect. Fashion shows because of their penchant for showing things off already had a sensual/sexual element to them that challenged notions of modesty. In scenes women paraded about in attire that

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146 According to the article, “The new silk lingerie... has all the individuality and high styling of a dress.” The multi-purpose styling potential of lingerie would have been attractive to women during the Depression hoping to increase the wearability of their wardrobes. Cherie Nicholas, “Beguiling Silk Lingerie That’s Styled Dress-Like,” Gazette, 4 March 1939.
drew attention to the feminine form, as indicated by the reports mentioning the shapeliness or the figures of the models. As Leach has argued, "the desire to show things off helped to loosen the resistance to personal sexual display and performance in public that hitherto distinguished American social behavior."\(^{149}\)

Moreover, since clothing was associated with the body, it already had an erotic element to it. The fashions of the period seem to highlight this fact. In the 1930s, styles had become more risqué as it was the fashion that evening gowns were low cut and form fitting and the length of sport skirts were shorter. Fashion shows often contained a boudoir or beach scenes in which women paraded about in various states of undress, wearing attire that was not meant for public view. When Faith Jackson appeared in a show she pushed the bounds of decency even further by modeling "red pajamas" and then choosing "unlike the rest of the models to wear them the entire evening."\(^{150}\) While the incident involving Jackson represents an extreme case, wearing this type of attire in public countered notions of modesty that were so central to middle-class ideas of respectability. But in doing so, African American women reclaimed the sexuality that they had been forced to repress in the interest of racial uplift. Thus, the fashion show provided a forum for African American women to "test the boundaries of modesty," which "was a form of power."\(^{151}\) The appearance of these 19th century

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\(^{150}\) "On the Avenue with T.D.S.,” *Call & Post*, 1 June 1940.

fashions in the same space as these more revealing fashions indicated that the old could exist alongside the new and that the fashion show just as the larger consumer culture from whence it originated could encompass contradictory and even competing values.

*Model Fashion*

Whether old or new, the fashions were incomplete without the models that brought them to life. Part of the lure of the fashion show was that the audience could identify with the models, "not as idealized bodies, but as reflections of what they hoped to become." The models were not professionals, but were usually members of the community, often referred to as "socialites." Labeling models as such emphasized their respectability and membership in an elite group. The Arkansas Club's fashion show's models were described as "young ladies who represented some of the leading families of the East End." Other shows described their models as "leading clubwomen" attesting to their middle-class status. African American sponsored fashion shows gave black women a unique opportunity to serve as living mannequins. Black women were rarely featured in department store fashion shows in Cleveland. In 1935, Mme. Beulah Jones, operator of a successful beauty shop in Cleveland made headlines when she was not only invited to attend, but to model in a May Company fashion show.

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154 "Models at May Co.,” *Call & Post*, 12 September 1935.
Two years later, the incident was still noteworthy. In an article, it was pointed out that Jones was not only distinguished by her participation the event, but by the fact that she had received first prize.\textsuperscript{155}

Models were selected in various ways. In announcements leading up to fashion shows, women in the community were encouraged to apply as models. In other instances, show organizers invited businesses, churches, and other organizations to select representatives to model in the show. Dressmaking and retail establishments also entered models into shows as a way of promoting the styles they had to offer. In an announcement for the 19\textsuperscript{th} Ward Civic and Political Club, it was announced that Mrs. Kibbler, proprietor of Janalene Frocks, planned to enter models in the show.\textsuperscript{156} Minnie Moore who owned the Les Petites Dress Shoppe also had models appear in clothes from her shop, which sold new and used clothing.\textsuperscript{157} Sometimes, however, groups did enlist the aid of a celebrity. It seems Clevelanders were quite taken with the sartorial displays of black athletes' wives. Mrs. Ruth Owens, wife of Cleveland's own track and field star Jesse Owens, appeared in Proto Club Fashion Revue and was listed as one of the show's outstanding participants.\textsuperscript{158} Ruth often garnered attention for her fashion even receiving the most votes at a pajama party for having the best ensemble, a

\textsuperscript{155} "Madame Jones Makes Record as Beautician," \textit{Call & Post}, 20 May 1937. Jones was a well-respected member of the community. Jones assisted people financially during the Depression, even buying clothes for those in need.
\textsuperscript{156} "Among the Clubs....," \textit{Call & Post}, 26 September 1935.
\textsuperscript{157} "Femme Unique Fashion Revue and Dance," \textit{Call & Post}, 12 October 1940. In other ads, Les Petites is followed by "Bargain Center" instead of "Dress Shoppe."
\textsuperscript{158} "Proto Club Fashion Revue," \textit{Call & Post}, 26 September 1935.
creation of "wine-colored transparent velvet and brocaded satin" (fig. 7). When the Hospital Auxiliary hosted "Sepia Mannequins," they chose Mrs. Marva Louis, the wife of heavyweight prize fighter Joe Louis, to serve as their "leading lady." Joe Louis was quite popular in Cleveland, one of the social clubs had even been named in his honor. However, Mrs. Louis was chosen for such an honor not simply because of her celebrity, but because of her personal style. Mrs. Louis was considered a trendsetter and "one of America's best dressed women." According to a report, "Marva Louis is leading the way to femme fashions...and many of the fashionable magazines are devoting space to Mrs. Louis who dresses well." She was described as "the walking Vogue for Negro womanhood with her fashionable dress." An article leading up to the show reported, "Mrs. Marva Louis...will display a wardrobe of fashion finery that will be the envy and possible dismay of several thousands of feminine eyes." Mrs. Louis wardrobe had first come to the attention of the African American press when she had chosen to shop at race stores for her trousseau. In the show Louis "astounded" the audience in a Parisian ensemble that reflected the influence of the Orient on fashion. Accessorized with a turban, the stylized

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160 "Marva Louis Leads Triumphant Cavalcade," *Call & Post*, 1 June 1940.
163 "Joe Louis Offers to Pay $250,000," *Call & Post*, 12 July 1941.
165 "Buys Trousseau at Race Store," *Call & Post*, 26 September 1935.
Figure 7. Mrs. Minnie Ruth Owens, Wife of Jesse Owens, 1935, 
_Cleveland Press Collection_, Cleveland State University.
presentation was reminiscent of “one of those harem scenes” that appeared in

*Esquire Magazine.*

Her appearance would draw some criticism when it was discovered that
she had been paid three hundred dollars to participate in the show. “Town
Gossip” columnist, June Williams, referred to Mrs. Louis disparagingly as a
“foreigner” writing:

> the sum paid the “Mannequin” for the day was unnecessary, inconsistent
and beside the point. With the tremendous amount of currency entailed in
the young lady’s possession, one would think that for such a charitable
enterprise, the less the wife of Joe Louis would be to donate her services.
That would have enlarged the fund for the cause, it’s true, but why take
something you don’t need? With a wardrobe and ensemble such as the
young lady showed, little else could be lacking that could be procured with
a measly three hundred dollars.

While Williams took offense that Mrs. Louis was paid for her services, it seems
Marva had made a career for herself as a professional model. Louis’s “ability to
wear clothes” was seen as a talent and made her quite popular. She had “been
appearing throughout the principal American cities in this role of Fashion
Model.” Perhaps this is how she justified or afforded such expenditure on her

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167 *Call & Post*, 1 June 1940.
168 “Mrs. Marva Louis to Model,” *Call & Post*, 9 May 1940. While the paper often referred to her as
Mrs. Louis her actual married last name was Barrow as that was Joe Louis’s actual last name.
She was later sued for alleged breach of contract when a woman claimed that Louis had failed to
wardrobe. Or maybe she relished the modicum of independence that the money earned from these appearances gave her. Her fee seemed to be a worthwhile cost by the fashion show's committee because despite the criticism, it was later claimed that the event "proved to be the finest Fashion Revue ever staged in Cleveland among its sepia socialites."169

Although it was unusual for models to be paid to appear in shows, as discussed earlier, it was not unusual for them to appear wearing items from their personal wardrobes, which included clothes that were either purchased or made expressly for the show. There were few reports of clothes featured in fashion shows being provided by retail establishments. In one of the few examples, the Bailey Co. Department Store sponsored the Lafeyette P.T.A.'s show featuring the school's mothers and children as models. In another, the Fashions Frocks Co. furnished gowns for the Adult Activities Department of the Phillis Wheatley Association.170 Since clothing was not usually provided, women chosen to model in shows were willing to endure a certain amount of self-sacrifice in order to do so. After spending sixty-five dollars on a "dream dress," which was particularly expensive especially considering it was the Depression, Vivian Weaver did not let a 102 degree fever stop her from modeling in the City Hospital fashion show. The dress she wore was one of "Quinn Maahs thrilling gowns of chalk illusion

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169 "Forest City Auxiliary Announces 1941 Style Revue On May 17th," Call & Post, 26 April 1941.
net, over the shoulders of which ran garlands of roses."\textsuperscript{171} Weaver was committed to getting her money's worth and two weeks later it was reported, after having recovered, she again was spotted wearing the dress at a sorority formal.\textsuperscript{172} Such sacrifice probably seemed worthwhile as models of gowns usually received the greatest attention and walked away with the top honors. Mrs. Hattie Leathers won first prize at the Second Baptist Church's fashion show for her evening dress, despite the fact that there "[m]any beautiful frocks" on display (fig. 8).\textsuperscript{173} Miss Sophie Mae Rose "walked away with honors" in the Proto Club fashion show after having "swayed to the tune of 'Sophisticated Lady'" wearing "a black velvet gown with a detachable jacket" during an evening scene.\textsuperscript{174}

The popularity of the fashion show was further evidenced by the fact that one of the highest compliments a woman could be paid was to have comparisons drawn between her own self presentation and the fashion show. According to a report of the Elite New Year's Party, "The ladies were dressed as fashion models of the evening, furnishing a most picturesque scene."\textsuperscript{175} In a column detailing the activities of Cleveland's African American younger set, it was flatteringly reported, "The girl I think should win any Style Show as far as clothes are

\textsuperscript{171} Marjorie Drexel Ison, "The Social Ladder," \textit{Call & Post}, 1 June 1940. Quinn-Maahs was a dress shop located on Euclid Avenue. The owners of the shop were Katherine Quinn and Gertrude Maahs who had previously worked for Halle Bros. Department Store.
\textsuperscript{172} "On the Avenue with TDS," \textit{Call & Post}, 15 June 1940.
\textsuperscript{173} Verna Mae Pitts, "Mrs. Leathers is Prize Winner at Church Style Show," \textit{Call & Post}, 23 April 1936.
Figure 8. Hattie Leathers in Dress that Won Her First Prize at Second Baptist Fashion Show, Call & Post, 23 April 1936.
concerned is Miss Amanda Stinson. Amanda has some of the finest drapes we've ever gazed upon. She was one of the best dressed girls at Central's Prom Friday Night. Another article reported that fashion show attendee, Mae Caroll "looked like one of the models in her Irish green crepe." She must have really stood out in order to receive such special notice in a crowd that numbered over a thousand.

*Fashioning Leisure*

Fashion shows were not the only club activities that revolved around fashion. Groups sometimes invited guest speakers to speak on the topic. Just a few weeks after her fashion show was deemed "a success," Olivia Robinson, the proprietress of the Fay Lee Dress Shop was invited to speak at a meeting of the Wonder Eight Social Club on "style and color." Reinforcing the connection of dress to domesticity, the Homemakers Club after conducting its regular business, featured a "style talk" by Sylvia McGuinea entitled, "Do's and Don't's in Wearing Apparel." Her talk was accentuated "with interesting illustrations also some hints on Needlecraft and highlights on shopping." Groups also participated in creating fashions, as evidenced by the attire modeled in the show was often made by members. The Belle Brummels referred to it as "living up to our name"

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176 "Younger Set Doings," *Call & Post*, 15 January 1940.
177 Marjorie Drexel Ison, "The Social Ladder," *Call & Post*, 1 June 1940.
178 While the crowd in attendance was relatively large, the thousand in attendance was well below the 3000 that had been projected to attend the event.
179 "Doings of Society," *Call & Post*, 20 April 1935.
180 "Home Makers Club Hear Style Talk," *Call & Post*, 7 December 1940.
when they reported plans to make “ultra-modern” dresses as part of their summer activities.\textsuperscript{181}

Organizations often hosted fashioned themed parties. Popular themes included plantation, gingham, organdy dress, pajama, and housecoat parties. These parties which usually took place in members’ homes were quite popular and were well attended. A pajama party which took place at the home of Mrs. Arelia Whitmore was described as a “miniature fashion show, with displays of the latest styles in lounging wear.” Despite being limited by theme, reports mentioned the wide variety of fashions worn. According to the report of the Money Spenders Club’s gingham dress party, “Many well fitting gingham house dresses were displayed by the feminine sex with many varied styles. No two were alike.”\textsuperscript{182} Prizes provided extra incentive for women in attendance to and distinguish themselves in their dress. Women were usually awarded prizes for having the “best,” “neatest,” “loveliest,” or “prettiest” dresses by a panel of judges or by the votes of those in attendance. At the Pennies from Heaven Club’s house coat party prizes were awarded for the “prettiest House Coat in silk” and the “prettiest cotton House Coat.”\textsuperscript{183} The exact nature of the prizes was rarely publicized, only being mentioned in a few instances. The Hollywood Social Club announced “first and second cash prizes given for the two prettiest gingham dresses.”\textsuperscript{184}

However, it seems that sometimes the awards were not given on the basis of

\textsuperscript{181} “Belle Brummels,” \textit{Call \& Post}, 4 July 1935.
\textsuperscript{182} “Gingham Dress Party Gala Affair,” \textit{Call \& Post}, 23 February 1935.
\textsuperscript{183} “Pennies from Heaven CL,” \textit{Call \& Post}, 30 March 1939.
\textsuperscript{184} “Doings of Society,” \textit{Call \& Post}, 25 June 1936. Mini-fashion shows often included card playing, usually bridge, which gave the attendees more opportunities to win prizes.
fashion, but popularity or celebrity. When Miss Laura Holt, a “popular little entertainer” won first prize for her gingham dress, it was suggested that the judges had been “confused in their charge” to award the prize for the best house dress. Obviously, the writer of the article did not believe that Miss Holt deserved first prize honors. Whether deserved or not, the awarding of prizes encouraged women to out dress their peers, thus reinforcing the notion that fashion was a competitive arena.

Even social activities where the focus was not fashion, acknowledged its primacy, awarding prizes for best dressed. At the Golden Leaf Club’s houserent party, the “best dressed ladies at the affair” received prizes. When the La Junta Club hosted a social, first, second, and third place prizes were given to the best dressed boy and girl. Despite being open to both sexes, the top two prizes were awarded to young women, furthering the notion that fashion was largely a feminine arena. Miss Lucile Gulux received first prize for “a beautiful spring blue silk semi-formal gown that fit her lithe body perfectly.” Ernestine Griffin took second place honors for a “brown skirt and waist of the knitted effect.” The reporter did not even bother to “secure” the name of the young gentleman who had won third prize, but did describe his ensemble as a “brown suit and white turtleneck sweater.” Even when prizes were not awarded, the importance of fashion at club social events was illustrated in the newspaper stories that

186 “Golden Leaf Club,” Call & Post, 9 February 1939.
followed, which often made note of the fact that attendees were dressed in the latest fashions and featured detailed descriptions of what they wore.

The myriad of club sponsored social events promoted consumption and were therefore important economic stimulants. The money that women spent in readying themselves for these events often was an economic boost to the economy, more specifically, the female economy. According to Anne Meis Knupfer, “these social events supported the predominately female businesses of dressmakers, milliners, chiropodists, hairdressers, and manicurists.” Club activities also benefitted other businesses. The Gentles Flower Shop operated by Mrs. Minnie Gentles Turner, who was a mainstay at fashion shows, provided flowers and plants that were used to decorate venues and the corsages that women wore. Since music, as discussed earlier, was such an important aspect of activities, events were an important source of employment for musicians.

In addition to being a boon for businesses, events were important fundraising activities that enabled women to combine their passion for fashion with their philanthropic and humanitarian efforts. Fashion shows could be quite lucrative. The Phillis Wheatley Association was able to raise $1000 for its building fund. The Women’s Auxiliary of the Forest City Medical Association


189 Mrs. Minnie Gentles Turner was very involved in fashion shows, even putting on one for the benefit of Emanuel Baptist Church. See “Style Show Models to Pose at Benefit for Emmanuel Baptist, Call & Post, 14 May 1940.

fashion show was organized to help raise funds "to create a Negro owned and
operated hospital in Cleveland." Mrs. Annabel Freeman produced a fashion
show for "the Reconstruction" of St. James A.M.E. Church. Despite the
importance of fashion shows as fundraising ventures, during difficult times such
as the Depression, organizations were also sensitive to the economic situation
and priced events accordingly. Before the Depression hit, the cost to attend a
fashion show was upwards of fifty cents. In 1927, tickets to attend the style show
given by the "ladies of Cleveland" cost $1.00 if purchased by a certain date and
$1.25 after that date. However, during the Depression ticket prices significantly
decreased, usually costing less than fifty cents. In 1937, the Amarse Girl's Club
charged twenty-five cents in advance and thirty-five cents at the door. The
following year, the Alexander Hamilton Community Center's fashion show was
advertised as "free and with 800 comfortable seats available." In keeping with the
center's policy "to offer the best to the citizens of the community," the fact that the
show was free did not lessen its quality. The "full evening entertainment" included
a "10 piece jazz band" and "special added acts." The fact that the center chose
to put on a fashion show despite their being no economic incentive for doing so,

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191 "Expect Smashing Attendance at Trianon Style Revue-Dance," Call & Post, 25 May 1940. The membership of the auxiliary was made up of the wives of the city's African American physicians and dentists, as well as nurses. The aim of the hospital was not only to provide health care for the city's black residents, but to make sure that black physicians and dentists had a place to practice. Such an endeavor was quite controversial. The Gazette did not support the endeavor and argued that it would foster segregation in the city. This was in line with the strong integrationist stance of the newspaper which often rejected the notion of separate black institutions.

192 "Cleveland Society News," Call & Post, 10 February 1938.

193 Advertisement, Call & Post, 17 June 1937.

points to their recognition of recreation as an important means to an end unto itself.

Churches were not just the charitable beneficiaries of fashion shows. Churches allowed other organizations to use them as a venue for fashion shows. The Poro Club gave a style show at the Mt. Zion Temple, before a crowded house.¹⁹⁵ Churches also sponsored fashion shows themselves, but these shows tended to be more overtly didactic, focusing more on the practicality and utilitarianism of clothing rather than on its aesthetic qualities or on following the latest fashion trends. The Friendship Baptist Church's fashion show focused on the more conservative aspects of fashion, highlighting the "durability" of clothing and how clothes could "preserve ladies health as well as their form."¹⁹⁶

Church fashion shows, even when advocating restraint, tied consumption to religion and there seemed to be nothing "incongruous" about them doing so.¹⁹⁷ As mentioned in the previous chapter fashion was an important part of church attendance. The fashion show expanded opportunities for people to engage with the church outside of religious services, allowing the church to remain culturally relevant and continue its multipurpose role in the community.

¹⁹⁵ Thelma Louise Taylor, "Cleveland Squibs," Pittsburgh Courier, 30 April 1930.
¹⁹⁶ "Friendship Baptist Church," Call & Post, 9 June 1934.
¹⁹⁷ White and White, Stylin', 213 and Drake and Cayton, Black Metropolis, 801.

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Fashion Shows, Popular Culture, and African American Beauty and Sexuality

Fashions shows not only represented the influence of the middle-class and the church over the sartorial dimensions of African American women's lives in Cleveland, they also demonstrated the influence of popular culture, as African American women looked to the silver screen for fashion inspiration. Movies were a major source for both clothing and make-up. In the Progressive Club's 1936 "Fashion Trend and Musical," Bessie Ashbey modeled what was described as "the cleverest dress." The dress she wore, which she made herself, "was of black crepe, trimmed in white linen, a copy of a dress worn by Jean Harlow" in the film Wife vs. Secretary (1936, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer). It seems that in making her choice, Ashbey chose to follow the trend of the fashion industry which "regularly copied Hollywood designers' on-screen creations."

Like fashion shows, movie theaters were "sites for socializing self-display, and consumption." Movie going further tied consumerism with spectatorship and helped to shape female consumption, "instructing women...about what was

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198 "Progressive Club Gives Fashion Revue," Call & Post, 23 April 1936. The dress, however, was not an exact copy as Harlow's dress had actually been blue. While it may have been difficult to ascertain the true color of the dress from the film which was in black and white, the dress was featured in posters and advertisements for the film which appeared in color. This was probably a conscious choice on the part of Ashbey for reasons unknown. Whatever the reason for the color of her fabric choice, it made the dress her own.

199 Sandra Stansbery Buckland, "Promoting American Designers, 1940-1944: Building Our Own Home," in Twentieth-Century American Fashion, ed. Linda Wettles and Patricia Ann Cunningham (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2005), 108. According to the Buckland, Hollywood was a major source of inspiration during the 1930s because "glamorous film stars provided a diversion from the hardships of the Depression, and American women eagerly followed the fashions created by the silver screen."


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fashionable and current,” and their stars important trendsetters. Knowledge of movie stars’ “costumes, hairstyles, and affectations” represented “an intensely important cultural currency” for African American women. Both the Gazette and the Call & Post featured news from Hollywood, reporting on celebrity gossip and featuring Hollywood beauty and fashion trends, even reporting when Harlow, who was considered the original “blond bombshell,” gave her platinum blond hair a “brownette” wash for Wife vs. Secretary.

