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WOMEN AND WORK:
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN DEPRESSION ERA
AMERICA

by

SARAH WARD

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Women and Gender Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New

York

2018

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African American Women in Depression Era America

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Sarah Ward

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Women
and Gender Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts.

Date

Blanche Wiesen Cook

Thesis Advisor

Date

Dana-ain Davis

Executive Officer

ABSTRACT

Women and Work: African American Women in Depression Era America

by

Sarah Ward

Advisor: Professor Blanche Wiesen Cook

This project explores whether African American women met similar public sentiments as Caucasian women during the Depression Era and how gender dynamics changed within African American households in urban America as well as the effect of the crisis on a populace that was not new to the work force. Historical statistical analysis and emphasis on labor policy are used to garner information. The Great Depression sparked an abrupt shift in not only the American economy but also American ideology regarding male and female gender dynamics. Despite discouragement from entering the workforce due to dominant masculinity, employment rates rose amongst Caucasian women. African American women, on the other hand, had been in the public employment sector prior to the Depression. African American women have always been working. Family dynamics within Caucasian households changed drastically. This project will explore if a similar shift occurred in African American familial structure. The Great Depression was a widespread crisis felt by millions. African American women were the most significantly and harshly affected.

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Introduction

On October 29, 1929, the rigid gender dynamics in the United States, not dissimilar to the stock market, crashed. The Great Depression sparked an abrupt shift in not only the American economy but also the American ideology regarding male and female gender and race dynamics. This rippled through different economic and regional groups despite the rigid social stratification of the time. Masculinity pre-Depression era, both martial and restrained, was one of domination. This could take the form of actual physical prowess or domestic and economic power over others — not dissimilar to themes seen in expansionist rhetoric. In nuclear families, men took on the role of provider in a time of economic growth in the United States. As the economy plummeted in the wake of the stock market crash, gender roles were drastically disrupted in ways that were caustic to the standardized norm of the era. This had profound consequences on American civil societies in the generations to follow. With a focus on the social implications of the Great Depression, this research is primarily a discourse on gender and race in the early twentieth century. A more holistic study of this time can be achieved by focusing not only on how this depression shaped the economic sphere but also what that meant for men and women, specifically African American women. Taking into consideration the way in which family dynamics were altered as a result of the crash, women and their roles within the workforce changed dramatically. As such this project will be focused primarily on how African American women were affected by the Great Depression and the rippling affect this had on generations to come.

The Great Depression lasted from the crash in 1929 until the United States' official entry into World War II (WWII) in 1941. This was not America's first major economic crisis, but it was one of the first that affected the middle-class in the major urban centers across the country,

such as New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago.¹ These cities became prominent in the wake of the Industrial Revolution as well as the Great Migration post-World War I (WWI). Men and women from poverty stricken southern states flocked to these supposed centers of opportunity. Throughout the course of this crisis, many actions were taken to preserve the American economy as well as the American populace, though certain members of the population seemed to garner less attention and aid than others. This disenfranchised group was primarily African Americans — specifically African American women. More to the point of the necessity of this research is the lack of information on this group in the *historical record*. With the recovery project as a driving force of historical growth, it is time to focus this lens of history on the public perception, treatment of, and burdening affect that the Great Depression had on the population that arguably suffered the deepest: African American women.

Purpose

This project explores whether African American women met similar public sentiments as Caucasian women during the Depression Era and how gender dynamics changed within African American households in urban America as well as the effect of the crisis on a populace that was not new to the work force. Historical statistical analysis and emphasis on labor policy are used to garner information. The Great Depression sparked an abrupt shift in not only the American economy but also American ideology regarding male and female gender dynamics. Despite discouragement from entering the workforce due to dominant masculinity, employment rates rose amongst Caucasian women. African American women, on the other hand, had been in the public employment sector prior to the Depression. African American women have always been working. Family dynamics within Caucasian households changed drastically. This project will

¹ Collins, Gail. *American Women: Four Hundred Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2007, pp. 352.

explore if a similar shift occurred in African American familial structure. The Great Depression was a widespread crisis felt by millions. African American women were the most significantly and harshly affected.

There is a large body of research surrounding the Great Depression. Everything from the economy to family values to social reform has been examined. However, there appears to be academic oversight explicitly regarding African American women and the Depression. Whether this is as a result of male-centered historical studies, something that has plagued America for centuries, or the lack of voice given to minorities in important cultural upheavals, it needs to be remedied. The significance of a study on African American women in urban settings during the Great Depression cannot be ignored. It will not only add to the scholarship on the subject, but it will also provide a different insight into the gendered dichotomy of public and private spheres. Though a gendered scrutiny of history has gained more prominence in the past few decades, there is still a lack of representation for African American women and their place in political and social movements.