Jean Harlow was not the only 1930s movie star to capture the imagination of African American women in Cleveland. A couple of years earlier, Mrs. Alice Singleton won first prize at the pre-Halloween party given at the Masonic Temple for her Mae West costume, which she had “designed and made.” The costume was an “exact replica” of an outfit the actress had worn in a “cigarette advertisement.” It was not simply the costume that won her honors, but that she had been “assisted by the ‘Mae West’ walk and manner” (fig. 9). Sepia versions of Mae West were also popular female impersonators. Movies were

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204 Marjorie Drexel Ison, “Fuzz and Fizz,” Call & Post, 3 November 1934.
205 Call & Post, 10 November 1934. Mae West was quite popular in Cleveland. One of Cleveland’s most popular social clubs, the Mae West Bridge Club, was named in her honor. Mae West’s popularity among African Americans may be because her celebrity status was indebted to black culture, even stylizing herself much like African American female blues performers. See Mary Beth Hamilton, When I’m Bad, I’m Better: May West, Sex, and American Entertainment (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 169.
206 Mae West female impersonators were quite popular. One of them was so well received that his/her engagement at the Cedar Gardens Cocktail Lounge was extended. Mae West herself was seen as “the greatest female impersonator.” See “Mae West, Stage and Movie Star Who Burlesqued Sex, Dies at 87,” New York Times, 23 November 1980.
Figure 9. Alice Singleton in Mae West Costume, *Call & Post*, 10 November 1934.
not just a source of fashion inspiration, but deportment. In one study, an eighteen
year old African American high school senior reported that she looked to movie
stars to “develop a more ladylike composure,” spending time in front of the mirror
copying their mannerisms, hoping to develop the sophistication that she believed
was “essential for social success.” The young woman was not alone in her
belief that this was not time wasted. Susman argues, “Poise and charm top the
list of necessary traits, and there was insistence that they could be learned and
developed through careful practice.” Moreover, attempts to approximate
popular movie stars was reflective of the “culture of personality,” which had
contributed to the rise of the celebrity and had helped to legitimate their
authority.

As the above suggests, it was not uncommon for African American
women to attempt to identify with the white heroines in films, however, black
representations based on white cultural models have often been interpreted as
problematic. In African American literature, for example, appropriations such as
these have usually been interpreted as examples of racial self-loathing. In the
Bluest Eye, the character Pauline being a fan of Jean Harlow and her movies,
styles her hair like the star based on a photo she had seen in a magazine and
goes to watch one of Harlow’s films. Pauline’s appropriation is ultimately
unsuccessful because while enjoying her movie going experience her tooth falls

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208 Susman, Culture as History, 280.
209 Ibid., 282-283. The “culture of personality” would have resonated with African American
women as it was empowering, stressing “the importance of not feeling inferior.” Feelings of
inferiority were viewed as a sign of weakness. See ibid., 274, 279.
out. For Morrison, there is nothing redeeming in Pauline’s failed attempt to look like Harlow. The incident, instead, exemplifies the psychological hold that impossible standards of white beauty have on African American women causing them to devalue their own beauty. Stewart examining black film spectatorship argues that Pauline’s “effort[s] to emulate and embody white Hollywood beauty and desirability...exacerbate her already damaged sense of self-esteem.”

Examples, such as Pauline, only serve to demonstrate black mutilation by dominant culture and serve as cautionary tales of blacks putting too much hope in consumer culture.

However, such appropriations deserve an alternative reading. It might be easy to dismiss such appropriations as the desire to be white and interpret black identification with these characters as perpetuating white supremacy since both West’s and Harlow’s ultra-white appearance was essential to their cinematic presence. As a case in point, in the film Wife vs. Secretary, Harlow’s nickname is Whitey. However, the “way in which these films were possessed by Black female viewers...may have been about problematizing and expanding one’s racial identity instead of abandoning it.” While epitomizing whiteness, the characters played by both West and Harlow also presented a challenge to the

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213 Wallace, Dark Designs and Visual Culture, 264.
existing sexual order. Therefore, African American women's interest in these movie stars was not so much a fascination with whiteness, but with cinema's vision of modern femininity. Films presented new ideas concerning female independence and sexuality. Enstad argues that "when we can come to desire with a character, we can identify with them, even if the character is of a different, gender, class, or race, or is in a story about a different time or culture."215

When Ashbey chose to appropriate the image of Harlow, she laid claim to these developing ideas about womanhood. In the dress choice, Ashbey chose not to identify with the respectable wife played by Myrna Loy, but the unmarried secretary character played by Harlow and she chose not to copy Harlow's more glamorous evening dress, but one of her work dresses. Both of these choices seem to indicate that Ashbey was making a conscious choice to identify with the new woman of the period, who was associated with "autonomy and independence."216

In the film, Wife vs. Secretary, Harlow plays the attractive


secretary to Clark Gable's character, the wealthy owner of a women's magazine publishing company. As a secretary, Harlow's character represents the female independent wage earner, which was being threatened by the Depression. Harlow's white-collar positions, as a clerical worker, also represented employment many African American women desired to obtain but were unable. Despite the expectation that Harlow's character must be available to her boss at all times of the day, even putting her personal life on hold, her boss makes it clear that she is not a servant. When Harlow's fiancé, played by Jimmy Stewart, tries to force her into choosing between her career and marriage, she tries to convince him to allow her to continue working after they are married and when he refuses, she initially chooses to delay marriage. In spite of Harlow's character's unconventional choices in both work and her personal life, her attractiveness is not diminished by her failure to conform to traditional notions of femininity. In fact, at the film's end, Stewart's character still wants to make her his wife and does so on her terms, suggesting that marital domesticity and a professional career were not mutually exclusive.

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217 The film, adapted from a *Cosmopolitan Magazine* story by Faith Baldwin, exemplifies the prosperity that had been undermined by the Depression. As an indication of Gable's character's wealth, his manservant has a manservant. The film suggests, as Joel Dinerstein has argued, "During the Depression, Americans did not lose their taste for spectacle, fantasies of the wealthy were a major staple of films...In these films the lives of the rich-of luxurious consumption of freedom from want-were the content." See *Swinging the Machine*, 202.

218 African American women's desire for white collar employment was evident in the fact that despite the difficulties faced in securing such employment, they still took advantage of clerical training, when possible.

219 Harlow's decision to marry seems to quell the film's more radical impulses. Film plots involving rebellious women characters often included having them marry or agree to marry by the film's end in order to minimize the threat they posed to traditional norms. See Stamp, *Movie Struck Girls*, 125-132.
As discussed earlier, the fashion show’s propensity for showing off the female body had already helped African American women to express developing ideas concerning female sexuality. Identification with these movie stars further represented African American’s women embracing of changing cultural ideas surrounding female sexuality. In the 1920s, “Hollywood emerged in the American consciousness as the major source of imagery and energy for the sexual revolution.”220 The characters that Mae West and Jean Harlow played were empowered by their sexuality as they were not hindered but advanced by it. Snead argues, “The real scandal of Mae West’s characters is not their unapologetic sexuality, but that they manage to get so far using it.”221 African American women’s identification with the characters in these films “provided an opportunity for women to fantasize about engaging in rule-shattering behavior, to identify with a fantastical sexual identity that was simply impossible (and possibly even undesirable) for the vast majority of women.”222 Dressing themselves up to look like these stars who were known for their sexuality, took the fantasy a step further, publically challenging notions of race and respectability.223

222 Marsha Oregon, “Making ‘It’ in Hollywood: Clara Bow, Fandom, and Consumer Culture,” Cinema Journal 42.4 (2003): 89. Even though the author is talking about the Clara Bow, the same ideas still apply to stars of the 1930s and 1940s, like Mae West and Jean Harlow.
223 Ashbey was not the only model to seemingly challenge traditional notions of femininity during the Progressive Club’s Fashion Show. Irene Davis, one of Ashbey’s fellow models, also received attention for a red crepe evening gown that had been trimmed in silver. As mentioned in a previous chapter, red was associated with a more aggressive female sexuality.
Wife vs. Secretary also contested traditional ideas of respectability by showing the connection between consumerism and relationships, reinforcing the expectation that women should be financially compensated for their romantic relationships.\(^{224}\) When Gable's affections seemingly turn from his wife to Harlow, he invites her on a trip and tells her to go shopping. Harlow tells him she has enough clothes, but Gable responds, "A woman can never have enough clothes." Instead of going shopping and involving herself in an adulterous affair, Harlow chooses instead to go to his wife in an attempt to reunite the estranged couple. She tells the wife, "Pretty soon he'll want to buy me things. I'll take him second best, but I'll have him all the same."

Such appropriations during the fashion show provided public but safe space to present alternative cultural values while maintaining social distance.\(^ {225}\) African American women's participation in their own sexual objectification might initially be perceived as problematic because it had the potential of reinforcing dominant culture's negative image of the oversexed black female, serving the interests of a racist white patriarchal culture. However, constructing themselves as the objects of male desire could be empowering as dominant culture either

\(^{224}\) As this indicates, the film is just as much about consumer culture as it is about relationships. In the film Gable's character worried about losing advertising revenue to low price weekly five-cent magazines, decides to buy one of these magazines. Emphasizing the importance of advertising, the following can be overheard in the film: "The profession of advertising, a contribution to American civilization, a great contribution. In every home are a 1001 necessities, necessities mind you which the world would never of had without the beneficial force of advertising."

\(^{225}\) This is the way that blackface minstrelsy worked. Whites appropriated black visages and culture to create distance, especially when expressing ideas that might be considered uncomfortable or controversial. For more on blackface minstrelsy as it relates to this idea, see Eric Lott, Love and theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) and David R. Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class, 2nd edition (London, UK: Verso, 1999).
portrayed black women as asexual or oversexed, but whatever the portrayal, sexually undesirable. Furthermore, as it was women not men who were overwhelmingly in control of these fashion shows, the displays represented women not as passive objects for male consumption, but making a conscious choice to make themselves conspicuous and display their bodies as the objects of desire. It is important to note that because the fashion show was largely a female environment, this desire was not only sexual. Fashion shows, as visual displays of consumption, also constructed women as representations of female desire.

Desirability was considered the basis of a successful self-presentation. According to “Beauty Hints,” a column that appeared in the Gazette, “As long as [a woman] feels herself desirable she will naturally take care of her appearance.” Thus, while sexual desirability countered notions of respectability, creating themselves as representations of female desire or envy complemented efforts to get women to improve their personal appearances, an essential aspect of racial uplift. In usurping the images of these movie stars, African American women laid claim to feminine beauty, constructing it outside of the exclusive domain of whiteness, undermining notions of racial supremacy. The

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226 Films, including some of Harlow’s, featured African American women as servants in order to heighten the white women’s femininity making them appear “more authoritatively womanly.” According to bell hooks, “Even when representations of black women were present in films our bodies and being were there to serve—to enhance and maintain white womanhood as object of the phallocentric gaze.” See Snead, MacCabe, and West, *White Screens, Black Images*, 4-5 and bell hooks, *Black Looks*, 119.


ability of African Americans to see themselves in white images was therefore not necessarily negative. An African American dressmaker realized this when trying to recreate a dress a client had seen in Vogue. Although the client did not have the ideal body for the fashions she chose to emulate, the dressmaker recognized there was something empowering in her client's ability to identify with the white model in the magazine. The experience taught her, "People will see you the way you see yourself!" She noticed that despite the fact that the client was overweight, she did not appear unfashionable because she "never thought she wasn't chic, and so nobody else did either." Therefore, the key in presenting a positive self-image was self-confidence. When African American women appropriated images from dominant culture, they were declaring that they did not see themselves in unflattering and demeaning portrayals of black women's sexuality and femininity, but in these images that were held up as epitomes of female beauty. As Peiss notes, "beauty mattered as a symbol and instrument of racial pride and advancement." Cleveland's social groups made this clear by asserting African American beauty in the naming their clubs. One group named their organization the Brown Skin Models Art Club. The club had taken its name from a popular New York Revue that "in defiance of the traditional standard of beauty" featured darker skinned beauties in an attempt "to glorify the colored

girl." Another group called themselves the "American Beauty Club" laying claim not only to notions of attractiveness, but citizenship.

Ashbey's choice to use the fashion show as a venue to assert such claims, points toward the important role that shows had in shaping the meaning of the African American female body. African American women purposely drew attention to their bodies in order to celebrate it by presenting it as a "thing of beauty." Advertisements for fashion shows and subsequent reports attested to the beauty of the models using positive adjectives to describe the models. The Ladies of Cleveland advertised, "The most attractive models will wear the season's latest mode." The models in the Erma Lee Style Show were described as "living creations of perfect beauty." When the Ladies Auxiliary of the 19th Ward Civic and Political Club announced its upcoming "Style Revue," they used terms such as "young sophisticate," "glamorous," "ever gorgeous, and "popular" to describe the models. A subsequent story following the show reported, "The latest fashions, modeled by Forest City beauties, were on parade at the Cosmopolitan Club." The following year, the club made the connection between beauty and fashion more explicit by having its fashion show also feature an actual beauty contest.

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231 See White and White, *Stylin',* 218.
232 Ibid.
233 "Fostering Style Show in Cleveland," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 16 April 1927.
234 Eddie Stinson, "Candid Comments," *Call & Post,* 14 October 1937.
237 "East siders compete for Miss 19th Ward Title at Style Show," *Call & Post,* 18 April 1940. In a subsequent report about the style show a winner of the contest is not announced.

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In constructing African American women as beautiful, fashion shows also acknowledged that it was not simply the clothes that owed to a successful self-presentation. Fashion advice columns directed women to pay close attention to their shoes, accessories, and hair as every detailed mattered "in giving the impression of smartness which the modern woman aims to attain." Reports of fashion shows reinforced this notion by paying careful attention to how the models accessorized their looks and styled their hair. Accessories most often included hats, gloves, belts, and shoes. The "Greek influenced white jersey" outfit that Beth Lampbright modeled was aided by a "jeweled belt." Sometimes, though, reports failed to mention the type of accessories and simply commented on how the color of the accessories complemented the outfit.

In terms of hair, Gertrude Brown's dress was referred to as "stunning" because her presentation had been aided by her "stylish coiffure." Hair had always been an important facet of "dressing up" for African American women dating back to their enslavement. Hair and clothes were not mutually exclusive, as both owed to a successful self-presentation. Claiming that "Beauty Culture is one of the most important essentualities [sic] of modern civilization, a New York Beautician argued, "Many a person think that when, referring to beauty culture, only applies it to woman and their hair, this is true only in one sense... Your dress attire, what you wear, and how you wear it should be one's first consideration,

238 "Neatness Easy to Attain," Gazette, 6 May 1916.
239 Marjorie Ison, "Social Ladder," Call & Post, 1 June 1940.
240 "Proto Club," Call & Post, 26 September 1935.
your shoes shined, suit or dress pressed goes a long way in one's appearance, and to colors, it plays a most important part.\textsuperscript{241} This fact was reinforced by the fact that dress was an important element of coiffure or beauty revues. These revues were often marketed as combination hair and style revues. Advertisements invited potential attendees to see "the latest and smartest styles in hair dress and clothing."\textsuperscript{242} If newspaper reports are any indication, the hair styles were often upstaged by the clothing styles which often received greater attention.

The fashion show epitomized the culture's "new interest in personality—both the unique qualities of an individual and the performing self which attracts others."\textsuperscript{243} Contradictory to consumer culture, which encouraged people "to make themselves from their things," models were signaled out for things that could not be purchased in the marketplace.\textsuperscript{244} Miss Theodosia Skinner received "first honors" for her modeling in a Phillis Wheatley style show "for her grace, walking, nonchalance."\textsuperscript{245} This emphasized the importance of style, which can also be defined as "the individual construction of an aesthetic based not just on what you wear, but how you wear it."\textsuperscript{246} In a newspaper column titled "Beauty Hints," the writer suggested that a smile was an important cost effective accessory for any

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[241]{Edna Mae Crenshaw, "A Lesson in Loveliness," \textit{The Actor}, 24 August 1936, 11, \textit{Black and Third World Periodicals Sample Issues 1844-1963}, microfilm, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, New York, NY, Reel 7.}
\footnotetext[242]{"To Present Coiffure Revue," \textit{Call & Post}, 8 July 1937.}
\footnotetext[243]{Susman, \textit{Culture as History}, 281.}
\footnotetext[245]{"Cleveland Squibs," \textit{Pittsburgh Courier}, 10 May 1930.}
\footnotetext[246]{Daniel Miller, \textit{Stuff} (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), 15.}
\end{footnotes}
outfit. In explaining, the writer recounted an incident in which she noticed "a
girl...who had fewer dresses than many of her friends, but always appears quite
well-dressed and always more charming." The writer concludes that the girl
appeared so because "she alone wore a smile."247 In emphasizing the girl's
charm the column alludes to the importance of distinguishing one's self from the
masses by "standing out in a crowd," which was at the heart of the "culture of
personality."248 The column's focus on the girl's smile also suggests that despite
the importance of clothing, the face was considered the "key to all expression of
self."249

African American Spectatorship and the Fashion Show

Just as the fashion shows reconfigured African Americans as spectacle, it
also empowered them as spectators. In the case of the fashion show,
"[p]articipants expected and desired to be looked upon by their peers, as well as
by those they considered to be their inferiors."250 Recognizing that spectatorship
was a form of pleasure, advertisements and announcements for fashion shows
attempted to entice potential goers by offering them the privilege of looking.251

Fashion shows sponsored by black organizations permitted African Americans

248 Susman, Culture as History, 277.
249 Ibid., 282.
250 White and White, Stylin', 213.
251 Much of the work on African American spectatorship specifically applies to movie going,
however, it is also applicable to live performances such as the fashion show. See bell hooks,
"The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in Black Looks: Race and Representation
(Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992); Stewart, Migrating to the Movies; and Manthia Diawara,
across color, gender, and class lines the privilege of looking, subverting the
notion that the gaze, which was central to modern consumer culture, was only a
privilege of whiteness. For African American women this meant engaging in an
activity that other women took for granted. For African American males this gave
them the authority of the "phallicentric gaze."252 Men were able assert their
masculinity by indulging in the pleasure of looking at the feminine form without
fear of violent reprisal, as in the case of lynching where African American men
were punished for even the accusation of looking at a white woman. Unlike
performances of blackness in dominant culture, looking at images of other blacks
in the space of the fashion show did not entail confronting images of racial
inferiority. Thus, the pleasure that blacks derived from watching the fashion show
was very different from the one that white observers derived from black
performance, as it was not based on a process of othering, but a sense of pride.
This was because consumer culture "privileged looking in the construction of
meaning."253 In the space of the fashion show African Americans were able to
look and name what they saw which was central to New Negro ideas of self-
definition. This represented an important departure from earlier middle-class
reform efforts which had been preoccupied with white surveillance, particularly
white authority to construct meaning of the black body.254 These fashion shows
were not directed outside the African American community but within, so there

253 Enstad, Ladies of Labor, 180.
254 Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Baptist
were no attempts to manage public consumption or perceptions of blackness for a white audience. Outside of the voyeuristic dimensions of the white gaze, African American women did not have to worry how their sartorial choices would be received or perceived as evidence of their exoticness or inferiority. Since whites were not the intended audience, it also meant that blacks did not have to encounter the segregation that restricted African American viewing in both space and time. As previously discussed, these restrictions sometimes even extended to their own neighborhoods, most dramatically in the cases where the city's night clubs permitted black people to perform on stage but excluded them from being members of the audience. For all of the above reasons and probably more, African American spectatorship in the space of the fashion show further established the show as an important site of resistance. In the space of the fashion show, African Americans were empowered as performers, spectators, and as object and subject of the gaze.

The Easter Parade and Other Displays of Fashion

Despite the popularity of the fashion show, sartorial displays were not completely removed from the streets. While the fashion show could not completely remove sartorial displays from the streets, it could provide guidance on to what was appropriate attire for such occasions. It was not unusual for fashion shows to contain an Easter Parade scene. The Parisian Debutantes fashion show featured the Easter Parade as its finale, “showing, Swagger, Reefer, Sport and Dress suits.” See “Parisian Debutantes Present Style Show,” Call & Post, 21 April 1938.

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referred to Cedar Avenue as a "show window" where one could see "gorgeously dressed" women parading with their "handsome escorts" (fig. 10). According to Walker, "The progress of colored Cleveland [was] measured by [Cedar Avenue's] tempo." Natalie Middleton recalled, "The young teenagers would stroll down Cedar, dressed in their Sunday best to Shauter's to eat a dish of ice cream or a soda."  

The most popular of the Sunday strolls was the Easter Parade (fig. 11). Observing the "chic" strollers along Cedar Avenue, an African American journalist referred to Easter as "The greatest day in the church year." African Americans were not alone in their celebration of Easter through the Parade as it emerged in dominant culture during the late 19th century to become "one of the fundamental ways that the occasion was identified and celebrated." Over time, the holiday became less focused on Christ's death and resurrection, and more of a celebration of consumption and materialism as people traveled from church to church in their best attire to view decorations, signifying consumer culture's ability to co-opt traditional cultural practices.  

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256 William Walker, "Down the Big Road," Call & Post, 23 August 1935.
257 Natalie Middleton, interview by Antoinette Kindall, 20 December 1986 transcript, St. James Oral History Project, MSS 4536, Container 2, Folder 24, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, 17. Middleton remembered Shauter's, a black-owned drug store which was located "at E. 93rd and Cedar," as one "of the most popular drug store from the 1930s."
258 Thelma Louise Taylor, "Cleveland Squibs," Pittsburgh Courier, 26 April 1930.
The ladies, left to right are: Virginia Williams, Elnora Williams, Mary Ellen Freeman and Olenna Powell. They were promenading on Cedar Avenue Sunday and managed to escape from their escorts long enough to have their pictures taken.

Figure 10. Sunday Stroll on Cedar Avenue, Call & Post, 7 May 1936.
Figure 11. "Easter Paraders Take Spotlight in Fashion Show," Call & Post, 1 April 1937.
earlier Protestant religious conservatism that promoted simplicity and thrift in
dress.\textsuperscript{261} In 1938, an article simultaneously recognizing the rising secularism of
the holiday and the fact that the Depression may have limited people’s ability to
purchase new clothing noted that Easter symbolized for many not Christ’s
resurrection, but “the resurrection of old garments newly cleaned.”\textsuperscript{262} The
holiday’s increasing trend towards secularization and fashion was made evident
when Cedar Gardens, a nightclub, hosted an “Easter Sunday Matinee Dance.”
The dance included a style show and a floor show with the unchristian title
“Devils Frolics.”\textsuperscript{263} The following year, the Modern Maidens, hosting their matinee
at Cedar Gardens recognized the holiday’s modern association with
secularization and emphasis on dress. Making no mention of the holiday’s
religious association, the social club advertised, “Come on folks, let’s swing and
sway; Tis Easter, and time for us all to be gay; Whether dressed in old clothes or
new, OUR MODERN MAIDENS welcome you, you, and you.”\textsuperscript{264}

As illustrated in the Modern Maidens advertisement, in meeting with
consumer culture, Easter’s traditional associations with self-denial and sacrifice
were subverted in favor of new ideas concerning self-fulfillment.\textsuperscript{265} The \textit{Call &
Post} gossip columnist “Skippy” related, “It looks like the folks are doing almost
everything in this mad rush for the traditional Easter Parade…Skippy has

\textsuperscript{261} Easter’s emphasis on clothing was made obvious in 1916 when an announcement noting
Easter’s later date that year began, “You’ll have more time this year to get money together for
\textsuperscript{262} “He is Risen,” \textit{Call & Post}, 14 April 1938.
\textsuperscript{263} Advertisement, \textit{Call & Post}, 6 April 1939.
\textsuperscript{264} “On the Avenue,” \textit{Call & Post}, 14 March 1940.
\textsuperscript{265} Schmidt, “The Easter Parade Piety, Fashion, and Display,” 147.
observed several parties making contacts that they otherwise would not make if it was not for the desire to get the Easter garments out of Will Call.266 People also took advantage of buying on credit. After one Easter, an article discussed how Easter’s focus had become about buying clothes on credit or installment.267 Spritz, a downtown clothing store, advertising in the *Gazette*, offered liberal credit encouraging readers to “Dress Up for Easter” and “Pay Spritz as You Can” for $2.00 down.268 The buying of clothes on credit or the installment plan to attend church on Easter was somewhat contradictory, considering that the church had been one of the biggest opponents of these purchasing methods. For instance, the Baptist Church “attacked installment buying as particularly detrimental to individual character and racial progress.”269

This suggested that the only sacrifices people were willing to make were those that enabled them to consume and participate in the parade. Mose of the Roaring Third joked, “Now an de time dat de folks begins to leave off paying de grocery man de insurance man de rent man all because dey am not gonna let

266 “Skippy,” *Call & Post*, 13 April 1935. Skippy’s comments echoed middle class concerns about women’s willingness to compromise themselves in order to fulfill their material desires.
267 “He is Risen,” *Call & Post*, 14 April 1938.
268 *Gazette*, 3 April 1926. The focus on buying clothes on credit was reflective of more liberal credit policies that were available to consumers beginning in the early 1920s. According to Leach, “The most liberal credit policies ‘tended to become the rule’ to make up for the relative inequity in incomes, with merchants ‘hesitating to press desirable customers for prompt payment for fear of driving them to more lenient competitors.” See Leach, *Land of Desire*, 299. Spritz in its advertisements offered easy terms no matter customers’ economic situations. One advertisement read, “Spritz Credit serves you in good times and bad times-when money is tight you can use Spritz Credit to wear clothes to help you hold you head up higher.” See Advertisement, *Gazette*, 1 May 1926.
anything stop dem from splurging in dat Easter Parade.” Perhaps realizing that people were willing to do without in order to appear well-dressed on the holiday, Spritz offered a promotion for Easter through which customers who spent $25, received a “Big Basket of Easter Groceries.” Even the Depression was not cause for denial. In 1938, it was announced, “There’ll be an Easter Parade in spite of Old Man Depression.”

The holiday’s focus on new clothes and shopping also helped to structure the holiday as feminine. Reports on the Easter Parade reinforced the feminine nature of consumption by focusing predominately on the female paraders and their fashions. Gossip columns leading up to Easter were filled with information about preparations and speculation about what women would be wearing for the holiday. Columns even tried to deduce from which stores women were making their purchases. Sometimes even a year later newspapers referred to what people had worn the previous year. These reports made it clear what was considered appropriate attire for the holiday even using adjectives such as “correct” in describing what people were wearing. In 1938 for example, “the color for the year” was “London Tan or Copper” and purportedly “any woman that ventured out Sunday without her London tan shoes, hat and gloves looked out of

270 Advertisement, Call & Post, 23 March 1935. The store offered the grocery promotion since the 1920s.
271 Advertisement, Gazette, 3 April 1926.
272 “Jolly Jots By Jean,” Call & Post, 9 April 1936. The community wide participation in the Easter Parade during the Depression was made clear when Lenora Cayword reporting on the week’s events did not say much about the parade feeling there was no need because she felt readers had witnessed it for themselves. However, she could not help mentioning the attire of Miss Gladys Corbin who appeared “stunning in green.” See “Around the Campfire,” Call and Post, 23 April 1936.
273 “Skippy,” Call & Post, 21 April 1938.
place." While the Gazette never printed actual descriptions of what people actually wore, since the late 19th century it had carried columns that discussed what would be in fashion for the holiday. However, wearing something that was considered the height of fashion did not always equate to successful self-presentation. One Easter, as case in point, Mary Webster wore a hat that was referred to as one of "latest creations from Paree [sic]" but its effect was diminished because "she had to hold it on her head the whole time." The emphasis on femininity was further evidenced in the fact that the photographs of the Easter Parade that appeared in the newspaper were overwhelmingly of women. In giving attention primarily to women, the holiday also represented a challenge to traditional gender roles. As Schmidt argues, the holiday countered Victorian notions of femininity because "Easter was about women in public procession." Much like the fashion show, this self-assertion on the part of women countered notions of modesty in dress and deportment.

As material display, clothing was a significant part of the visual narrative of African American socio-economic progress. Thus, the Easter parade was not merely a showcase of fashionable dress, but of African American advancement and can be included in the "live performances...that provided migrants with visions of African-American dignity." Sunday, April 12, 1936 was declared "an event in Negro history and progress over the nation: for without bidding for it the

274 "On the Avenue with TDS," Call & Post, 21 April 1938.
275 "On the Avenue with TDS," Call & Post, 1 April 1937.
Negro captured more publicity and attention than any other group or race."

According to the newspaper, "hundreds of white people" took a detour to Cedar Ave in order to see African Americans on parade. While African Americans had "unwittingly solicit[ed] such special attention," it was considered newsworthy because "sixty years ago this was impossible as a race, we were stealing glances at the Easter parade, admiring and envying something we had never known." After the intrusion, the Call & Post waged an ongoing competition with the city's white Easter paraders, encouraging its black readers: "Let's all cut out in our suppressed Easter finery and show Euclid Ave just what dressing really is." In 1938, the newspaper reported, "At sunset on Easter Day one could safely say that the persons of color were not simply dressed well but surpassed in many instances their more fortunate friends of Canterbury-Brighton and Coventry Roads." As the Call & Post alluded, the presence of well-dressed blacks en masse on the streets was important to black self-image and community building. It also suggested the continued importance of appearance even in the face of economic instability.

_Fashion Displays and Traditional African American Culture_

Previously, modern consumption was interpreted as a homogenizing force that threatened tradition, implying cultural loss rather than cultural retention.

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278 Bob Williams, "Under the Lamplight," _Call & Post_, 16 April 1936.
279 "On the Avenue with T.D.S.,” _Call & Post_, 18 April 1940.
280 “Skippy,” _Call & Post_, 21 April 1938.
While the Easter Parade did not have its origins in African American culture, its popularity cannot simply be attributed to imitation. African Americans had a long history of appropriating and modifying dominant culture in ways that aligned with traditional practices. Through these re-interpretations African Americans "shared in the material attractions of the larger world" while expressing an "alternative set of cultural values."\(^{281}\)

The Easter Parade allowed for the continuation of African American cultural traditions that connected public display to fashion, such as the Sunday parades which had begun during slavery and the stroll which had developed as a part of free black urban identity. As mentioned earlier, dressing up had been central to African American constructions of freedom, enabling them to lessen their sense of inferiority and deprivation.

While these sartorial displays represented important continuations with African Americans' enslaved past, the "continued relevance" of these practices had just as much to do with the present as they did the past. As Daniel Miller has argued, "within modernity is a struggle for the objectification of freedom." He writes:

"The condition of slavery would have fostered an extreme concern with the expression of freedom, but it is the continued imperative to objectify forms of freedom which make this historical trajectory complete itself, as it were within contemporary forms. For this reason, the authenticity of style

\(^{281}\) Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*, 114.
derives not from whether one can claim descent from some such particular origin, such as slavery..., but rather as consumers we appropriate the possibilities given by these histories for strategies of identity construction today."^{282}

Even though slavery had ended, African Americans remained racially oppressed. Therefore, they continued to find value in sartorial displays that were traditionally used to assert themselves and contradict notions of black servility and inferiority. Therefore, African American modernity was not about the loss of cultural traditions, but their reinterpretation and adaptability. As both traditional and modern, these displays epitomized the New Negro, proving that African Americans had a past that could be used to transform the image of African Americans as racially inferior to modern and urban.

Take for instance, the gingham dress party, one of the most popular themes for the mini-fashion shows. These parties represented one of the ways in which the traditional could become modern. African Americans could aesthetically use cultural traditions to simultaneously acknowledge and distance themselves from their enslaved past. For African American women, gingham connected them with their slave and rural heritage, as gingham had been a popular fabric for clothing. When Hanna Fambro was interviewed in the 1930s at her Cleveland home as part of the Federal Writer’s Project to collect slave narratives, it was the gingham turban and dress that she wore that visually

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connected her to an enslaved past. According to the interviewer, she presented "the delightful picture of a real southern mammy." While gingham dress parties may at first glance seem at odds with African American women’s efforts to separate themselves from the stigmas associated with their past, the ability to make choices about what they wore and to host these parties also symbolized black progress.

The popularity of gingham also reflected America’s obsession with the rural and the folk, which had begun in the late 19th century. It was a welcome diversion for those who were disillusioned with civilization and modern life, which had signaled a break with the past and tradition. Proponents of the "simple life sought to bring what was good from the past into modern society."

In the 1930s, a fashion advice column proclaimed, “To be in fashion you must become decidedly gingham-minded” and deemed the fabric perfect for party wear. Despite the fact that gingham could be just as expensive as silk, historically, as shown with its association with slave clothing, gingham had been a fabric associated with poverty. It was described as a “humble fabric” giving the impression of simplicity and thrift. The popularity of gingham dresses indicated that it was not the material, but the craftsmanship that made the dress. During the Depression, gingham along with other economical fashions that connoted

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284 According to Susman, the folk not only represented a nostalgia for the past, but became the basis for a collective American identity. See Susman, Culture as History, 205.
286 “Sway of Gingham Still Hanging On,” Gazette, 8 July 1939.
287 “Gingham Costs like Silk,” Gazette, 2 June 1917.
plainness, such as sack dresses, gained in popularity. Considering the country’s dire economic circumstances, extravagant dressing for frivolity was considered inappropriate. In addition to the gingham dress party, clubs also hosted "wash dress" and "cotton dress" parties. Washable fabrics had become increasingly popular during the Depression as they did not require the added expense of dry cleaning.

*African American Fashion Displays and African American Newspapers*

Much of the information on fashion shows was contained in reports of club activities that appeared in African American newspapers. The society pages of the *Call & Post* were often filled with reports of African American sartorial displays. This was because "every social club has its reporter who must see that notices of club meetings are inserted in the weekly press and that favorable accounts of dances and other special events, will get into the papers."288 Sociologist, Frazier, dismissed reports such as these, criticizing them as proof the black middle-class' obsession with publicity.289 However, these reports countered notions of African American women's invisibility and represented one of the few ways African American women could receive recognition with their names and images positively displayed in the public sphere.

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In the weeks leading up to a fashion show, the names of the women that
were to model were listed in the paper. After the show took place, the names of
the models who stood out in the show reappeared along with descriptions of
what they had worn. Gossip columns were filled with information about the
names of Easter strollers with the details of their outfits. Reports of these
displays were sometimes accompanied by photographs. A picture of Mrs. Daisy
Scaggs, referred to as "one of Cleveland, Ohio's loveliest ladies," appeared in the
Chicago Defender when she was selected to model in a fashion show to benefit
the building fund of the Phillis Wheatley Association. 290 Like the displays
themselves, the photographs served as powerful visual representations. Like W.
E. B. DuBois's earlier efforts at the Paris Exhibition, these photographs
"represented African Americans as thoroughly modern members of the Western
world." 291 Photographs of fashionable African American women had a political
dimension in that they served as a type of "subversive resistance." 292 These
images provided a means "to resist misrepresentations as well as a means by
which alternative images could be produced." 293 As true to life representations,
photographs expanded the realm of visual representation of African American
women, refuting negative stereotypes of African Americans that tended to
exaggerate African American dress and physical characteristics portraying

291 Shawn Michelle Smith, American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture
292 Willis, A Small Nation of People, 55.
293 bell hooks, "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," in Picturing Us: African American
African American women as unfashionable and unattractive. Instead, they proffered empowering images of African American femininity and beauty. Moreover, they placed African American women at the center of fashion. Highlighting the connection between fashion and photography, Allen E. Cole, an African American photographer, who operated a studio in Cleveland used the following tagline in his advertising, “New Fashions Demand New Photographs” (fig. 12). For the time period in question, the fashion advice columns that appeared in the *Gazette* were often reprinted from white publications like *McClure’s* and *Ladies’ Home Journal*. In the 1930s, “Fashions for the Smart Women,” appeared in the *Gazette*. The column was “prepared especially” for the newspaper which seemingly indicates that the column was directed specifically towards African American women, however, the women that appeared in the accompanying drawings did not necessarily appear visibly black. The fashion advice columns that appeared in the *Call & Post* made it clear that they were written specifically for African American women. In 1936, every other week, the newspaper featured a beauty column by Marie Downing, Director of the St. Louis based Larieuse Beauty Foundation, titled “Beauty and Romance.” The column also offered fashion advice including what colors were most flattering

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Figure 12. Advertisement for Allen E. Cole's Photography Studio, *Call & Post*, 28 July 1934.
for dark skin and hair.\textsuperscript{296} It even promoted the idea that beauty was ageless advising women forty and older to dress age appropriate. According to the column, for the mature woman "clothing should be fashionable....., and yet conservative. In choosing apparel and accessories it is often well to select the darker and less gay article."\textsuperscript{297} The company, in addition to proffering its own advice, gave average women an opportunity to offer their own ideas about feminine beauty. Clevelander Mamie Lou Pitts won fifty dollars in the foundation's nationwide contest for her "suggestions regarding careful grooming and attractive clothing."\textsuperscript{298} In 1940, the newspaper also began featuring a column, "Style Slants for Sepia Socialites," but similarly to the Gazette column, the women depicted in drawings were racially ambiguous. A year earlier, however, when the newspaper announced that "The 'monk' or 'shiftless' dress is one of the new 1939 fashion discoveries," it pictured a local African American woman from a "popular" club. The "attractive model" accessorized the dress with "a black pill box hat, with a blue chiffon wimple," striking two poses wearing the dress with and without a belt to demonstrate the dress's versatility.\textsuperscript{299}

While African American newspapers intervened into the racist dimensions of dominant culture offering positive images of African Americans, they also represented important contradictions. This was especially true in advertising.

\textsuperscript{296} Marie Downing, "Beauty and Romance," \textit{Call & Post}, 26 October 1940. The foundation was established by the white-owned Godefroy Manufacturing Company, but they appear to have actively courted the African American market.  
\textsuperscript{297} Marie Downing, "Beauty and Romance: Beauty Begins at 40," \textit{Call & Post}, 23 December 1937.  
\textsuperscript{298} "Local Woman is Winner of $50.00," \textit{Call & Post}, 17 December 1936.  
\textsuperscript{299} Cecilia Smith, "'Monk' Dress Scores Hit," \textit{Call & Post}, 23 February 1939. 
Even advertisements in African American newspapers did not feature people of African descent. This fact did not go unnoticed by Floyd J. Calvin, the editor and publisher of the *Call & Post*. In remarking on the difference between African and African American newspapers, he was impressed by the fact that African newspapers advertisements "present their copy in a form that appeals to the self-respect of the African." He noted that "[a]lmost uniformly, Negro characters are used in illustrating the ads." This was in contrast to African American newspapers where the "reader is so overwhelmed with the idea of 'white.'" Floyd connected the paucity of advertisements featuring images of African Americans to American racism writing, "The way the economic life is organized here, the Negro can't get very far promoting race pride. There are indications that our white neighbors don't want us to have but so much race pride, because it might threaten their sense of security."300 As Floyd alluded, advertisements did not attempt to change the social order, but reinforce it. Advertisements were concerned with selling commonly held ideas which included those concerning black inferiority and their supposed unfitness for consumer culture. Advertising companies even believed that blacks preferred whiteness.301 There was little to counter such ideas because blacks were largely not employed by advertising agencies. Moreover, largely because of economic constraints, many black-owned businesses often did not participate in extensive advertising. Their advertisements were often

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300 "The Digest," *Call & Post*, 10 February 1938.
simple in both size and content and usually lacked images or featured stock images.302 As a result, advertisements in Cleveland’s African American newspapers rarely featured people who were visibly black. In the rare instances that they did, they were pictured as before images in skin whitener ads or in ads for hair products that promised to change hair texture or increase hair length.

These advertisements detracted from the positive discourse concerning the beauty of African American women, underscoring Wallace’s idea that “practices of resistance are always deeply compromised by their willingness to make major concessions to other hegemonic conventions.”303 Skin whitener advertisements privileged light skin alluding to connections between beauty and light skin. Claiming to “lighten skin 7 shades in 7 nights,” Fan Tan Bleach Cream ads urged readers to try the cream “to lighten dark, ugly skin fast.”304 They advertised that lighter skin held the promise of “friends, business success, popularity, and the envy of those about you.”305 Some products even created a relationship between light skin and “being liked and admired,” with such slogans as “love demands a light clear skin;” “WIN LOVE ROMANCE SUCCESS WITH A LIGHTER COMPLEXION;” “To be admired, you must have light, clear skin;” and “lighter skin wins handsome lover” (fig. 13).306 Such emphasis in product

302 Sometimes stock images were shaded in order to suggest blackness.
303 Wallace, Dark Designs and Visual Culture, 227.
304 “Fan Tan Bleach Cream is Highly Recommended,” Call & Post, 5 August 1937.
305 Advertisement, Call & Post, 23 June 1934.
306 Susman, Culture as History, xxii; Advertisement, Call & Post, 19 May 1934; Advertisement, Call & Post, 20 April 1939; Advertisement, Call & Post, 31 March 1934; and Advertisement, Call & Post, 28 July 1934.
advertising reinforced the “culture of personality,” especially its idea “that true pleasure could be attained by making oneself pleasing to others.”

Although sartorial displays and beauty products offered inconsistent images about racial pride, they reinforced the importance of appearance and firmly placed beauty, femininity, success, and desirability within the realm of consumer culture. Consumer culture often promulgated that the solution to an individual’s perceived inadequacies or problems was to “buy a new you.” Purchase was not only quintessential to personal improvement, but happiness and fulfillment. Despite the fact that such expectations from consumer culture were unrealistic, the belief in the transformative power of material goods continued to hold sway.

Conclusion

As the presence of African American dressmakers and the growing popularity of fashion shows and other public sartorial displays indicate, African

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307 Susman, *Culture as History*, 281.
309 Willis, "I Shop Therefore I Am," 178.
310 Matt, *Keeping Up With the Joneses*, 183.
Figure 13. Advertisement for Palmer's Skin Success Ointment, 
*Call & Post*, 28 July 1934.
American women were not content to rest at the margins of this developing
culture as they seized upon the culture’s associations with modernity and
progress. Dressmakers, along with displays both large and small, provided space
and opportunity for African American women in Cleveland to participate in
fashion consumption and leisure in ways that were not guaranteed to them in the
larger society and culture. Moreover, their continued relevance during the
Depression suggests that the economic crises that defined the 1930s did not
quell Africans American women’s desire to participate in the culture of
consumption. As a matter of fact, the Depression made African American women
more adamant about demanding their rights as citizen consumers.
Chapter 5

Not Too Depressed to Shop, 1929-1940

In 1938, Dr. Mordecai W. Johnson appeared as a speaker before a crowd of thousands at Cleveland’s Gethsemane Baptist Church. Making reference to the Depression Johnson declared, “The Negro race faces the greatest danger today that it has faced since the Emancipation Proclamation.” Johnson argued, African Americans could “no longer come to the north for [their] salvation.” He went on to “urge” the audience “to hold on to their self respect” regardless of their economic standing for failure to do so would confirm white expectations about African American inferiority. However, this “self respect” represented a different attitude for African Americans. No longer were African Americans concerned with proving themselves worthy of citizenship, but asserting their right to equality in their everyday lives. As a result, “economic nationalism and civil rights took precedence during the Great Depression.”

This chapter will examine how the Great Depression impacted African American women’s dress related consumption, paying particular attention to the political dimensions of consumerism that developed during the economic crises. Cohen refers to this period as the “rise of the citizen consumer” because “[m]any ordinary Americans became much more self-conscious about their identities and

1 “Negroes Face Greatest Crises Since Freed, Says Dr. Johnson,” Call & Post, 31 March 1938. Dr. Johnson was in Cleveland to appear on the national radio program, "Wings Over Jordan."
2 “Negroes Face Greatest Crises Since Freed, Says Dr. Johnson,” Call & Post, 31 March 1938.
interests as consumers." Consumers also remade themselves as activists. The Depression intensified economic and social inequalities, making racial disparities more apparent, but it also "gave the Negro consumer the consciousness of his purchasing power." This consciousness helped to transform black agency. While the Depression seemed to suggest in a myriad of ways that the progress of the nation had stalled, African Americans still continued in their quest for racial advancement. Consumerism became an integral part of the struggle for equality. African Americans sought to attack racial discrimination in the marketplace, insisting on their rights to engage with the culture in terms of both leisure and labor.

*The Economic Situation*

African Americans in Cleveland, as elsewhere, were hit particularly hard by the Depression. Unemployment rates in the Central Avenue Area "averaged 50 percent and in some sections as high as 90 percent." During the Depression African Americans' economic deprivation was apparent in their lack of adequate clothing. Geraldine Daniel recalled having "decent clothes...until the Depression

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5 "Negro Business has Learned from the Depression," *Call & Post*, 14 March 1940. The article estimated that nationwide African Americans spent in excess of $2,000,000,000 annually.
7 Christopher G.Wye, "Midwest Ghetto: Patterns of Negro Life and Thought in Cleveland, OH, 1929-1945" (PhD diss., Kent State University, 1973), 631.
came. According to Natalie Middleton, "The Depression just about devastated us." While recounting her family's financial struggles, Middleton "remember[ed] wearing second hand clothes, even to high school. There were no mod fashions for children and the young people in those days. If there were I didn't have any, simply because we did not have any money." As a result, Middleton was forced to wear "darned socks" and "patched clothes."9

While such deprivation was common across racial lines, African Americans' economic struggles during the Depression were compounded by racial discrimination in the labor market. African Americans were affected disproportionately by unemployment and underemployment. As a result, the Central Area where the majority of African Americans resided had a high frequency of poverty. To counter economic instability and cut expenses, families often consolidated households. Parents moved in with adult children and vice-versa. Finding it increasingly difficult to survive on modest incomes alone, families also took in borders. In addition to adjusting to living arrangements, the Depression threatened traditional gender roles as it disrupted men's ability to be the primary wage-earners. Even those families that had achieved the middle-class ideal of having a stay at home wife found it necessary for her to enter the workforce for the first time or after a long absence. Moreover, it was also easier

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for women to secure employment because gender discrimination in the workplace resulted in them being paid less.\textsuperscript{10} This upset traditional gender roles. Middleton recalled that her father was unemployed for about ten years and her mother who had not previously been employed became the primary breadwinner. Her father, who worked intermittently at odd jobs, mostly stayed home performing most of the domestic duties including child care.\textsuperscript{11} Because of low wages, two-income households often fared better than single-income households. Even in cases where husbands were able to retain employment, wives still found it necessary to be employed. In some instances, families were able to avoid the brunt of the Depression. Gwendolyn Stokes Williams did not recall “suffering even during those Depression years” because both she and her husband had been employed.\textsuperscript{12} However, there was still cause for frustration.

In the short story, “With Malice Toward None” (1939) by Chester Himes, the main character named “Chick,” perhaps as an indicator of his emasculation, is overwhelmed by his inability to live up to patriarchal expectations, despite his employment.\textsuperscript{13} He perceives his failure to adequately support his wife in the lack

\begin{itemize}
  \item Gwendolyn Stokes Williams, interview by Margaret Butcher, transcript, \textit{St. James Oral History Project}, MSS 4536, Container 3, Folder 42, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, 6. Maintaining a two income household in the midst of the economic crises was not an easy task. For some women their statuses as single, separated, widowed, abandoned or divorced made this virtually impossible. For married couples, illness and disability also interfered with the ability to maintain a two income household.
  \item The story originally appeared in \textit{Crossroad} 1 (1939). Chick as either slang for a female or a baby bird might refer to the character’s lack of masculinity in terms of middle-class patriarchy and domesticity.
\end{itemize}
of material possessions. The story begins with Chick and his wife preparing for a night out. While watching his wife’s “cautious ceremony of drawing on her stockings to keep from getting runners,” he feels himself “a fool” to have married her because “he couldn’t even buy her the stockings she needed.”\textsuperscript{14} As she continues to ready herself, his failure becomes more apparent. When Chick tells her not to wear a hat because her hair “looks pretty,” she tells him she had not planned on it because the only one she possessed is outdated, an “old rag from last year.”\textsuperscript{15} Chick, defensive, perceives this as an insult to his manhood and angrily responds, “Well, Goddammit, you don’t have to rub it in! ... I’m doing the best I can do. Hell, I ain’t no damn millionaire.” His wife quickly reassures him that she did not mean anything.\textsuperscript{16} Chick’s male pride is once again wounded when their landlady stops them and asks to see if his wife has on something new, but his wife admits, as Chick “grits his teeth,” that it is “just the same old black and green dress” that she had worn before. After his wife’s admission, Chick is again offended, and rudely says, “Come on, come on, let’s go.”\textsuperscript{17}

As the short story indicates, men’s inability to fulfill their roles as providers had not only an economic toll, but a psychological one. Cohen argues that because masculine identity was very much tied to their work, men regardless of race, “suffered severely from their loss of status.”\textsuperscript{18} Like Chick, men felt

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 49-50.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 50.
\textsuperscript{18} Cohen, \textit{Making a New Deal}, 247.
emasculated over not being able to fulfill their traditional role as breadwinner and provide for their family’s consumer needs and desires. The embarrassment and humiliation that they felt was largely because manhood was “define[d]...in terms of consumption.” For African American men, this frustration was compounded by the fact that because of racism, their authority largely resided within their domestic relationships. This manifested itself in various ways, including anger and violence. If the *Call & Post* is any indication, domestic violence was on the rise during the Great Depression. In one report, Eliza Buford “killed her common-law husband ... during a struggle for her WPA check.” She was later freed when it was found she acted in self-defense. According to her testimony, her common-law husband “came after her with a knife after she had refused to turn over her paycheck to him, and during the ensuing struggle she wrested it from him and stabbed him.”

Such conflict was not only gendered, but generational. It was not only wives, but children who challenged men’s patriarchal authority. Men expected to control not only their own wages, but those belonging to other members of their household. Children, especially females, who had reached working-age were expected to contribute to the family economy, often their entire earnings, to

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21 “Judge Frees Woman Who Killed Husband Over WPA Paycheck,” *Call & Post*, 16 November 1940.
ensure the family’s subsistence.\textsuperscript{23} This left children with little opportunity to fulfill their own consumer desires and limited their independence. Ella Mae Sharpe who had secured employment as a teacher, was expected to turn over her whole check to her father. While willing to pay for “room and board,” she resented her father’s complete control of her finances and went to see a lawyer regarding the matter. The lawyer suggested that she move out on her own, as that was usually the only recourse for children who chose not to turn over their wages.\textsuperscript{24} However, Sharpe’s father, unable to accept how her economic independence challenged his authority, ended up abandoning the family.\textsuperscript{25} This type of marriage instability was not unusual for the period. It was not uncommon for men who were “impatient with a less than ideal home life” to desert their families.\textsuperscript{26}

While intensified by the Depression, African Americans’ economic situation was nothing new. According to Emmett J Scott, “The Negro people, more largely than others have been deprived of the opportunity to freely work and win their own way. Racial and economic barriers have conspired to keep them at the lower and lowest levels of economic life and have needlessly penalized them as they have but their best efforts to rise to full equality with their fellow Americans.”\textsuperscript{27} As early as 1921, it was reported, “thousands of our people

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\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 65.
\textsuperscript{24} Cohen, \textit{Making A New Deal}, 247.
\textsuperscript{26} Benson, \textit{Household Accounts}, 21. Such desertion was not permanent as couples often later reconciled. According to Sharpe, her parents eventually remarried. See Sharpe, interview 21.
\end{flushleft}
are out of employment and in dire need." The article blamed the circumstances on their refusal to save when the economic situation had been better, instead spending their money on other things including expensive clothing. When the Depression hit, African Americans were no longer blamed for their economic circumstances. In the wake of a riot involving both whites and blacks at the Cuyahoga County Relief Office in which two people were shot by police, the Gazette cited as one of the "contributing factors...the fact that the burden of the depression has fallen with more than average severity upon that important group of Clevelanders, the colored people." Furthermore, the article argued that it was not poor spending habits that were responsible for African Americans' failure to save, but insufficient wages.

Jane E. Hunter of the Phillis Wheatley Association echoed these sentiments writing, "Despite the inequality of income, the Negro must pay the same for clothing, food, and often more for shelter and insurance. Such a condition indicates a blindness to the human rights of colored citizens."

Job prospects for African Americans, which were already limited, dwindled during the Great Depression. African Americans were forced to occupy marginal positions and increasingly relegated to unskilled and low paid work. This was in large part because blacks were increasingly displaced from employment to make room for white laborers who were also experiencing downward occupational

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28 "Cleveland Social and Personal," Gazette, 16 April 1921.
29 "Behind a Riot," Gazette, 17 October 1931.
mobility.31 While much of the discourse on black unemployment was male focused, unemployment rates for women actually exceeded that of men.32 Job prospects for African American women were especially limited as they faced employment discrimination both on account of race and gender.

Even in fashion related fields, which were dominated by women, there were limited opportunities available for black women. In 1930, when the Depression was still relatively new, the Negro Welfare Association while noting widespread unemployment remained optimistic. According to a "1930 Annual Report," there had been improvements in placing women in the fashion industries. There was an increase in African American women employed in garment factories and as seamstresses in laundries.33 However, as the Depression continued, opportunities in both production and retail were largely non-existent. The Max B. Wertheim Company, a manufacturer of women's blouses, "fired" black female employees after white female employees refused to work with them.34

Despite the fact that the Depression was the "heyday" for Cleveland's department stores, as many experienced expansion, African Americans did not

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seem to benefit from this growth. When the Higbee Co. opened a new store, it hired "hundreds of additional employees" and its workforce was expected to number over 3,500 people. The Gazette could not but help but to beg the question, "How many are Afro-Americans?" African American females were also dismissed as stock girls and elevator operators, the only department store positions they were allowed to hold. According to an article that appeared in the Call & Post, one of their reporters was informed by store officials that the Bailey Company planned to remove its African American female elevator operators to those located at the back of the store, replacing them with white female operators at the front. The author of the article called these actions "indefensible" and encouraged readers not to patronize the store. In trying to impress upon readers the importance of the situation, the author suggested that segregation was both an employment and customer matter writing, "We wonder if the Bailey Co. intends to have separate doors for its colored customer and separate registers to put their money in." In 1931, when it appeared that the May Company who at the time employed seventy-five African Americans had let go of some of its black female elevator operators, the store's manager quickly responded in a letter to the editor. According to the store's manager, it was not a result of racism but of reorganization and that thirteen of the girls remained in the employ of the store as "stock girls on the various selling floors." He also said their new positions did

35 "Cleveland Social and Personal," Gazette, 20 August 1931. According to the article, the department store had a reputation for discriminating against both Jews and African Americans.
not represent an attempt to place them "out of sight" because the women were "in full view of the public at all times."37 Such discrimination was believed to be so widespread that the smaller Woodlow Department Store located, in the Central Area was commended for keeping its African American employees on staff.38

Discrimination was also evidenced in the exclusion of African American females from education opportunities that would prepare them for employment in these fields. The "Jane Adams School for Girls" denied young African American women admittance for training in "Tailoring, Dressmaking, High Powered Machine Sewing, [and] Tea Room Service, arguing that there is no demand for such services from colored girls."39 Even when African American women were able to access the same educational opportunities as white women, they faced difficulty gaining employment. In 1937, when Hazel M. Barnett graduated from Flora Stone Mather, the women's college of Western Reserve, while most of her classmates were able to gain employment at Halle's Department Store, this was

37 "Hear! Hear!! The Rounder What's Doing," Gazette, 7 March 1931 and "Manager Gross' Statement," Gazette, 7 March 1931. During the depression, the May Company had a rather good reputation for its treatment of African American employees. In 1935, the department store hosted a picnic at Erie Beach for African American employees. Employees were not only welcome to invite guests, but were provided with complimentary transportation and food. See Modess Thomas, "Employees [sic] of May Co. Frolic at On-Erie Beach," Call & Post, 18 July 1935. These type of outings were an important because "corporate-sponsored leisure was part of the process by which companies tried to mold workers values, to direct them toward productive leisure that would make them loyal and efficient workers." See Susan Currell, The March of Spare Time: The Problem and Promise of Leisure in the Great Depression (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 17.
38 "Woodlow's Dept Store Retains Negro Help Despite Depression," Call & Post, 1 June 1940.
not an option for Barnett. She instead went on to Wilberforce, an African American university, to receive a degree in education.\textsuperscript{40}

Labor market discrimination meant that African American women regardless of skill or education were increasingly restricted to the realm of domestic service.\textsuperscript{41} While the majority of African American women were already employed in this manner, conditions worsened and they could no longer count on domestic work for some semblance of economic security. Domestic work became highly competitive as more women attempted to find work within the field. African American women not only faced competition from women of their own race, but white women who were in many cases preferred by employers. The oversaturation of the market worsened working conditions, as wages decreased and workloads increased. The Industrial Department of the Negro Welfare League found that domestic service was one of the fields where "maintaining a fair standard of wage" was the most difficult.\textsuperscript{42} Wages for domestic workers dropped to just a few dollars a week and because of the cheapness of labor, more employers wanted live-in help over day work. Despite it being the only employment largely available to African American women, they were loath to accept it, refusing to be exploited or give up their independence. In expressing

\textsuperscript{40} Hazel M. Barnett, interview by Marjorie Witt-Johnson, 11 January 1987, transcript, St. James Oral History Project, MSS 4536, Container 1, Folder 2, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, 4.
\textsuperscript{41} According to statistics, ninety-three percent of African Americans were employed in unskilled work regardless of their skills or education. See Christopher G. Wye, "The New Deal and the Negro Community: Toward a Broader Conceptualization," \textit{Journal of American History} 59.3 (1972): 635.
employment preferences, black women requested day work, nights off, and Sundays off. As a result, the Negro Welfare League reported that it was having a difficult time making placements because African American women were largely disinterested in being live-in help. According to the organization's executive secretary, "Such jobs are difficult to fill because applicants are usually young women who want their evenings off for recreation or self-improvement or women with families who cannot afford to be away from their families at night." Moreover, live-in work often meant uniforms. As a study of consumption during the Depression revealed, the sale of maid's uniforms increased. The study traced the rise in sales to the fact that more women were able to hire help because the reduction in wages for domestic workers had made help more affordable. As previously discussed, African American women found this prospect unattractive as wearing their own clothes was seen as an important aspect of maintaining an identity separate from their labor.

Despite the lack and undesirability of job opportunities, African American women expressed a willingness to work. They went to the Negro Welfare Association and other employment agencies in search of employment. Some African American women registered with the Friendly Service Bureau, an

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employment agency that had been established in 1930 by the YWCA “to care for the needs of girls and women who were unemployed or underemployed.” The agency promised to give help to “any girl or woman except delinquents or those who are unemployable because of physical or mental unfitness or the infirmities of age.” In addition to employment assistance, the agency also provided clothing, including new shoes and stockings to applicants in order for them to look presentable. As previously noted, appearance was seen an important aspect of employability and the agents who filled out the applications sometimes took note of such in determining a women’s suitability for employment.

Other women took matters in their own hands advertising in the help wanted sections of newspapers. One woman’s financial struggles were in such dire straits that she was willing to accept other forms of wages. The woman, describing herself as “needy,” advertised for several weeks in the newspaper for work as a laundress or domestic, offering to “work in exchange for clothes for herself and four children.” Some women participated in what has been described as “survivalist entrepreneurship,” in which they countered economic insecurity during the Depression by choosing to become self-employed, operating small scale businesses out of their homes. These businesses included dressmaking establishments and stores in which women sold clothing items and accessories. Described as a “widow and mother of 10 children,

46 “Statement by Mrs. Winifred Gaehr, Director, Friendly Service,” Jan-Feb. 1932, U.S. Women’s Bureau, Box No. 252, Bulletin 139, National Archives, Bethesda, MD.
47 “Classified Advertising Department,” Gazette, 14 March 1931.
Gertrude Gorman sold undergarments and hosiery out of her “little shop” located in her East 85th Street home.\footnote{Majorie Drexelle, “Fuzz and Fizz,” \textit{Pittsburgh Courier}, 11 April 1936.}

The “devastating effects” of the Depression were evident in the fact that a disproportionate number of African Americans were on relief, depending on it to satisfy basic necessities such as food, shelter, and clothing. While African Americans comprised only seven percent of Cleveland’s population, they accounted for thirty percent of the city’s relief clients.\footnote{“Unemployment Figures,” \textit{Call & Post}, 11 May 1935.} In the Central Avenue Area, Cleveland’s black belt, “[n]early eighty percent of that population was on either direct or indirect relief.”\footnote{Phillips, \textit{Alabama North}, 197.} Relief underscored the high unemployment situation facing the African American community during the Depression not only because of its high incidence, but because, as a national study found that a higher percentage of blacks on relief had been previously employed, more so than their white counterparts.\footnote{“Down the Big Road W.O.W.,” \textit{Call & Post}, 6 April 1935.} African American women previously employed as domestic workers comprised a high percentage of those on relief lists. For some, the decision to receive government assistance was not just a matter of dwindling opportunities in the field, but reflective of the fact that wages were so low, it was sometimes more economically lucrative to go on relief than remain employed. However, those on relief had to be careful as the appearance of non-essential consumer spending could cause them to lose their relief benefits. Because relief often still meant unemployment, it was not considered a suitable solution to the
economic problems African Americans were facing. Dependency on the government threatened to undermine the self-sufficiency that was integral to racial advancement. It was perceived by some as a "tragedy" because "people [were] learning not to work." Social commentators feared that this "idleness could ultimately prove destructive to the black community causing it to descend further into vice and crime. Unemployment also posed a huge threat to black professionals who because of segregation were largely restricted to a clientele no longer able to afford their services. However, some college educated African Americans found employment through the Cuyahoga County Relief Administration (CCRA) as social workers handling relief cases.

Relief was often inadequate especially in terms of providing clothing. In 1937, after finding that relief clients were improperly clothed, two councilmen attempted to get the city council to pass an emergency resolution that would provide funding for clothing, contending that it was, "a matter of public decency and health." The situation was considered urgent because schools were not permitting "ill-clad students" to attend. The headline of the newspaper proclaimed, "City Probes Cost of Clothing for Relief Clients." According to the story, "Councilman William O. Walker (R) of Ward 17" accused the administration

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53 "Is the New Deal Giving a Negro a Square Deal in Relief?," *Call & Post*, 26 May 1934. This article was taken from an address that William Conners, Director of the Negro Welfare Association, gave at the St. James Literary Forum.

54 Relief also limited African American's consumer choice. Initially, direct relief was not given to African Americans because it was believed that they were "unable to properly manage their affairs." Instead they were forced to have their orders filled at certain stores. See "Liberalized Relief," *Call & Post*, 20 April 1935.

55 "Seeks $100,000 to Aid Kiddies," *Call & Post*, 7 October 1937.
of charging "exorbitant prices for clothing." According to Walker, relief clients were being asked to pay prices for clothing items far exceeded their worth. His solution was to either offer clothing of better quality or reduce prices.56

Not everyone in need could count on relief to mitigate the effects of the Depression. This was especially true for new migrants to the city. To receive relief, one had to satisfy residency requirements, which usually entailed a person living in Cleveland for at least two years. Those who were ineligible or unable to prove residency could face deportation, meaning that they were provided fare for transportation back to their previous place of residency. There was, however, some racial disparity when it came to who was singled out for deportation. According to an observer, "Deportation cases seldom used in the white wards of the city. These cases come about wholly in the case of Negro Clients."57 Perhaps this was because deportation was considered a viable solution to the overcrowded conditions of the Central Area, where "on the eve of the Depression, at least 90 percent of the city's blacks were concentrated in a ghetto bounded by Euclid and Woodland avenues and East 14th and East 105th streets."58 The Depression and the associated New Deal housing projects further entrenched residential segregation and overcrowding in the area, as African

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56 "City Probes Cost of Clothing for Relief Clients," Call & Post, 7 May 1940.
57 "Clevelanders Rally to Aid Mother and Daughters Facing 'Dixie Deportation,'" Call & Post, 11 April 1940.
Americans accessed opportunities for newer and better housing in the form of project living.\textsuperscript{59}

The economic situation was so bleak in the eyes of the Negro Welfare Association that it considered publicizing that migrants should not consider Cleveland a viable destination.\textsuperscript{60} Even without such publicity, African American migration decreased during the Depression. Those who migrated found employment very difficult to obtain and were unable to access relief as they did not have at least two years residency in the city. Despite hardships, those who migrated found Cleveland preferable to the places from which they had fled. Lydia Birks who had migrated and later sent for her two daughters, preferred urban life in Cleveland to her rural existence in Mississippi. Facing deportation she declared, "We'll never go back to Mississippi, even if we starve."\textsuperscript{61} Joe Lockett, a former sharecropper also from Mississippi, who found himself unemployed and living in a crowded attic apartment with his wife and five children stated, "I'm thankful I'm in Cleveland starving rather than in Knoxville County, Miss., still a slave of Mister Charlie Fields who owns the plantation where I was born."\textsuperscript{62} Upon being made aware of these families' struggles, the community mobilized in spite of their own difficulties and came to their aid. The migrants were given donations not only food, but clothes and money. According

\textsuperscript{59} Wye, "New Deal and the Negro Community," 625.
\textsuperscript{61} "Get 'Back to Mississippi' Ultimatum," \textit{Call & Post}, 4 April 1940. Despite having lived in Cleveland for six years at the time of her deportation, Birks was threatened with deportation because she had accepted relief prior to meeting residency requirements.
\textsuperscript{62} "Sharecroppers Share Northern Hunger," \textit{Call & Post}, 23 November 1939.
to one report, “one of the most interesting things about the gifts was the donors [were] by no means wealthy people” which was indicated by the fact that “the clothing [was] by no means new, but...clean and where a hole was, the place had been mended.”

Various charitable organizations tried to answer the clothing needs of the impoverished. According to Jane E. Hunter, “the depression is driving us to recognize each other.” In 1934, the Call & Post announced, “Hundreds of churches, clubs, organizations, welfare agencies and political organizations are rushing to completion of their plans distributing Christmas cheer next week.” These plans included the Woodland Center’s disseminating of “garments and other necessities... to the adults.” In 1939, the Church of God in Christ responded by forming the Helping Hand Club which donated various clothing items to help the needy. Although responding towards the end of Depression, the newly formed club was able to donate “400 pieces of clothing.” Sewing circles also responded to the clothing needs of the community by mending old articles of clothing and making new ones. In another instance, seven fatherless children were given an opportunity to attend camp for two-weeks, but one girl’s mother told a woman she did not have the money to purchase “camp clothes” for her daughter. The woman was able to collect the necessary items by contacting

63 “There’s a Hole in the Wall, but to the Locketts their New Home is ‘Blue Heaven,’” Call & Post, 7 December 1939. See also “Generous Cleveland,” Call & Post, 7 December 1939 and “Sharecroppers in Our Midst,” Call & Post, 30 November 1939.
64 Jane E. Hunter, Letter to Robert L. Vann, 12 August 1932, Jane Edna Hunter Papers, 1930-1969, MSS 3544, Box 1 Folder 1, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH.
66 “Helping Hand Club of the Church of God,” Call & Post, 18 June 1940.
various individuals in the community and as a result, “made it possible for a little eight year old girl to enjoy this very healthy vacation.”

These efforts on behalf of the less fortunate indicated a developing sense of community, crucial to community mobilization efforts to improve the quality of life for African Americans in the midst of the Depression. As Rev. David Hill of the Second Mt. Sinai Baptist Church had surmised, “Before the Negro can begin to feel some what [sic] economically secure in our American commonwealth, he must first seek racial solidarity.”

The unemployment situation was somewhat “alleviated” by federal government intervention in the form of programs like the Workers Progress Administration (WPA), established by the Emergency Relief Act of 1935, which were designed to counter the effects of high employment through job creation. As a result, the federal government became one of the largest employers of both middle-class and working-class African Americans in Cleveland, as local work relief projects had done little to alter the unemployment situation of African Americans. Local agencies preferred to give African Americans direct relief, which was criticized not only for being less remunerative than work relief, but as injurious to African Americans’ self-respect.

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67 16th Ward News,” Call & Post, 6 July 1939.
69 Wye, “New Deal and the Negro Community,” 634. The New Deal represented a new philosophy holding that the government had a responsibility to ensure the welfare of its citizens.
70 Scott, “The Negro’s Rightful Share in American Democracy.”
However, federal programs were somewhat of a mixed blessing. While they were an important source of employment, wages were low in order to discourage long term employment on projects. However, many African Americans did not have an option because private industry was largely closed to them. Moreover, African Americans suffered from the fact that these programs discriminated, often employing them well below their skill levels which equated to lower wages.\textsuperscript{71}

WPA employment was based on a sexual division of labor, so most of the women were employed in government sewing projects. WPA sewing projects were important to both the local and national economy. Locally the program provided employment opportunities and clothing to relief clients, which were important to bringing the nation back from economic disaster. A sewing project housed in the Public Auditorium which manufactured garments for those on relief boasted a workforce of 900 women, half of which were African American.\textsuperscript{72} In 1937, it was reported that the sewing project located at the Woodland Center, employed eighty African American women and the Payne Avenue Sewing Center's workforce was eighty-three percent African American.\textsuperscript{73} In 1940, Cleveland WPA projects participated in a national open house entitled, “This Work Pays Your Community Week.” At one of the headquarters, the open house

\textsuperscript{72} “Race Women Work on WPA Sewing Project,” \textit{Call & Post}, 26 May 1938.
approximated a fashion show, as some of the garments were being modeled by project workers and there was also musical entertainment.\textsuperscript{74}

Despite being illegal, racial discrimination was quite prevalent in federal work relief programs—so bad in fact that it was declared, “The New Deal has lamentably failed to advance the cause of progress for Negro Citizens of America.”\textsuperscript{75} African Americans were often paid less than white workers for the same jobs. African Americans found it difficult to secure white collar and skilled employment within the WPA, even when they had the appropriate qualifications and had been classified by the WPA as such. When two African American women received notice to report to work on a WPA project, they were “humiliated” by the supervisor who rejected them and wrote on their paperwork, “The project cannot use colored typists or clerks.”\textsuperscript{76} The women were eventually permitted to work on the project after a WPA Director became involved. Other African Americans who received skilled classifications and were assigned to projects in these capacities, were often re-immediately reassigned to another project “[a]nd in the shuffle...invariably reduced to the status of laborer.”\textsuperscript{77}

Virginia Boyd who had a clerical position remarked, “The chances for a colored girl to get any place on WPA are very slow.” Boyd’s remarks were made in response to the fact that when the project for which she worked in a clerical

\textsuperscript{74} “WPA Workers Demonstrate During the Week of May 2-25, Projects Hold Open House,” \textit{Call & Post}, 16 May 1940.


\textsuperscript{76} “This is a Glimpse of ‘Americanism’ in Action on Cuyahoga County WPA Project,” \textit{Call & Post}, 1 February 1940.

\textsuperscript{77} “An Unsatisfactory Explanation,” \textit{Call & Post}, 7 July 1938.
position closed, despite having a “satisfactory” employment record, she was not given a similar position. Instead, Boyd “was reclassified as a laborer, and assigned to the notorious 21st and Superior ‘sweat shop’ sewing project.” When Boyd inquired into the matter, she was told that the reclassification was because there were no clerical jobs available, but she observed that several white women had obtained clerical positions. When Boyd sought redress from WPA officials she was given a form letter informing her that she should go about the almost impossible task for black workers of finding such employment in the private sector.

It was not unusual for workers who protested or complained of working conditions to be threatened with dismissal and demotion. In another instance, seasoned dressmaker Alice Felder complained to her supervisor that she was being used below her skill level as a bundler while white women with no experience were given more skilled jobs. Thereafter, she was labeled as a “trouble maker and reprimanded for not having the appropriate servile demeanor. According to the report, “Miss Felder was told that she would have to change her manner of walking, and given a veiled hint of possible discharge!” A description of her deportment claimed that she “strutted around the project as though she

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78 The project was labeled as such because of the poor working conditions in which workers were punished for supposedly unfair accusations of “inefficiency” with loss of pay and long hours. Reportedly, the project was so concerned with production that the bathrooms did not have mirrors so as to prevent employees from spending time attending to their appearances.

79 “Seek Work Elsewhere Hints WPA Form Letters to Negro Workers Asking Decent Jobs,” Call & Post, 15 September 1938.
thought she was somebody important." As far as her supervisor was concerned, Felder did not know her proper place in the racial hierarchy. As Felder’s experience illustrates, “[l]ack of deference was seen as aggressiveness or gratuitous assertion of rights...Generally whites were offended whenever African Americans showed dissatisfaction with the color line.” The lessons of the Jim Crow South also applied to the north, as Richard Wright observed, “When you are working for white folks...you got to ‘stay in you place’ if you want to keep working.” Part of the reason that African Americans found higher classifications difficult to obtain was that “the powers that be” did not want to upset white workers on the projects who resented blacks with higher classifications. In nearby Akron, when an African American was placed in a “sub-supervisor” position on a sewing project, the white women went on strike and only returned to work after the woman was placed on another project where all those working under her shared her same race. As the above incidents indicate, officials were more accommodative of white workers’ demands than they were of black workers’ demands.

In addition to having limited types of WPA employment open to them, African Americans found it difficult to maintain employment. They were disproportionately represented in WPA layoffs. When five women were laid off a

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80 “Supervisors, Foremen Using Layoff ‘Authority’ to Prune WPA Rolls of Negro Workers,” Call & Post, 27 April 1939.
83 “Akron Whites on WPA Strike When Negro Gets Post,” Call & Post, 1 September 1938.
sewing project, four of them were African American.\textsuperscript{84} In 1939, a new policy referred to as the “18 month rule,” also led to the loss of employment for African Americans. According to the rule, a person could only be continuously employed by the WPA for 18 months before a mandatory thirty day lay-off, after which they were eligible for rehire. However, African Americans were often not given a second chance and when they were, they were reclassified at a lower position and therefore less money. According to an article that appeared in the \textit{Call & Post}, “The 18-month rule has served to eliminate many of the most militant Negro workers, and prejudiced supervisors and foreman are attempting to limit as far as possible the number of skilled Negroes to be hired.”\textsuperscript{85} It was not unusual for investigations to be made into the discriminatory practices of the WPA. In instances where investigations resulted in changes, they were often only temporary because once investigators left, the discriminatory practices often returned. The problem of discrimination was viewed as stemming from the fact that there were no African Americans employed in the personnel department.\textsuperscript{86}

Despite rampant discrimination, some African-American women were able to secure white-collar employment through the WPA as instructors for sewing classes and dressmaking. In cooperation with the WPA Adult Education Schools, the Negro Welfare Association employed women to teach classes in sewing and

\textsuperscript{84} "Supervisors, Foremen Using Layoff 'Authority' to Prune WPA Rolls of Negro Workers."
\textsuperscript{86} "Three Supervisors, White Collar Jobs, New Programs Planned," \textit{Call & Post}, 2 June 1938.
handicraft at schools, churches, and community centers. Through the WPA, Mrs. Ella Hawkins taught "dressmaking, handicraft and pattern making." Schools were established throughout the city with the aim of teaching housewives and young women how to sew, allowing women the opportunity to participate in productive leisure. Students were not only taught to make new garments, but repair and make over older garments. The items produced in these classes were often put on display in home economic demonstrations and exhibitions, featured in fashion shows, and in plays as costumes. For instance, the WPA adult education classes hosted an exhibit at the May Company which included dressmaking.

These classes emphasized the importance of maintaining personal appearances despite economic insecurity. The Depression had helped to revive home sewing, reinforcing female domesticity at a time when traditional gender roles were being threatened by women's increasing entrance into the workforce. The focus on domesticity was made clear by the fact that the classes were not to prepare women for the industrial workforce, but to fulfill their roles as homemakers. For instance, these classes usually did not offer women the opportunity to learn how to operate the heavy equipment that was standard use

88 Ibid.
89 Social clubs also promoted the importance of sewing during the Depression. Recognizing the importance of such skill, at one of their club meetings, the Sophisticated Seven "presented each member with a sewing kit." See "Sophisticated Seven," Call & Post, 27 October 1938.
90 "WPA Teachers Stage Excellent Exhibit at May Co.,” Call & Post, 9 March 1939. In addition to dressmaking exhibits on salesmanship and advertising were presented.
in the mass production of clothing. Sewing, because it was perceived as economical, was essential to proper household management and helped families "reduce their dependence on the cash economy while maintaining some semblance of respectability."91 According to Gordon, "Sewing was once again valuable as a set of skills that may not have generated income, but were central to preserving it."92 It is important to note, however, that the popularity of home sewing during the Depression was not only owed to economic reasons. It also reflected people's growing pessimism towards industrialization, which was exemplified in the mass-produced clothing of the ready-to-wear industry.

Even though discrimination was cause for the removal of government funding, some of the classes were racially segregated. For instance, attempts were made to exclude a young African American woman, Laconia Purefoy, from a sewing class located at the Bee Hive School. When Purefoy attempted to enter the class, the instructor took her aside and inquired into her racial background. Upon confirming the instructor's suspicions, Purefoy was told that her presence in the class was not appreciated by the white students and that she would be better off in a class comprised of those who shared her same race. Purefoy did not accept the instructor's recommendation and she approached a precinct committee woman from her ward for advice. The matter was brought to the attention of a WPA official who initiated an investigation. Ultimately, Purefoy was

allowed to remain in the class and was told to report any further incidents. To ensure that the instructor complied, the committee woman to whom Purefoy had first reported the incident decided to join the class because she believed, “The only way to beat these things...is to stick together.” In another instance, the housing project, Cedar-Central Apartments, held classes on separate days for whites and blacks. When the white instructor refused to allow segregation, she was dismissed. The class was subsequently cancelled and some of the students, both black and white, followed the instructor to a class at a different location. However, after threat of withdrawal the class was eventually reopened, and forced to integrate under a new instructor.

Shopping During the Depression

Despite worsening social and economic conditions, appearances continued to matter. African Americans continued to wield considerable purchasing power. During the Depression, national estimates placed African American spending at more than two billion dollars annually. If “underconsumption” was in fact to blame for the Depression, African Americans showed that despite deprivations, they were doing their best to stimulate the economy and bring the country back from economic disaster. Gossip columns

93 “Committeewoman Squelches Jim Crow in WPA Class,” Call & Post, 22 February 1940.
94 “Drop Jim Crow Policy in Project Sewing Classes,” Call & Post, 28 March 1940.
96 For more on underconsumption as cause of the Depression, see Lawrence B. Glickman, “The Strike in the Temple of Consumption: Consumer Activism and Twentieth-Century,” Journal of
in the *Call & Post* took note of these type of economic recovery efforts and
sometimes devoted considerable space to reporting on shopping activities,
especially as they related to dress, including specific details about who was
shopping, where they were shopping, and for what they were shopping. "Skippy",
a gossip column noted that even in the midst of the Depression, "Most of the
folks that go downtown supposedly to window-shop usually return home only
after purchasing something." ⁹⁷

The hardships African Americans experienced during the Depression were
not even enough to bring an end to the consumption associated with weddings.
While the during the Depression marriage rates dropped, newspapers are filled
with reports of weddings and their associated expenditures, including detailed
descriptions of the fashions. Some of these nuptials were extravagant affairs
attended by hundreds of guests. The Paris-Myers June wedding at St. John’s
AME Church was referred to as the "most outstanding social event." The
wedding reportedly had approximately 2500 people in attendance (fig. 14). ⁹⁸

Veryle Paris, the groom, was a postal worker. The extravagance of the wedding
was indicative of the "social status" of postal workers which had been elevated by

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⁹⁷ "Skippy: The Snoopin' Reporter Sees All-Knows All Tells All," *Call & Post*, 27 February 1936.
⁹⁸ "Paris-Myers Nuptials Attract Large Gathering," *Call & Post*, 11 June 1936 and "June Weddings
Figure 14. “Paris-Myers Bridal Party,” Call & Post, 18 June 1936.
the Depression.\textsuperscript{99} In addition to illustrating the potential of social mobility despite the economic crises, reports of lavish weddings also showcased the importance of spending to the health of the national economy. These weddings also suggested that despite the Depression's undermining of "consumption, gender, norms, and family stability," these were still values worthy of adherence.\textsuperscript{100}

This seemed to be in keeping with larger consumption trends. As such, the fashion industry was considered by many to be "impervious to economic downturns."\textsuperscript{101} One study claimed that "the forces of fashion are apparently superior to the forces of the Depression," finding that the consumption of clothing while altered had not decreased.\textsuperscript{102} Women had simply modified their consumption habits buying less expensive garments and were seemingly more concerned with quantity over quality. According to the study, "instead of having one very good dress suitable for all occasions, women now have several less expensive dresses."\textsuperscript{103} The sales of separates, like blouses and skirts also increased. As discussed earlier, this gave women more variety and versatility when it came to their wardrobes, allowing women to create different outfits depending on the combination of pieces. Sportswear, which referred to a type of

\textsuperscript{102} Tebbutt, \textit{The Behavior of Consumption}, 16.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 16.
wearing apparel that the modern woman use[d] for practically every daytime occasion," had also become popular.\textsuperscript{104} This was owed to the fact that like other Depression-era fashions, sportswear "was about practicality and comfort; mass-manufacture and mix-and-match."\textsuperscript{105} The decreasing emphasis on the quality of apparel may not simply be attributed to the effects of the Depression, but to ever changing styles and women's desire to keep pace with them. In \textit{Selling Mrs. Consumer}, Frederick argued that durability was no longer a major concern when it came to women's clothing purchases. She wrote, "The fact is that the modern woman has an entirely new psychology toward her clothes buying. She does not want her clothes to last. She would rather they did not. If a dress or a coat gives one season's wear, that is all she expects of it."\textsuperscript{106} An advertisement for a May Company clearance sale echoed Frederick's observations, proclaiming that garments available for purchase were "Costumes you could wear proudly for months!"\textsuperscript{107}

Much of the shopping reported in these gossip columns was being done by female black professionals and white collar workers, and the wives of those from the same classes of workers. These women included social workers, beauty shop owners, elevator operators, and the wives of physicians; but if these reports are any indication, teachers were responsible for the bulk of shopping activities.

\textsuperscript{106} Frederick, \textit{Selling Mrs. Consumer}, 201.
\textsuperscript{107} Advertisement, \textit{Call & Post}, 31 December 1936.
Observing this, "Skippy" could not help but exclaim, "My, how teachers spend money on clothes!" Dress was important for teachers, as they were expected to dress in a respectable manner in order to set an example for their students. Teachers' ability to consume was a function of their relative economic stability. Unlike many other black professionals, teachers could count on a fixed salary which meant that their standard of living was not as affected by the economic crises. Moreover, their relative financial security meant that they could also qualify for store credit, as it was observed an unnamed young female college teacher and her friend "charg[ed] some sport dresses." As Susan Porter Benson observed, because they were "steady and relatively well-paid jobs", those employed "could engage in long term planning more confidently than most."

African Americans took advantage of installment buying and credit, where they could, to purchase everyday clothing and clothing for special occasions—especially holidays. However, these special occasion purchases sometimes met with criticism as the expenditures were considered for just one day and did not

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108 "Skippy: The Snoopin' Reporter Sees All-Knows All Tells All," Call & Post, 27 February 1936. It is difficult to ascertain whether the focus on the shopping activities of these classes of workers was a function of the fact that they had the necessary expendable income or the bias of the reporter.

109 Despite their relative economic security, teachers were not completely immune to the crises. Early on during the Depression, teachers' salaries were reduced. See Regennia N. Williams, "Reading, Writing, and Racial Uplift: Education and Reform in Cleveland, Ohio," in Education & The Great Depression: Lessons from a Global History, ed. Thomas Ewing & David Hicks (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2006), 115.

110 "Skippy Observes the Shoppers," Call & Post, 17 September 1936.

111 Benson, Household Accounts, 165.
benefit black merchants who for the most part were not able to offer credit to their customers.  

The Depression helped to expand consumer credit even though buying on credit was argued to be one of the causes of the economic crises. Consumer spending was seen so essential to the recovery of the national economy that the Depression helped to remove the stigma associated with buying on credit. This was a departure from earlier attitudes toward credit, which discouraged the use of credit. Credit contradicted older notions of thrift by encouraging people to spend beyond their means and incur debt. In 1900, the Gazette published the following from the Atchison Globe, "There is only one excuse for buying on credit; the hope that the merchant will forget to charge your purchase." Advertisements for retailers that appeared in Cleveland’s black press during this time encouraged consumers to take advantage of credit. Recognizing that more people were making credit purchases, May Company advertisements often indicated when customers would be billed for credit purchases. Credit meant that customers were not as limited by their discretionary incomes, which allowed customers to maintain or increase their standard of living.

In assessing an individual’s credit worthiness, letters of reference were required. Jane Edna Hunter received inquiries from Halle Brothers and May Co. requesting her to serve as a reference for women who were in residence or in the

112 "Mose of the Roaring Third," Call & Post, 16 April 1936.
114 Gazette, 18 August 1900.
employ at Phillis Wheatley. These letters requested that she supply information regarding the women's credit worthiness. In the letters that survive, Hunter gave positive recommendations, attesting to the women's financial stability and their character. In attesting to their deservedness, Hunter used words like "reliable," "responsible," and "dependable." In one case she even discussed how the young woman was from "an excellent family."  

Smaller stores also provided credit options for their customers. Fanny Lessem Dress Shop located in the Arcade advertised that it offered "liberal credit" with no "red tape." The shop offered budget plans to suit the particular needs of the individual. Women could "be well dressed at all times for as low as $1.00 a week." Advertisements ensured that customers did not have to sacrifice style for affordability, because the store offered the "newest and snappiest styles." By offering credit, retailers encouraged customer loyalty. However, purchasing on credit could mean that consumers could still be paying for clothes that had become unwearable. For consumers who did not need immediate gratification—will-call and layaway were attractive options. They enabled customers to put down a deposit on merchandise which the store would reserve until the item(s) were fully paid.

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115 Secretary to Miss Hunter, Letter to Mr. S. Gross, The Halle Bros, Co., 8 November 1932, Phillis Wheatley Association Records, 1914-1960, MSS 3527, Container 9, Folder 12, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH and Secretary to Miss Hunter, Letter to Mr. D. Jordan, Credit Department, May Co., 16 May 1934, Phillis Wheatley Association Records, 1914-1960, MSS 3527, Container 9, Folder 12, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH.

116 Advertisement, Call & Post, 10 September 1936 and Advertisement, Call & Post, 20 August 1936.

117 Advertisement, Call & Post, 20 August 1936.

118 Benson, Household Accounts, 164.
Stores offered all sorts of promotions to attract customers, make items more affordable, and guard against declining sales. However, when stores did this, they sometimes cut back on the services they provided to make purchases more affordable.\textsuperscript{119} For example, during the May Day Sale, the May Co did not allow customers "mail or phone orders, neither were they allowed "c.o.d.'s or will call."\textsuperscript{120}

Consumers could make their purchases work for them by patronizing stores that offered customer rewards programs. The Depression helped to revive trading stamp programs. As discussed in an earlier chapter, these stamps were given away with purchases and could be collected and later be redeemed for merchandise or to receive discounts on purchases. There were even some cross store promotions. For instance, some stores participated in the Eagle Stamp program, which customers could redeem at any participating store. Coupons also offered savings. The Woodland Department Store, located in the Central Avenue area featured coupons for specific advertised items. One advertised coupon entitled customers to receive fifty cents off ladies' silk dresses.\textsuperscript{121} The store also tried to make it easier for customers to purchase winter coats by offering a promotion in which an "old jacket regardless of condition" could be traded in for two dollars off any new coat in stock. By shopping on certain days of the week,

\textsuperscript{120} Advertisement, \textit{Call & Post}, 7 April 1934.
\textsuperscript{121} Advertisement, \textit{Call & Post}, 28 November 1935.
women could also take advantage of bargains. On Fridays, for instance, the Bailey Company offered special savings for "larger women."  

As could be expected, the sale of luxury items, such as fur coats, declined during the Depression. Few could afford to make such purchases during this period of economic crises. However, "Skippy" did observe the wife of a postal worker shopping for a new fur coat. Her desire for a fur coat was probably to mark her new class position as part of the black professional class. Unlike many others of the black professional class during the Depression, postal workers were financially stable and could therefore access important lines of credit. To increase sales, fur coat retailers increased promotions, not waiting until the off-season to drastically cut prices. The L.H. Glanz Fur Store located on Euclid Avenue held what it considered "the most unusual sale in its 30 years of business." The sale featured showroom models that ranged from $28 to $59. For those who could not afford to buy a coat outright, the store offered installment plans. However, installment plans were not for everybody. A woman had her $100 fur coat repossessed when she failed to make subsequent payments after having made the $10 initial down payment. According to the report, "the owner sent out two men to get the fur coat, so when she was strutting

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122 Advertisement, Gazette, 4 April 1931.
124 "Skippy Observes the Shoppers," Call & Post, 17 September 1936.
125 For more on purchasing clothing on credit during the Depression, see Benson, Household Accounts, 163-165.
126 "Glanz Fur Store to Stage Biggest Sale," Call & Post, 2 February 1939 and Advertisement, Call & Post, 2 February 1939.
two men jumped out of a car and down Cedar avenue one afternoon, took the coat away from her now she is telling everybody that she was robbed."127 Those who did not want to risk repossession could purchase a fur coat secondhand. At the same sale, the Glanz Fur Store offered for sale trade-in coats and repaired coats for as little as $11. It seems the store was hoping to "sell-out" coats that had not been sold in a previous sale. A few weeks earlier the store advertised a sale in which "unclaimed fur coats" could be purchased at their "repair costs." According to the advertisement, "slightly used" coats that had cost hundreds of dollars had been "repaired like new" that had originally cost hundreds of dollars and could be purchased for $29 and under.128

Fur coats were not the only clothing items that could be purchased not entirely "new." Dress shops offered stock worn merchandise at low prices.129 In the Call & Post classifieds, a New York mail order company advertised "used dresses." Those that took advantage of the offer could obtain ten dresses in a variety of fabrics, styles, and colors by sending a money order for $1. The company guaranteed customer satisfaction by allowing dresses to be returned prepaid.130 Les Petite Bargain Center, mentioned in the previous chapter, sold both new and used clothing. While choosing to purchase another person’s discarded garments did not prevent someone from appearing well-dressed, doing so, often involved some work and skill. Second-hand clothing "was rarely usable

127 Dr. J.R. Nickens, "Items on the Wing." Gazette, 24 February 1934.
128 Advertisement, Call & Post, 19 January 1939.
129 "Fay Lee Dress Shop," Call & Post, 13 April 1935.
130 "Dresses," Call & Post, 2 November 1940.

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as it came to the recipient," so it often needed altering for fit and style, and repair.Those whose finances did not allow them to shop at retail stores for either ready-to-wear clothing or fabrics could still shop by patronizing the various sales that occurred at community centers, churches, social clubs and settlement houses. Rummage sales often had for sale both new and used items. The Phillis Wheatley Association held clothing and notions sales, some of which had been produced through its Unemployed Sewing Circle.

Some woman chose not to refashion existing garments, but sew new ones. In the gossip column, an unnamed waitress was observed shopping for gown patterns. Emphasizing the struggles African Americans were facing the Call & Post reported, "Most of the spending is confined to the cloth counter at the department stores from which the patterns are also secured and then at home they drag out the old sewing machine." Recognizing the resurgence of home sewing, an advertisement for fabrics sold in May Company's Basement Department read, "Sew your own summer garments...and pocket the difference." Women could also cut costs by purchasing fabric "remnants" or "odd lots."

African Americans' ability to consume despite economic insecurity reflected the strength of African American purchasing power and was thus seen as a powerful weapon in African Americans' quest to empower themselves as

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133 Call & Post, 18 May 1939.
consumers and improve their communities. While earlier reform efforts had “generally focused on behavior modification or self-help”, during the Great Depression efforts entailed “demands for structural changes in American laws and institutions.”

If African Americans wished for change, they would have to be their own agents for change. African Americans were increasingly encouraged to protest discriminatory treatment. The following quote by Ella Wheeler Wilcox appeared on many occasions in the Gazette under the heading “Protest! Protest!”: “To submit in silence when we should protest makes cowards out of men. The human race has climbed on protest. Had no voice been raised against injustice, ignorance and lust, the inquisition yet would serve the law, and guillotines decide our latest disputes. The few who dare, must speak and speak again to right the wrongs of many.”

Race and relations of power continued to play out in consumer space. Retail outlets became contested spaces as African Americans used the legal system and boycotts to contest the racial discrimination they experienced in the marketplace.

Shopping for Justice

The economic crises highlighted the unfulfilled promises of northern migration. As illustrated by labor market discrimination, the Great Depression intensified “[s]egregation, jim-cowing, and prejudice.” African Americans in

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Cleveland and elsewhere were not content to resign themselves to second class citizenship and became more aggressive in their protests against discriminatory treatment. They used the legal system to demand their rights as consumers and address instances of racial discrimination related to their shopping activities. According to Ohio Civil Rights Law and the Municipal Code of Cleveland, establishments that discriminated on the basis of a race could be subject to a fine and revocation of their business license. However, laws were only as effective as the courts were in enforcing them and the high incidence of businesses willfully violating the code is indicative of the fact that the law was not consistently enforced. Moreover, legal decisions were only effective where they had the support of public opinion. As Charles Chesnutt argued, “Courts and Congress merely follow public opinion, seldom lead it.”

In January 1935, Ellen Sissle was refused service when she entered the Women’s Apparel Shop (also referred to as the Harvey’s Ladies Apparel Shop) hoping to take advantage of a sale that she had seen advertised in the Shopping News. According to Sissle’s testimony, after selecting several pieces of silk underwear for purchase, she attempted to get one of the clerks to wait on her, but was unsuccessful. Sissle testified that the clerk ignored her, except to give

her "a dirty look." Dissatisfied with the discourteous treatment, Sissle "walked out of the store" without making a purchase.139

The shop was located in the Terminal Tower Building, which opened in 1930, at a reported cost of $150 million dollars. The Terminal Tower was part of the Union Terminal complex, a modern showcase, and occupied thirty-five acres of the city's public square. The project was connected to the revitalization of the public square and the city's hopes of expansion. The complex positioned Cleveland as a modern metropolis and was meant to be a source of civic "pride and a distinctive symbol for the city—a landmark."140 The tower replaced an area "that was regarded as the city's worst disfigurement" giving the area "a new respectability and a new importance."141 The project had been dreamed up by the Van Swerigen brothers to connect the new suburb of Shaker Village to downtown, solidifying the link between mass transportation and consumer culture.142 Terminal Tower embodied the abundance, comfort, and convenience that defined modern consumption. Touted as the largest of its kind, the complex was referred to as a "city within a city", offering "virtually every article and service that the traveling public is likely to need."143 One description noted: "All buildings in the terminal area are inter-connected by underground streets and

140 Miller and Wheeler, Cleveland, 129.
142 The Van Swerigen brothers were proponents of racial segregation. The developers had also been involved instituting legally restricting covenants that prevented blacks from purchasing homes in Shaker Heights. See Russell H. Davis, Black Americans in Cleveland: From George Peake to Carl B. Stokes, 1796-1969 (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1985), 224.
143 Cleveland Union Station, 9-10.
passageways. The traveler arriving in Cleveland at the new station will be able to visit hundreds of stores, shops, and offices without stepping into the outdoors."\textsuperscript{144}

The majority of shops and restaurants were operated by Harvey Inc., which shared management with the Fred Harvey Inc., a company which operated a chain of restaurants and hotels in the west along the Santa Fe Railroad. It was thought that a single management company would reduce inconsistency and duplication in the services provided.\textsuperscript{145}

Sissle decided to sue the shop for violating Ohio's Civil Rights Law and was represented by Chester Gillespie, a lawyer with the NAACP, known as "the fighting lawyer" because of the many civil rights cases he had litigated. The municipal court rendered a verdict in favor of Sissle awarding her $100 in damages, however, the decision was reversed by the appellate court which ruled that stores were not places of public accommodation and therefore had the right to refuse service at their discretion. The court's decision relied mainly on the fact that stores were not specifically named in the law. The local NAACP with support from the national branch decided to refer the case to the Legal Defense Committee and take the case to Ohio's Supreme Court. However, the state's Supreme Court decided not to review the appellate court's decision. The court's refusal was perceived as an "attack" on African American civil rights and was met

\textsuperscript{144} "Cleveland Mirrors Progress in New Rail Project," \textit{Plain Dealer} (Union Terminal Section), 29 June 1930. In addition the complex also housed a hotel and banks. However, hundreds may have been a bit of an exaggeration, because another article appearing in the paper reported that the complex consisted of "more than forty shops, restaurants, stores and specialty businesses." See "Harvey, Inc., to Operate All Shops in New Station," \textit{Plain Dealer} (Union Terminal Section), 29 June 1930.

\textsuperscript{145} "Terminal Shops and Landlords," \textit{Plain Dealer}, 7 April 1929.
with protest. It also countered long held notions that retail spaces were public spaces. The decision of the Ohio Supreme Court prompted political leaders to seek an amendment to Ohio's Civil Rights Law to include retail establishments, which was achieved in 1937. As a result, the law was revised to include "stores, or other places for the sale of merchandise."  

While Sissle was still waiting for her case to be decided in the appellate courts, Mrs. Constance H. Wiggins was awarded a judgment in the amount of $50 for discrimination she had received while attempting to make a purchase from Elizabeth Davis, Inc., a Euclid Avenue dress shop. Wiggins accompanied by a friend had went to the establishment to purchase a dress, but "they were told by a clerk that they didn't have anything that the ladies would want and called the pres. who told the girls that they did not want to sell them to them because they were colored." The decision in her favor was somewhat surprising given the recent and the fact that the case was heard by an all-white jury. However, it seems that having a witness worked in her favor. The Gazette, a longtime advocate of civil rights litigation, had urged "in order to prove such incidences a person needed to have at least one good witness of the refusal."  

Women sued not just for being prohibited to purchase articles of clothing, but for not being able to engage in other aspects of the shopping experience. In 1935, Mrs. Cleota Collins Lacey won a suit against the Wm. Taylor & Co. for

147 "Women Awarded $50.00 for Discrimination," Call & Post, 16 April 1936.
being refused service in its restaurant. Responding to the discrimination, the
Gazette urged its readers not to patronize the store. The newspaper's call for a
boycott got the attention of the department store because the general manager of
the store sent in a letter insisting that it was not a matter of store policy.
According to the letter, "all employees of the store have always had strict orders
to treat ALL of its patrons with courtesy and respect regardless of their race
connection or religious professions." 149

The above incidences of refusal of service seem minor when compared to
one involving Langston Hughes’ mother, Carolyn Clarke. On November 7, 1936,
Clarke went to the Liberty Fur Co. located on Euclid Avenue hoping to cancel a
"will call" transaction for a coat she had made just a few days earlier. The clerk
waiting on her, however, refused to refund her $10 deposit. Clarke asked to
speak to the manager who directed the clerk to comply with her request for a
refund. Unhappy, the clerk retaliated with verbal and physical violence throwing
Clarke out of the store. As a result of the altercation, Clarke who was described
as a “small, frail woman of sixty,” sustained injuries for which she sued the
Liberty Fur Co. in the amount of $5000. 150 The case, however, never went to trial
and was settled out of court for an undisclosed, but purportedly “sizeable

149 "Wins Civil Rights Case," Gazette, 16 March 1935.
150 "Langston Hughes’ Mother Beaten in Store: Sixty Year Old Widow Sues Fur Firm for $5000," Call & Post, 19 November 1936. According to the article, Clarke’s injuries included “a severely bruised, sprained and lacerated right wrist, right arm, and right shoulder.” See also “Langston Hughes’ Mother Is Victim of Attack,” Cleveland Eagle, 20 November 1936, Clippings, Chester K. Gillespie Papers, MS 3671, Scrapbook 5, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH.
sum. But it was not disclosed whether the clerk involved had retained his job or had been fired. For this clerk, it seems the adage "the customer is always right" had racial limits.

Litigation led by the NAACP relied heavily on middle-class respectability in its efforts. The respectability of the litigant demonstrated the progress of the race in spite of oppressive conditions. The suits against retail stores for violating Ohio's Civil Rights Laws were largely made by those belonging to the middle-class who felt that such acts of discrimination were not only an affront to their race, but their class position. The women were the wives, daughters, and mothers of prominent men. When reporting on civil rights cases, newspapers often attested to the respectability of the litigant. Sissle was reportedly a relation to Noble Sissle, a famous Vaudevillian, who just a year earlier had been honored by the city. Like Ellen, Noble had a low tolerance for racial discrimination. Years earlier while a student at Central High School, Noble had refused to submit to prejudice and entered a civil suit against a theater for refusal of admission and was awarded a judgment of $250. Lacey was described as "exceptionally talented vocalist and a very fine woman." Lacey, whose family dated back to the 19th century, was also the daughter of the well-respected Reverend Dr. Ira A. Collins.

151 "Langston Hughes' Mother Settles Out of Court," Call & Post, 17 December 1936.
152 Davis, Black Americans in Cleveland, 153.
154 Reverend Collins had served as pastor of the St. John A.M.E. Church.
Civil rights cases centered on the Euclid Avenue shopping district reflected the integrationist stance of Cleveland's black middle-class. This reflected not only in those individuals who chose litigation but the fact that the NAACP was a middle-class organization. The NAACP of the Depression era was a much different organization from the one that had existed in previous decades. Before the 1930s, despite being the state's most active branch, the organization had been largely unresponsive to legally addressing acts of racial discrimination in retail stores. John P. Green, president of the local NAACP branch during the 1920s, had even refused to sue when he was not permitted to try on a hat at the Wm & Taylor Department Store. In 1924, the NAACP had settled for simple assurances from management when it was brought to their attention that the Higbee Company discriminated against African American women by not allowing them to try on clothing items.\(^{155}\) According to the *Gazette,* "it was rare that suit was brought because of the unwillingness of the victim to undergo some of the unpleasantness attendant upon court trials. This unwillingness has definitely changed since the new spirit of militancy has spread."\(^ {156}\) Thus, the responsiveness to discrimination and the increased use of litigation by the local branch of the NAACP represented a new direction for the organization.

Litigation was not just about improving the quality of service African Americas received. The rise of civil rights cases was also a matter of self-

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155 "Annual Report of the Cleveland Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for the Year Ending December 1\(^{\text{st}}\), 1924," *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Cleveland Branch Records, 1924-1967,* MS 3520, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, 1.

156 "Charges are Made that Halle Bros. Discriminates," *Call & Post*, 10 September 1936.
preservation for African American lawyers, whose livelihood depended on a black clientele. Lawyers, like other black professionals, found the Depression especially difficult because the clientele on which they depended could not afford their services. These cases enabled lawyers to continue practicing and while fighting to improve the quality of life for the race, they were able to improve their own.

One of the hugest supporters of civil rights litigation was Harry C. Smith, editor of the Gazette who as mentioned in an earlier chapter had been instrumental in the passage Ohio's Civil Rights Law. The newspaper advised its readers that the most effective means of fighting discrimination was to use the legal system to redress acts of discriminations. The paper urged its readers to "stop begging for rights and privileges in public institutions we are entitled to as tax payers and citizens." As a reminder, the language of the law often appeared in the newspaper.

The impact of litigation, however, was lessened by the fact that there was not community wide support for the tactic. This was evidenced by the fact that "few in the black community had any deep or active involvement with it." This was because members of the African American community generally were unaware of the existence of laws prohibiting racial discrimination in public accommodations, lacked money to initiate litigation, desired to avoid the notoriety

157 Drake and Cayton, Black Metropolis, 545.
158 "Cleveland Social and Personal," Gazette, 8 June 1929.
of a court case, or wished to avoid the degrading experience of being refused service." Among some in the community there was a distrust of the legal system, which they observed worked more against them than for them. The court's failure to protect the civil rights of African Americans reflected not simply the legal system's indifference, but acceptance of racial discrimination. As a result many believed that the system was not a means to combat, but to reinforce inequalities. An article that appeared in the Call & Post argued, "Our local NAACP is going to make a sad mistake if it imagines that that growing discrimination in stores and restaurants can be fought successfully by lawsuits before prejudiced judges."  

The lack of support for litigation also reflected disillusionment with the "politics of respectability". While law suits depended on the status of the complainants, the fact that the complainants suffering the discrimination were respectable undermined the belief that conformity to middle-class norms was enough to counter racism. Not only did being well-dressed not result in better treatment, it sometimes led to African Americans being unfairly suspected as criminals. For instance, it was reported that a woman, the daughter of a minister, while en route to Cincinnati was arrested at an Indianapolis railroad station on the suspicion that she was a "crook". The arresting cop had made the assumption on the basis that the woman "was dressed so neatly and carried an

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elegant valise." As a result of the arrest, the women spent "several hours" in incarceration.\textsuperscript{162} African Americans, especially those belonging to the working-class, looked for alternative avenues to equality. They believed if they were really to achieve middle-class respectability merely adhering to values would not be sufficient, they would need better employment opportunities that offered the possibility for economic mobility.

\textit{More than the Right to Purchase}

African Americans increasingly sought justice outside of the courtroom, realizing that their consumer power, if harnessed correctly, could serve as the basis for political action. Over the course of the Depression, African American consumerism was increasingly enmeshed in a larger discourse about African American labor. This was part of a larger trend of consumer activism that was on the rise during the Depression.\textsuperscript{163} Like other groups, African Americans organized recognizing the interconnectedness of their roles as consumers and workers, demonstrating their importance to the economy. After all, if African Americans were to fulfill their roles as consumers, they must have secure employment.

\textsuperscript{162} "Fresh Ohio News," \textit{Gazette}, 24 December 1938. Subsequently, the woman entered a law suit asking for $50,000 in damages.

\textsuperscript{163} See Cohen, \textit{A Consumers' Republic}, 18-61. Cohen argues, "For social groups not otherwise well represented, in particular women and African Americans, identification as consumer offered a new opportunity to make claims on those wielding public and private power in American society" (32).
Just as segregation led to the growth of racial consciousness and racial solidarify, it also expanded opportunities for more grassroots level protests. African Americans reasoned that if they were going to be subjected to residential segregation, they would use their consumer power to address economic disparities, specifically the labor market in their own neighborhoods. According to a "casual survey...Negroes in the Central Area were spending, even in the midst of depression more than $200,000 per week in stores located in their community."\textsuperscript{164} African Americans used this spending power to pressure businesses located in the Central Avenue to change hiring policies and practices.

Locating race pride in economic empowerment, African Americans were encouraged to change their consumption habits. They were told that spending money in stores that did not benefit the African American community was tantamount to "economic slavery."\textsuperscript{165} African Americans were once again asked to put aside the consumer culture's emphasis on self-fulfillment and act in the interest of the race. In 1934 Charles H. Loeb, co-editor of the \textit{Call & Post} wrote a column in which he encouraged African Americans "to spend their money where it does the most good for themselves in particular and the race in general."\textsuperscript{166}

The column was basically a business directory that identified black and white businesses. In order for white-owned business to be listed they had to have a demonstrated record of employing African Americans. For those not swayed by

\textsuperscript{165} "The F.O.L.'s Advice," \textit{Call & Post}, 21 December 1940.
\textsuperscript{166} Goin' Shoppin', \textit{Call & Post}, 20 October 1934.
a purely economic argument, William O. Walker, editor of the Call & Post, appealed to readers' Christian sensibilities: "Well somewhere in the bible you will find the saying that the Lord helps those who help themselves. So until the Negro starts helping himself, he can expect little help from the Lord." Advertisements also appealed to this growing racial consciousness. Stores that were managed by African Americans often pointed this out in their advertisements. Libby's Dress Shoppe not only mentioned that both the store's manager and assistant manager were African American, but as proof, one of the advertisements featured the photographs of the two women (fig. 15).

These advertisements also indicated to African Americans that they did not have to leave their neighborhoods to fulfill their consumer desires. Central Area stores advertised that they carried a variety of merchandise of comparable quality and in some cases the exact same. In addition, in light of the rising cost of transportation and reduced services in African American neighborhoods, advertisements suggested that shopping in their own neighborhoods was both economical and convenient. Libby's Dress Shoppe, which was conveniently located in the business center of the Outhwaite Housing Project, advertised that it "brought to the neighborhood the latest styles in dresses, millinery, lingerie, and hosiery" and was a "tremendous saving in money and time." The store also

167 "Down the Big Road," Call & Post, 30 June 1934.
168 Call & Post, 3 August 1939.
169 "FOL Urges Public to Xmas Shop in their Own Neighborhoods," Call & Post, 14 December 1940.
170 Adding to the convenience, was the fact that one could even complete the look by visiting a neighborhood beauty shop, which was the only place where African American women could get their hair done as the beauty industry was heavily segregated.
SPECIAL
All of Our Regular Cotton
$2.00

THIS WEEK
DRESSES
Latest Styles
Latest Fabrics and Colors
$1.59
2 for $3.00

GET ACQUAINTED WITH LIBBY DRESS SHOPPE

The Libby Dress Shoppe, located at 4380 Scovill Ave.,
is the Outhwaite House Project business center, has
brought to the neighborhood the latest styles in dresses,
millinery, lingerie and lacy. Every customer is greeted
with a warm cordiality and courteous service which
are characteristics of the Libby system throughout their
many stores.

Louelle Taylor Curry, Mgr.

This store, under the management of Mrs. Louelle Tay-
er Curry and Mrs. J.6. Driskell Neel, her assistant, both
of the Outhwaite Homes, have brought efficiency and
charm into the service. Their pleasing personalities radi-
ate into every sale. The public is always invited to visit
the shoppe and see for themselves the styles and values
offered to them at a tremendous saving in money and time.

Eda Driskell Neel, Asst. Mgr.

LIBBY’S DRESS SHOPPE
4380 SCOVILL AVENUE

Figure 15. Libby’s Dress Shoppe Advertisement, Call & Post, 3 August 1939.
offered various promotions hoping to attract customers. The store also had a "penny sale," where customers would buy one item at regular price, and receive the second item for one cent.\textsuperscript{171} In another promotion, each Monday, the store gave away three dresses, no purchase necessary.\textsuperscript{172} The emphasis on economic empowerment represented a continuation with earlier reform efforts reiterating the importance of self-denial and self-control in racial progress. It also expressed a black nationalism that heretofore had been largely absent in Cleveland, bridging the economic self-sufficiency espoused by Booker T. Washington with the less accommodative militancy of the New Negro.\textsuperscript{173} These ideas were encapsulated in the "The Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns, which used "direct action and non-violent" tactics to leverage African American consumer power to gain more employment opportunities and improve economic conditions in African American communities.\textsuperscript{174}

In Cleveland, the movement had originated with Reverend and Mrs. Boston J. Prince of Messiah Baptist Church when they formed the Economic Race Development Society in 1931.\textsuperscript{175} The society sought to protest the racially exclusionary hiring practices of stores dependent on a black clientele. To initiate the movement, the Princes invited a man from Chicago, where the movement

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{171} Advertisement, \textit{Call & Post}, 22 June 1937.
  \item \textsuperscript{172} Advertisement, \textit{Call & Post}, 22 June 1939.
  \item \textsuperscript{173} Christopher G. Wye, "Merchants of Tomorrow: The Other Side of the 'Don't Spend Your Money Where You Can’t Work' Movement," \textit{Ohio History} 93 (1984): 42.
  \item \textsuperscript{174} For more on these campaigns, see August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, "The Origins of Nonviolent Direct Action in Afro-American Protest: A Note on Historical Discontinuities," in \textit{Along the Color Line, Explorations in the Black Experience}, ed. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, [1976] 2002).
  \item \textsuperscript{175} Reverend Prince was referred to as the "fighting pastor." See "Cleveland Social & Personal," \textit{Gazette}, 28 February 1931.
\end{itemize}
had originated, to come to Cleveland and speak. In conjunction, they also hosted a series of public meetings where Mrs. Prince served as master of ceremonies.\footnote{Ibid.} Gaining jobs was seen as essential to African American community building, as employment was necessary to the health and welfare of the people. Unemployment impeded racial advancement. It was linked to persistent poverty, crime, vice, and violence that seemed to plague the Central Avenue area. The “endeavor” of the society to obtain employment for African Americans in stores that were supported by African American patronage met with some criticism. Some believed that the movement should be contained to chain-stores rather than independent stores, feeling that to put such pressure on local businesses that were struggling in the midst of the economic crises was not fair.\footnote{“Let’s Be Fair,” Gazette, 28 March 1931.} The movement under the direction of the Princes was short-lived, as Reverend Prince’s declining health made it difficult for him and his wife to effectively lead the campaign.\footnote{In 1932, Reverend Prince suffered a stroke from which he had a difficult time recovering and left him unable to participate in economic reform. See “Cleveland Social & Personal,” Gazette, 15 September 1934.}

The campaign continued under the auspices of the Future Outlook League (FOL). Organized in 1935, the same year that Sissle began her legal battle, the FOL was committed to changing the economic status of Cleveland’s African Americans. The FOL argued, “Whenever the Negro is part of the consumer, he

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{“Let’s Be Fair,” Gazette, 28 March 1931.}
\footnote{In 1932, Reverend Prince suffered a stroke from which he had a difficult time recovering and left him unable to participate in economic reform. See “Cleveland Social & Personal,” Gazette, 15 September 1934.}
\end{footnotes}
should share in the profit by way of employment." According to the FOL, "No race of people...ever obtained anything desirable unless it had the will to fight for it." Believing that the workforce should reflect the demographics of its clientele, the organization protested discrimination in the marketplace, taking aim at racially exclusionary hiring practices in Central Area stores, the majority of which owned by white non-residents. This was viewed as problematic because it meant that the majority of wealth being generated by black consumerism was benefitting communities where African Americans were not even permitted to reside. The FOL was headed by John Holly, who was well aware of the lack of positions available to African Americans in retail stores, having been employed as a porter at Cleveland's Halle Brothers' Department Store for three years before losing his job in 1930 as a result of lay-offs. Holly had been influenced by the more aggressive efforts he had witnessed in Chicago. Having adopted the motto, "The Future is Yours," the league's efforts were part of the "crusade for a better America in which to live—an America in which the Negro will be accorded all the privileges and opportunities guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States of America."

The FOL launched campaigns calling for African Americans to boycott businesses in African American neighborhoods that did not employ African

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179 "Future Outlook League Demands Show Down with Woolworth Co.,” Call & Post, 28 April 1938.
180 Loeb, *The Future is Yours*, 46.
181 Ibid., 19-20.
183 Loeb, *The Future is Yours*, 124.
American workers. However, it was not enough for white businesses to simply employ African Americans. The FOL used the principle that salespeople should reflect their "desired clientele," which had traditionally been used to bar African Americans from sales positions and to keep them at the bottom rung of the occupational ladder, to pressure stores in Cleveland's black belt whose success was dependent on African American patronage to hire African American in prominent sales positions. ¹⁸⁴ Many of the retail establishments that the FOL targeted were those that sold women's fashions and other dress related items.

Gaining these positions for African Americans was no easy task. Chesnutt wrote, "The thousands of places as clerks and salesmen in the great department and chain stores are closed to them with few exceptions." ¹⁸⁵ This also seemed to apply to smaller and independently owned retail stores. For the entire year of 1930, the Negro Welfare League had only been able to find one temporary and one permanent position for women to be clerks in stores. ¹⁸⁶ Because of the intimacy that existed between salespersons and customers, it was assumed that African Americans would not be accepted in such positions. Merchants claimed that they would lose their white customers and perhaps even their white employees if they hired African Americans in such prominent positions. It was

¹⁸⁴ According to Loeb, "Of more than three thousand business places operated in the teeming Central Area of Cleveland, less than one hundred employed Negro workers in any capacity, and for the most part these places offered Negroes only menial positions." See Loeb, The Future is Yours, 19.
perceived that white customers did not want those they saw as their racial inferiors serving as the gatekeepers to the institutions that expanded their own freedoms. The Woodland Department Store privileged their white consumers even though the majority of its customers were black. The lack of African American in sale positions was not just a matter of white prejudice as there were reportedly African Americans who preferred not to be waited on by members of their own race. According to the Call & Post, “It has been quite a job to educate our people to trust salesmen of their own race.” African Americans’ seeming preference to be waited on by white clerks was attributed to their internalization of ideas concerning black racial inferiority. It was also noted that African Americans enjoyed the inversion of the racial order that the shopping ritual entailed when white clerks waited on them.

Not only would hiring African American as sales persons improve the economic status of those employed; it was also generally assumed that if African Americans were employed as clerks in stores, this would help to improve the treatment that African Americans received when patronizing such establishments. To avoid the discrimination experienced in the larger stores, working-class people often chose to shop in neighborhood stores where they could expect to receive better treatment and credit. However, for African Americans this was not the case. Effie Osby was not even allowed to return the

187 “Down the Big Road,” Call & Post, 11 May 1935.
188 Drake and Cayton, Black Metropolis, 440.
189 Susan Porter Benson, Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores 1890-1940 (Urbana, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 78.
shoes she purchased for her children from the white-owned Tedley Shoe Store, located on Woodland Avenue in the heart of the African American community. On two occasions, Osby attempted to exchange or return the shoes because they were not the correct size. On the first, she was told to come back because the size she wanted was not in stock. On the second, she was informed that she would have to pay a higher price to get the exact pair of shoes she had previously purchased in a different size, so she asked for a refund but was refused. Even African American veterans could not expect to receive fair treatment. In 1936, when Congress passed a bill giving veterans bonus money, the Call & Post which had anticipated such schemes when the news of the bonuses was first announced, reported that Woodland Area department stores were profiting unfairly off veterans and their wives by price gouging. Merchants who became aware that a customer was shopping with bonus money would inflate the prices of merchandise "500 to 100 per cent." Noting that "women [were] mostly the victims of such practices," one of the reported incidents involved a woman who purchased a dress at $9.75, which was regularly priced at $1.95. It appears that the fixed prices that had helped to define modern consumerism could no longer be depended on in a time of economic crises as merchants sought to maximize their opportunities for profit.

While picketing usually received the greatest attention of all the FOL'S tactics, it was usually a last resort. Through its investigation committee, the

league would first request that businesses fill out a questionnaire, which surveyed profits and employment practices. Responses to these initial inquires varied—"some merchants filled them out, while others even went so far as to insult members." Once this information was ascertained, the FOL would attempt to negotiate with the businesses to hire African Americans in proportion with the trade it received from the race. However, some businesses refused to cooperate under the pretense that they only employed family members. But it seemed in many cases "family members" were those that simply shared the same racial background and were not really related.\textsuperscript{192}

Not all business owners complied with the FOL's requests to place African Americans on their sales staffs. If negotiation proved unsuccessful, the FOL organized boycotts and pickets of the stores. These protests put a more public face on the economic problems of African Americans and demonstrated the power of collective action. They also served as a powerful impetus to get businesses to change their hiring policies. As a result, pickets usually only lasted a few hours. Participants, referred to as "shock troops," "were carefully instructed in the art of picketing."\textsuperscript{193} To have a bigger impact and get the greatest amount of visibility, the FOL usually conducted demonstrations on Saturdays, which was "the biggest shopping day."\textsuperscript{194} One of the first stores to be threatened with picketing was the Hoicowitz Department Store. The store was located in the East

\textsuperscript{192} Loeb, \textit{The Future is Yours}, 25.
\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{194} Phillips, \textit{Alabama North}, 207.
55th and Woodland area, a major shopping district in the Central Area, where the FOL concentrated a considerable amount of their efforts. Hoicowitz was also the largest department store doing businesses in Cleveland's black belt. Reportedly ninety-five percent of the store's customers were African Americans. Despite the store's reputation of providing exemplary service to its African American patrons, the FOL took aim against the department store for its failure to provide employment. The picket lasted only an hour at the end of which the FOL and the store reached an agreement to hire Miss Leila Wilson as a clerk. For its cooperation, the Call & Post later labeled the department store as a "Favorite Shopping Center." Other stores that complied with FOL demands after being picketed included the Woodland Department Store and the Liberty Style Shop. The proprietor of the Liberty Shoppe, N. Falcovich, was much more amenable to negotiation after the picket. He "expressed a very favorable attitude towards members of the invest committee and he promised full cooperation."

Despite the negative impact that boycotts and pickets had on their businesses, some merchants still refused to comply. According to the Executive Board of the FOL, a white business owner who acknowledged his dependence on African American patronage, reportedly said that he would rather go to hell than employ an African American. Some businesses took legal action against the FOL and were successful in getting legal injunctions that prevented the

\[195\] "To Discuss Jobs," Call & Post, 11 May 1935.
\[196\] Loeb, The Future is Yours, 32.
\[197\] "Favorite Shopping Center," Call & Post, 14 November 1935.
\[198\] "Future Outlook League" Call & Post, 30 May 1935.
\[199\] "Future Outlook League Says it Will Continue Job Fight," Call & Post, 26 December 1935.
pickets. The judicial system held that picketing by the organization was unlawful, since the FOL was not a recognized labor organization.200

Establishments that complied with FOL demands and employed African Americans were given placards that could be placed in shop windows. African Americans were encouraged to patronize stores displaying the placards.201 However, the FOL continued to monitor businesses. The league did not want temporary, but permanent change. When the Jules Dress Shop located on E. 55th St. fired one of its African American sales women and failed to replace her with another African American, the FOL quickly mobilized and picketed the store. The store agreed to the part-time employment of another African American women, Miss Margaret Lawson.202 The league not only monitored the stores to make sure they retained the placements, but to ensure proper working conditions and equitable treatment. For instance, when the FOL became aware that the Woodland Department Store, only permitted the African American sales women, “to wait on customers if the other white clerks were busy,” the FOL “demanded that she be treated the same as other clerks.”203

Noting that previous efforts had been “handicapped” by a lack of visibility, the FOL engaged in various types of publicity.204 In door to door campaigns, members canvassed neighborhoods educating the community about the

200 Loeb, The Future is Yours, 26.
201 "Dress Shop Hires as Pickets Appear," Call & Post, 8 August 1935.
202 Ibid. Part-time employment, for Lawson, meant that she worked at the shop only two days a week.
204 Wye, "Merchants of Tomorrow," 43.

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organization's programs. The FOL also recognized that religious institutions were a vital way to connect with the African American community, and sent representatives of its Speaker's Bureau to address congregations. However, not all churches were receptive, and some church leaders, particularly those associated with the Friendship Baptist Church and Christ Temple, would not even permit the organization to address their congregations.205

The FOL also used print culture to gain support for the FOL's programs. The FOL printed and distributed circulars that advertised their activities. The organization even had its own newspaper, the *Voice of the League*. However, much of the FOL's publicity was courtesy of the *Call & Post*, whose editorship was highly supportive of the league's efforts. William O. Walker, editor of the newspaper understood the importance of publicity, having worked in advertising for a department store in Washington.206 Articles often touted the FOL's successes listing the names and addresses of the businesses that hired African Americans as a result of the league's tactics, along with the names of those who received the positions. The "Woodland Shopper" section of the newspaper featured advertisements for stores in the Woodland and E. 55th Street Area commercial district. Stores that were featured were often those that had cooperated with the FOL or were African American owned.

The rise of the FOL during the Depression reflected growing frustration and disenchantment with middle-class black leadership. The increasingly

oppressive racial climate was perceived as a failure of African American politicians' "lack of action". Traditional middle-class institutions such as the Negro Welfare Association, the NAACP, and the Ohio Federation of Women's Clubs were also perceived as largely ineffective. As a result, opportunities for social activism expanded and the FOL became a leading organization in African Americans' quest for racial and economic equality. Both the Call & Post and the Gazette, made note that the Future Outlook League was doing more for the race than the established leadership.

Despite the more militant tactics of the FOL, which seemed to eschew middle-class values, respectability was not completely abandoned. Even though the FOL was considered a working-class organization, it still had some inclination towards middle-class respectability, using it as a tactic. While these public protests were viewed as an extension of black working-class resistance, which was often centered on the street, much of the league's focus was on consumerism, a feminine activity. As with other organizations oriented towards consumerism, this would have "marked the movement as 'respectable' in spite of its militant tactics."\textsuperscript{207} In an early report of league activities, the organization attempted to downplay its reputation as an extremist organization. Holly, hoping to encourage membership, said "Don't be afraid to join us, the League is not radical, we contend only for those things which are ours."\textsuperscript{208}

\textsuperscript{207} Wolcott, \textit{Remaking Respectability}, 183.
\textsuperscript{208} "Doings of Society, Clubs, Personal Mention," \textit{Call & Post}, 25 March 1935.
In making placements, the organization weighed an individual's respectability when determining their suitability for employment. One of the FOL's earliest successes was obtaining positions at J.J. Newberry Company's Woodland Avenue store. The positions had been secured after the FOL sent a "letter demanding the employment of Negro girls as clerks" or face pickets at the company's headquarters in New York. After negotiation with representatives, it was agreed that an African American woman would be hired on a week's trial basis. With the help of Jane Hunter and Phillis Wheatley's Placement Bureau, a group of capable John Hay High School graduates were identified. Out of this group Miss Willa Collins was selected. Collins was chosen because she "possess[ed] the desired tact, personality, background and appearance." It seems the decision to place Collins was good one because she was so successful that after her week trial had ended the store hired another young woman. A year later, Newberry had in its employ twelve saleswomen and Collins had been promoted to senior clerk.

As the placement of Collins indicates, the FOL, like similar campaigns across the country "sought to place already trained and educated blacks in white-collar employment." Those who were employed in sales positions were "pioneers" and had a "responsibility to their race." As such they were directed to be mindful of their conduct because future employment opportunities, maybe

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209 Loeb, The Future is Yours, 28-29.
even the future of the race, rested on their success. As a result, participants in the pickets did not receive preferential treatment when it came to the employment opportunities that were opened up by the FOL. This was because "it was important to the League program that these placements be filled by persons possessing training not then to be found among the shock troops of the picket line." The league offered professional development and set up a "Training Club" to educate placements in the "art of salesmanship." Among the club's officers was Nellie Fields who had been hired as a sales clerk at the F & F Style Shop, which sold women's clothing. While the FOL sought out respectable candidates for placements, the organization refused to submit to store owners' preferences for light-skinned blacks. It was important that those hired as a result of league efforts, have complexions that visibly indicated that they were members of the race.

Even though the shock troops' acceptability for job placement was questionable, it appears that they attempted to project a respectable image while picketing. As a tactic, protesters appeared well-dressed, as it was customary to dress in their best clothes. According to Mhoon, "When African Americans were involved in public protests their dress was always conservative and calculated. Protesters wanted to limit the disapproval from onlookers within their

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212 "Down the Big Road," Call & Post, 17 August 1940.
213 Loeb, The Future is Yours, 33.
communities as well as hostility from white observers." Appearing well-dressed was also a demonstration of African American consumer power.

The FOL also sought respectability by trying to gain the support of "leading citizens". However, as in earlier efforts, the FOL would face difficulty in gaining the support of the entire community. As Cheryl Greenberg argues in her examination of "Don't Buy Campaigns", the diversity of the black community presented obstacles to organization especially across class. The league found that race loyalty was seemingly in shorter supply among Cleveland "better citizens" as it was them who resisted league efforts. It was not usual for members of this class to undermine boycotts or cross picket lines to patronize stores. As a result, the league's efforts were more successful in the less affluent, working-class sections of the Central Avenue Area. The FOL found it difficult to garner support from the established leadership and elite, who feared that their activities would do more harm than good, further entrenching racial discrimination and segregation in the city. There was the feeling that such pressure would cause African Americans to lose employment in other parts of the city outside of Cleveland's black belt. The FOL's tactics for racial uplift represented a departure from earlier efforts to achieve racial and economic parity and were therefore

216 Mhoon, "Dressing For Freedom," 27. While the appearance of protesters was important, it received little attention in reports. However, during the Civil Rights Movement, which these protests foreshadowed, much was made of the protesters appearance. See Marissa Chappel, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward, "'Dress Modestly, Neatly...As If You Were Going to Church': Respectability, Class and Gender," in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement," in Gender in the Civil Rights Movement, ed. Peter J Ling and Sharon Monteith (New York, NY: Garland Publishers, 1999).
218 "Outlook League Continues Picketing-Gets More Jobs," Call & Post, 6 June 1935.
219 Ibid.
subject to criticism, especially by the city's conservative black leadership. Initially, the Negro Welfare Association was especially critical and referred to the tactics as a "menace...to the harmonious relations that have existed between the various racial and national groups in Cleveland."^220 The association's fear that the league's tactics were detrimental to race relations probably reflected the fact that the association was very much connected to Cleveland's old African American settlers and the white power structure. However, a month later, the association seemed less dismissive of the league's tactics, offering its support provided that the FOL exercised "restraint and caution," and acted in accordance with the law.^221 The editorship of the Gazette also offered little support. The newspaper accused the FOL of threatening both interracial and intraracial relations in the city. The following statement appeared in the paper, "Future Outlook League members, who are so glibly criticizing 'The Old Cleveland colored residents,' are making a foolish mistake and are not promoting the harmony among our people that is so essential to the success of any effort in their behalf."^222

As mentioned earlier, the FOL also sought to gain the support of the area's black churches seeing them as an important institution to galvanize the community in support of its efforts. Some ministers agreed to cooperate and

^222 "F.O.L.," Gazette, 8 June 1935.
"instructed their congregations not to trade at stores being boycotted." The league also tried to attract the black intelligentsia hoping to garner their participation in the less controversial aspects of the league's activities. According to Loeb, this support would have the desired effect of "clothing the League with respectability."

In spite of uneven support from the city's African American community, the FOL could claim some important successes. According to reports, "as the year 1940 came to a close...more than five thousands persons were employed in jobs directly or indirectly created through League efforts in the Central Area." The FOL's ability to obtain employment for African Americans rivaled that of traditional agencies that offered job placement assistance. Despite not having professionally trained individuals on their staffs with expertise in this field, the FOL was able to gain African Americans employment in white business establishments. However, not everyone was able to benefit from the organization's employment services. Natalie Middleton recalled that after graduating from high school she went to the Future Outlook League to try and get employment but as mentioned earlier, her family had been so "devastated" by the Depression, she did not have the fifty cents required to register for job placement assistance.

223 "Outlook League Continues Picketing," Call & Post, 6 June 1935
224 Loeb, The Future is Yours, 45
225 Ibid., 45.
226 Ibid., 73.
227 Middleton, interview, 13.
The league itself was also a much needed source of employment. While the agency was largely dependent on volunteers, it seems there were times where the league was also able to offer some remuneration to those that participated in their efforts. The organization's first paid position was that of secretary, one of the white-collar jobs that African American women desired, but were often denied. The young woman who was hired received a salary of $3 per week, which was an improvement over domestic service both in terms of the amount of money earned and job tasks. However, the organization's finances were limited and she was not always paid in a timely manner.\footnote{228} There were also some instances where picketers were paid to carry signs.\footnote{229}

**Buying Black**

Securing jobs, however, was secondary to the league's "first objective...to strengthen the backbone of existing Negro enterprises by educating its followers to give preferential treatment to Negro-owned firms in their community."\footnote{230} The FOL advocated economic nationalism urging Cleveland's African American community, "First patronize your own group and second patronize the business that will give you employment."\footnote{231}

\footnote{228} Loeb, *The Future is Yours*, 34.  
\footnote{229} "Outlook League Continues Picketing-Get More Jobs," *Call & Post*, 6 June 1935.  
\footnote{230} Loeb, *The Future is Yours*, 24.  
\footnote{231} Qtd. in Wye, "Merchants of Tomorrow," 44.
Holly believed that black employment in white-owned establishments could serve as an important training ground for future African American entrepreneurs, as poor training was often blamed for the failure of African American businesses. The league hoped that those whom it placed in positions would become future businesses leaders. According to Holly, "The young Negro is not naturally a merchant...he can never be an efficient grocer, butcher, or shoe salesman, or dress designer, or buyer, or brewer, or retailer, so long as he is prohibited from learning these operations from the inside."\(^{232}\)

The emphasis on black business development was perceived as critical because despite the size and concentration of the black community, as one columnist noted, Cleveland was "far behind many other states in our business development."\(^{233}\) This was especially true in the fashion industry. Despite the fact that others existed, the only black-owned dress related businesses that were listed in the FOL directory were Mrs. Ethel Foster Goodson’s dressmaking and cleaning shop and John H. Sweeny’s York Garment Co, both of which were located on Cedar Avenue. In response to the paucity of these types of business, there was some effort by the Monarch Business Club, which had formed during the Depression, with the primary focus of forming an African American department and shoe store.\(^{234}\)

\(^{232}\) Loeb, *The Future is Yours*, 36.
\(^{233}\) "Down the Big Road W.O.W.," *Call & Post*, 4 May 1935.
Not only were black businesses lacking in numbers, but according to reports African Americans spent "less than four cents" per capita at race businesses.\textsuperscript{235} Despite the fact that supporting black businesses was touted as "evidence of the possession of race pride and race loyalty," African Americans still appeared to favor making their purchases in white-owned stores.\textsuperscript{236} This was made clear in gossip columns' reports of shopping activities, which in taking note of the continued purchasing power of African Americans, could not help but notice that most of the purchases being made were not being made in the Central Area nor were they being made at black-owned businesses. "Skippy" observed that "the decolette [sic] silk crepe dress of a certain elevator operator was not made by the Clark Style Shoppe on Cedar ave [sic], but was bought at the Peggy Ann's uptown on Euclid."\textsuperscript{237} In an effort to change this, African Americans were admonished that saving money should not be the primary focus of their consumption, but economic justice. African Americans were referred to as "careless" spenders and told, "No matter how shrewd of a bargain hunter you are, unless you purchase your merchandise from a store either owned by Negroes, or employing them as clerks, you are being cheated."\textsuperscript{238}

Criticism was not just reserved for African American consumers. It was suggested that African Americans preferred not to patronize their own because of their poor quality of the businesses, evident in the appearance of their

\textsuperscript{235} Hall, Charles, "Charles Hall Tells of Race Business in Ohio," \textit{Call & Post}, 1 April 1937.
\textsuperscript{236} "Cleveland Social and Personal," \textit{Gazette}, 20 June 1931.
\textsuperscript{237} "Skippy: The Snoopin' Reporter Sees All-Knows All Tells All," \textit{Call & Post}, 27 February 1936.
\textsuperscript{238} "In Eternal Fight," \textit{Call & Post}, 18 November 1937.
employees. Despite being supportive of African American entrepreneurship, the editorship of the *Call & Post* argued, "Too many of our stores pay little attention to the appearance of their sales force. I know of one store where the girls have their hair dressed all kinds of ways and they wear all kinds of dresses, and aprons. It is important in large organizations to have their employees dress uniformly [sic], it should be equally important in smaller ones."^239 However, it seems for many black businesses the dress of their employees were the least of their worries.

African American businesses were often forced to operate at a disadvantage, located in poor locations that were not conducive to customer traffic. One observer attributed this to a lack of business savvy, blaming blacks for poor planning and choosing locations based on the inexpensiveness of rent. The observer failed to realize that white landlords purposely sought to marginalize blacks from certain locations to protect the interests of white businesses. For instance, white landlords attempted to raise rents in order to oust black merchants and make room for white merchants who could afford to pay higher rents.^240

Blacks were also dependent on white wholesalers who often put the interests of their white customers ahead of that of their black customers. African American entrepreneurs were often vulnerable. This was not just because African Americans lack of capital, but also because white businesses did not

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^239^ William O. Walker, "Down the Big Road," *Call & Post*, 17 August 1940.

^240^ Wye, "Merchants of Tomorrow," 55.
appreciate competition and resorted to unfair practices to handicap black businesses. Anna Rodriguez who operated Anna's Notions on Central Avenue was informed by her landlord that she would be evicted if she continued to sell ladies' hosiery. According to the initial report, after receiving requests from her customers and receiving permission from another merchant, Rodriguez started carrying stockings. However, she faced obstacles when she was informed by her supplier that her account had been closed "because it was not his policy to sell two customers the same brand of hosiery." She was able to find another supplier only to be informed by her landlord that if she continued to sell the hosiery, she would be forced to vacate the premises because he had to "protect" the other tenants. The police had also raided her shop after receiving a malicious tip that "she supposedly was selling drugs" out of the shop.\footnote{241} This harassment was due to the fact that her white competitors resented Rodriguez's presence as it threatened their ability to profit from African American women's consumption of the items. Hosiery was a significant consumer item for African American women.\footnote{242} Stockings, once associated with the elite, had become essential to being properly dressed for all women regardless of class in the twentieth century.\footnote{243} In the case of Annette Davis her hosiery upstaged the rest of her outfit, as the gossip column signaling Davis out for her fashion only mentioned

\footnote{241} "Business Woman Says Competition Seeks to Interfere with her Sales: Ordered to Stop Selling Hose," \textit{Call & Post}, 5 May 1938.  
her "sharp hosiery". Advertisements for hosiery were quite prevalent in black newspapers, suggesting that African American women were a lucrative market for the items. Holly of the FOL eventually stepped in to ensure that Rodriguez was not unfairly evicted. In a meeting with Rodriguez's landlord, Holly "demanded" that Rodriguez be able to sell any merchandise she wished as long as it was in accordance with the law. When interviewed Rodriguez expressed her gratitude for the efforts on her behalf: "I am glad that Mr. Holly came to my rescue because it would be difficult for me to go into another neighborhood and build up a trade like the one I have here."

Despite the challenges, African American business development continued throughout the Depression. According to a Call & Post, "The depression has been the biggest boon Negro business in the North has ever had." As a means of self-employment, starting a business represented an attractive alternative to the rampant unemployment that marked the Depression. It also became an important symbol of economic independence. According to politician and newspaper editor William O. Walker, "The independent man or woman is one who operates his or her own business." The article also noted that African American businesses not only meant economic freedom for proprietors, but opportunities for other African Americans in the area of employment and consumerism. The author maintained, "We can talk about

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244 "June Williams," Call & Post, 17 November 1938.
245 "Landlord Agrees Miss Rodriguez Can Sell Hose," Call & Post, 12 May 1938.
247 W.O. Walker, "Down he Big Road," Call & Post, 14 May 1936.
getting religion, education, and culture all we want to, but if we do not get some businesses of our own; places where we do the hiring and buying, these other elements will not mean a thing.\textsuperscript{248} Black business development was seen as key to ending the cycle of poverty that plagued African Americans.

On July 11, 1936, Mr. John H. Sweeney opened York Garment Co. at 10022 Cedar Ave.\textsuperscript{249} Sweeney, a native of the British West Indies, had resided in Cleveland since 1914. The store carried ready-to-wear apparel for women, men, and children. When it opened it was the city's only African American owned department store. Advertisements for the store encouraged readers to "Shop in Your Own Neighborhood with Your Own," but that such patronage was not just a matter of race loyalty because it offered the same merchandise as downtown stores at similar prices. The store also recognized the economic situation of its clientele and offered relief cash checking services and lay-a-way plans.

Sweeney recognized that there was strength in cooperation and was a charter member of the Progressive Business Alliance. Established in 1939, the "organization was founded for the purpose of 'promoting closer cooperation among a group of the city's business and retail men as well as to simulate business.'"\textsuperscript{250} The Alliance sponsored a weekly radio show called "The Negro Business Hour," which was "intended to stimulate Negro businesses."\textsuperscript{251} It also sponsored a Negro Trade Exhibit. The six-day event was supposed to serve as

\textsuperscript{248} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{249} "To Open Saturday New Clothing Store," \textit{Call & Post}, 9 July 1936.
\textsuperscript{250} Davis, \textit{Black Americans in Cleveland}, 245.
\textsuperscript{251} "Progressive Business Alliance," \textit{Call & Post}, 30 November 1939.
ample demonstration why Negroes should spend as much ...as possible with
Negro Businesses."252 Eligible exhibitors were restricted to those that were
members of the organization and “to local firms giving employment in large
numbers to members of the Race.”253 One of the organization’s members
published a weekly periodical, The Buyer’s Guide, which featured black owned
businesses, was available at no cost, and had a guaranteed circulation of 10,000
copies. The cost of producing the newspaper was covered by advertisers. The
slogan of the guide was “Quality Plus Economy Equals Thrift.” Sweeney’s
membership in the Progressive Business Alliance was a testament to his
business acumen, as it was said that merchants who had knowledge of and
participated in activities that “stimulate[d] interest in Negro businesses” were
“more in tune with the modern pulse of business.”254

There were even attempts to get people to “buy black” from within white
owned companies. African American consumers were directed to seek out sales
associates of the race and give their patronage to them. However, this did not
always go over well. When Mrs. Clae Webb Biggs was promoted to a managerial
position in the Valdura Corset Co., she used her hiring authority to place black
women as sales representatives. She also began encouraging African American
women in the community to purchase from members of their own race. A white
saleswoman who had been successful in gaining black customers saw such

253 “Business Alliance to Stage Mammoth Negro Trade Show,” Call & Post, 10 August 1939. The
event reportedly had 15,000 in attendance. See “Negro Trade Exhibit Draws 15,000 during 6-Day
Show,” Call & Post, 28 September 1939.
254 W.O.W., “Down the Big Road,” Call & Post, 30 June 1934.
efforts as a threat to her business and reported Biggs to management. Biggs defended her efforts, explaining that they were "a matter of self-preservation, and not discrimination against any group." However, company management did not appreciate what they perceived as Biggs’ attempts to shut white saleswomen out of black neighborhoods. Biggs was told that black women considered it an "honor" to make their purchases from white saleswomen and was ultimately let go from the company. In a letter addressed to the editor of the Gazette, Biggs encouraged black women to boycott the Valdura Corset Co., and to instead patronize the Kellogg Corset Co. where she had subsequently secured employment. She also encouraged other women to take advantage of the employment opportunities available at the company "and prove that [blacks] can become successful saleswomen and business women if given a fair chance."255

African American Women and Consumer Activism

The more aggressive and confrontational tactics of African Americans during the Great Depression has often been constructed as masculine and has led to the marginalization of women in analysis. Wolcott in her study of Detroit, argues that the emphasis on "self-determination" was evidence of a more "masculine discourse."256 However, as she herself acknowledges, since consumerism was largely a feminine activity, women were central actors in African American activism during the period. Women, as the primary purchasers

256 Wolcott, Remaking Respectability, 169.
in households, were integral to the success of the “hire black” and “buy black” campaigns. Recognizing the important role of women in such efforts, Cleveland’s black press was especially critical of the Federation of Women’s Clubs for not fully living up to its mission of racial uplift and taking a more active role in expanding employment opportunities for the African American community. A column that appeared in the Gazette declared, “It wouldn’t hurt our local Federation of Women’s Club to do something besides holding meetings and giving social functions.”257 A few years earlier on Christmas Day, the paper had urged the federation “to do something to help place our young men and women in many of the stores of the 11th and 12th wards, that haven’t a single one in their employ, in spite of the fact that ninety to one hundred percent of their patronage is furnished by our people.”258

As a result of this tendency to connect African American militant activism with masculinity, women are virtually ignored in Kenneth M. Zinz’s analysis of the FOL. However, as Kimberley Phillips argues, women were essential to the success of the FOL. So much so that Marge Robinson asserted “black women were the FOL.”259 Of the fourteen present at the birth of the Future Outlook League, over half were women. The organization had a large female membership, including dressmaker Amanda Wicker. Women also played an integral role as “organizers and participants in its boycotts.”260 Maude White, a

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257 “Hear! Hear!! The Rounder on What’s Doing,” Gazette, 18 May 1935.
259 Phillips, Alabama North, 207.
260 Ibid., 3.
college educated African American woman who had been active in the
Communist Party and the League of Struggle, was largely responsible for training
picketers. The participation of individuals, like Maude White, who had leftist association further led to the
perception that the FOL was a radical organization. For more on FOL, Maude White, and the
Communist Party, see Phillips, *Alabama North*, 202-204. For more on African American women
and Communism during this period including Maude White, see Lawshawn Harris, "Running with

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There was an increased need for such training after the 1938 court
ruling that legalized picketing, led to an increase in membership, especially
among women. The growth of female membership was evident the first time
that the FOL was charged for assault in connection with its picketing. The
incident involved four female picketers who beat up a woman for crossing a
picket line. Women also served on various league committees, led
membership drives, prepared and served meals, and provided much needed
financial support through their own contributions and fundraising efforts.

One of the first leading citizens to give their support to the FOL was Hazel
M. Walker, a lawyer and the first African American to serve as principal of a
Cleveland Public School. Walker referred to the FOL as "one of the greatest
organizations in the country." In 1935, Walker was a speaker at one of the
FOL’s mass meetings. In what was reported as a "strong address," she “praised
Holly for his fine leadership and asserted that he was doing more to hold up the
morale of youth than any other organization she knew of.” Pledging her own

263 "Judge Suspends Fines, Releases 4 FOL Pickets on Probation," *Call & Post*, 3 August 1940.
“wholehearted support,” she also expressed her hope that more professionals would become involved in the organization.266

Before the FOL was in existence, one of the first groups to support “buy black” efforts was the Housewives’ League, a largely middle-class organization established in 1932 and that had various units throughout the city. Its housewives’ “waged war against extreme poverty and general unemployment.”267 A national organization, with a presence in major cities, the “Housewives’ League combined domestic feminism and economic nationalism to help black families and businesses survive the Depression. The only requirement for membership was a pledge to support black businesses, buy black products, patronize black professionals, and keep the money in the community.”268 The Housewives’ seemed dedicated to their purpose. In 1934, William O. Walker called a meeting of various organizations at Phillis Wheatley to try to get them to work towards solving the unemployment situation facing graduating high school students. The Housewives’ League was the only organization consistently represented at the meetings.

Despite class differences, the Housewives’ had much in common with the FOL. The Housewives’ even used similar tactics to those of the FOL.

Housewives’ canvassed neighborhoods asking women to patronize black businesses. When the Housewives’ became aware of unfair practices meant to

266 “Prominent Citizens Speak at FOL Mass Meeting,” Call & Post, 18 November 1937.
267 Mrs. Alice Pearson, “Housewives League Aims Outlined by President,” Call & Post, 18 May 1935.
drive African Americans out of business, they organized boycotts of the white businesses that had replaced them. In addition to advocating for patronage of African American business and employment, the organization also taught budgeting. In 1933, one of the units sponsored an exhibition, which showcased among other things dressmaking and tailoring. Like the FOL, the Housewives' also knew what it was like not to have widespread support for their efforts. In 1934, the Housewives' sponsored a "Negro Business Cooperation Week" in conjunction with the Cleveland's Board of Trade, an organization of local businesses. It was reported, "A goodly number of our local ministers are not in full harmony with the 'Negro Board of Trade and Housewives' League.'

However, the Housewives' did have the support of Jane E. Hunter, who said of the organization, "The National Housewives' League is a notable example born of grave necessity to save the Negro's pride, and to prevent many from dire want in the midst of the deepest depression." Hunter was an advocate of the Housewives' League as she was "interested in seeing that every dollar spent by Negroes from now on be spent with Negroes."

The FOL and Housewives' League helped "cast African American women as the central actors in an economic drama of self-help and racial

269 However, unlike the FOL, the Housewives' did not attempt to get white store owners to employ blacks, but focused their energy on patronage of black-owned stores.
272 Hunter, A Nickel and a Prayer, 185
273 Hunter, "Letter to Vann."
determination." Much of women's social activism operated under the premise that everyday activities such as shopping could be used to initiate social change. Representing a " politicized domesticity", the league exemplified how consumerism had long been the basis for women's social activism and central to ideas of the modern woman. By the Depression, there was already a long tradition of women often used their consumerism to advocate for laborers. The National Consumer's League, founded in 1899, tried to convince female consumers to practice 'ethical consumption,' selective buying to pressure employers and the state to improve wages and working conditions for employed women and children." As the FOL and Housewives' League show, African Americans of all classes were also part of this tradition using their consumerism in the interest of racial uplift.

Conclusion

During the Depression, African Americans in Cleveland remained committed to using dress and consumption as tactics essential to the welfare of the race. Despite being economically disadvantaged, African Americans continued to consume and saw their ability to do so as fundamental to ridding themselves of their second class status and assert their rights as consumers and laborers. However, while these tactics foreshadowed the use of black

274 Wolcott, Remaking Respectability, 182.
275 Evans, Born for Liberty, 217.
276 Cohen, A Consumers' Republic, 22.
consumerism during the later Civil Rights Movement, they did little to alter the overall economic situation for African American women.277 The majority of African American women remained relegated to domestic work. In fact it was one of the few fields that actually experienced growth.278 At the end of the decade, “76.2 percent of the black women who worked in Cleveland held jobs in domestic service.”279 Employment opportunities continued to worsen as African Americans were let go from various jobs. Claiming “Insufficient Funds”, African Americans workers were laid off by the WPA.280 Despite the gains made in neighborhood stores, employment in department stores remained elusive for most African Americans. Downtown businesses largely dismissed the activities of the FOL, perceiving them as a “neighborhood affair.”281

278 “Report of the Executive Secretary,” May 1937, 1.
279 Jones, Jane Edna Hunter, 114. This represented a 10 percent increase from 1930 figures.
280 “Report of the Executive Secretary,” 9 June 1939, 1.
281 Loeb, The Future is Yours, 32.
Chapter 6

Conclusion: To Shop and Still Not to Be

This dissertation has used dress and fashion as a lens to examine how African American women experienced modernity. During the period, 1890-1940, African American women in Cleveland used dress and the culture of consumption which were part of their everyday lives, to construct themselves as thoroughly modern women. They also established their own fashion-related businesses and publications, strove to break into the dominant white labor force in large department stores and small shops, and used the language of dress and fashion as ways of communicating their aspirations and resistance to the increasingly restrictive racial climate that accompanied black migration during the Jim Crow era and the financial collapse of the Great Depression. Thus, for these women dress was not meaningless or superficial, but a tactic they used to lay claim not only to their own bodies but also to public spaces, and to contest their marginalization in a racist, classist, and sexist society.

As part of their program of racial uplift, middle-class and religious African American women in the late 19th and early 20th century adopted fashions of the period in accordance with the “politics of respectability,” creating a visual narrative of progress. African American women saw fashion-consciousness as a way to ameliorate their second-class status. This was because African American women’s clothed bodies carried the added burden of representation. Dress was not simply an expression of themselves as individuals, but the entire race. Sartorial displays were not simply a matter of emulating dominant culture, but of
subverting the dominant culture's negative assumptions, especially regarding African American women's perceived unattractiveness and sexually immorality.

Initially, these women believed that they could counter subordination simply leading by example. But as the population increased and racism in the city that prided itself on its progressivism became more rampant, policing the dress of migrant women became a central aspect of their social activism. Through existing organizations like the church and ones created especially to respond to "the problem," like the Phillis Wheatley Association and the Negro Welfare Association, African American women actively engaged in reforming the self-presentation of others. However, this was no easy task as they came up against places of commercial leisure, which had their own codes of morality, reflected in the fashions worn by patrons and performers.

Fashion was also an important part of other activities. Organizations including churches and the various social clubs that African Americans formed, presented them with new opportunities to participate in bodily display and leisure. This engagement with dress and consumption was central to the self-definition and self-determination on which New Negro, largely a product of urbanization and migration, was based. However, as illustrated by fashion related occupations and the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" Campaigns, this engagement was not simply in terms of their ability to consume, but to profit from it in terms of employment.

While consumption represented new possibilities, it also had its limits. Racism and discrimination structured African American women's everyday
experiences in this realm. Dominant culture restricted African American’s access to consumer culture, attempting to dictate how, when, where, and what of African American consumption in ways that reified the status quo. As a result, African American women were never constructed as the ideal consumers.

Despite gains made during the Great Depression, discrimination against blacks in Cleveland continued. African American women in Cleveland still faced discrimination in their experiences with consumer culture, especially in department stores. In 1944, it was reported that the May Company, despite having a good reputation for its treatment of African Americans, still used the insulting term “nigger” in its advertising.1 As previously mentioned, while Cleveland’s African American population had been able to pressure stores in the Central Area to hire African American workers, they continued to face difficulty in finding employment in the downtown area where most of the department stores and larger retail outlets were located. The Halle Bros. Company, established in 1916, did not knowingly hire its first African American salesperson, Mary Jane Baylor, until 1950. Even then, Baylor worked in the children and infants’ department and not one of the store’s women’s departments.

While this dissertation focused on the period right before World War II, it would be interesting for future research to examine African American dress and consumption specifically in the context of World War II and its aftermath. World War II had an important impact on fashion. The war led to the Americanization of fashion as, France, the world’s fashion capital, was otherwise preoccupied.

1 “Use of Offensive Term in Advertising Brings Apology,” Call & Post, 2 December 1944.
During the war fashion became increasingly regulated. Many of the materials were diverted to wartime manufacturing, meaning that certain fashions were unavailable or subject to rationing. The war also led to the increasing acceptability of trousers for women's wear as women entered the industrial workforce replacing the men who had gone off to war. How did African American women respond to these shortages and the masculinization of fashion that the growing popularity of trousers seemed to suggest?

The post-World War II period is generally seen as a revolution in consumer culture. It is also is the period in which the larger society increasingly recognized African American's purchasing power and tried to advertise and market their products specifically to African American consumers. However, at the same time there was a recognition of African American consumerism, the geography of consumer culture changed in a way that affected African Americans' access to the culture. The prosperity that followed the war enabled the suburbanization and decentralization of commercial centers that had been interrupted by the Great Depression. Following World War II, there was a max exodus of white people out of Cleveland proper to the suburbs and the retail establishments followed. As a result, "Suburban shopping centers mushroomed after World War II." The movement of stores to the suburbs further structured consumer space as white space. The process led to both employment and consumer opportunities being increasingly available outside the city, which was

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further exacerbated by a transportation system that did not facilitate travel between the urban ghetto and the suburbs. The only major shopping district within reach for the Central Area was the city's declining downtown. By the early 1960s, Cleveland's downtown was on the decline and two of the major department stores, Bailey's and Wm. Taylor & Son, had gone out of business. According to William O. Walker, still the editor of the Call & Post, the closing of these stores made it apparent that "Cleveland [was] dying at its core." Walker blamed the decline on racial prejudice of department stores and stores' refusal to recognize African American consumer power. Referring to merchants as more "prejudice than practical," Walker noted that city's downtown stores had failed to appeal to African Americans in terms of advertising and employment. 4 Today, not one department store remains in the city's downtown.

In light of ongoing discrimination and the changing geography of consumer culture after the Second World War, it would be interesting to uncover how African American women experienced this. In the face of persisting racial inequities, how did African Americans respond to the growing nationalistic rhetoric that linked consumption with democracy and citizenship? 5 What effects did this have on African American communities and their ability to engage in consumer culture? How did the tactics of African Americans change or remain the same?

Longtime Cleveland resident, Natalie Middleton, stated in an interview that her "greatest achievement was trying to keep [her]self going in the light of the discrimination on all levels: socially, economically, and educationally, that Blacks had to face." Therefore, African Americans engagement with the culture of consumption is important to not only understanding African American women's modernity, but understanding their everyday struggles.

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