This research seeks to offer a more holistic approach to this economic event and bring into focus various aspects of class, race, and gender to examine their rippling affects post-Depression and WWII. Race relations, tenuous at best, kept an insurmountable pressure on class and gender stratification during this era. There are many threads of inquiry to be incorporated in a larger study of this subject. The culmination of which will provide a clearer history on something that has been relatively left without research and provide answers to the research questions presented. The most important of these inquiries is whether African American women, who have always had a place in the public economic sphere, were discouraged as heavily as white women from pursuing employment; this will potentially lead to a careful analysis of race,

gender, and how this economic crisis may have led to further subordination of women. The crisis of gendered spheres and the forced labor dichotomy shifts, which acted as a catalyst for many social movements following the Depression. However, the focus on African American women during this era will provide an important, and seemingly silent, voice to the story of the Great Depression and the subsequent changes in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Historiography

Scholarship on the Great Depression focusing on gender has been primarily constructed around white women entering the work force and the loss of white male labor. This has left a



Figure 1 Newspaper Clipping Post-Crash (Found Online. Salinas, Cassandra. "The Great Depression.").

large gap in necessary scholarship. "The Depression was a time when wage-earning women were charged with stealing jobs from men...In reality, only rarely did women and men compete for the same jobs...nevertheless,

working women, especially married ones, became the scapegoats of a movement to reassert the separate sphere thinking of past decades."² Women entering the work force appeared to have a dual purpose — gaining wages to keep their families afloat as well as to be vilified and blamed for male unemployment. The separation of public and private spheres, male and female, as an ideology of respectability came into question when women were forced into the labor market to support their families. Even though women were not taking primarily male jobs, they were seen

² Hapke, Laura. *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s*. Athens, Ga.: U of Georgia, 1997. Xv.

as a hindrance to the male breadwinner, head of household concept of masculinity since they were still entering the workforce while their husbands were unemployed. 'Breadwinner' ideology was dominant throughout the Great Depression. This is, essentially, the concept that the male head of household was necessary as the functioning 'breadwinner.' Therefore, they needed the most aid in times of economic depression. A gendered labor market ensured that most jobs that women actually took during this time period were seen as feminine in nature, such as nurses, teachers, or factory workers. They made significantly less money than men and had little access to jobs with room for financial growth, such as doctors or lawyers.³ However, there was still a sentimentality of lost masculinity felt throughout the nation, and someone needed to take the blame. Consequently, white women were heavily discouraged from staying in the work force though many remained working throughout the Depression regardless simply to keep their families fed.

On the other hand, African Americans were most heavily affected by the Depression. "The economic crisis affected everyone...The Federal government in 1930 estimated that 17 percent of the white population and 38 percent of the black population could not support themselves without assistance. Those figures soon worsened. African Americans were particularly hard

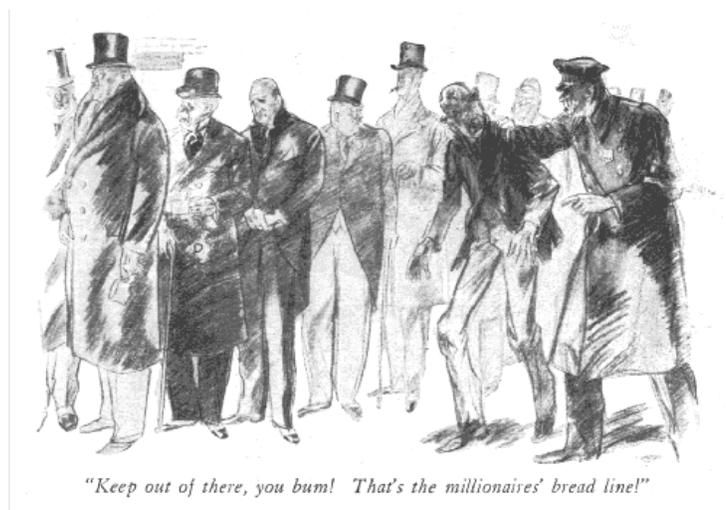


Figure 2 Original Cartoon Published in 1929 (Found Online. Crabtree, Cadwalder. "The Great Depression in Cartoons, Part 1: The Stock Market Crash." Archelaus. January 12, 2009.)

³ Srigley, Katrina. *Breadwinning Daughters: Young Working Women in a Depression-era City, 1929-1939*. Toronto: U of Toronto, 2010. Print. Pp. 129.

hit, as white men took jobs formerly held by black men.”⁴ A comparative study by Michelle Holder on labor statistics and the Great Recession of the early 21st century shows that this is a continuing trend even into the present.⁵ When recession hits, white men are likely to seek out labor jobs that were previously held by African Americans. Black women also faced severe unemployment rates. “The unemployment rates for African American women living in urban areas ranged from twice as high to four times as high as the rates of unemployment for white women. African American women participated in the paid workforce more often than white women during this time, meaning that many...families faced ‘dramatic welfare losses’ when compared to whites.”⁶ The clear indication of this information is that white men and women moved into occupational spheres previously held primarily by African Americans. However, there is very little information on how this affected the sentimentality regarding black women in the workforce. This is one of many instances where a specific narrative is missing in the historic record.

Outside of basic labor statistics, these are the two primary narratives presented about the sociological effect of the Great Depression. To put it very simply, white men pushed black men out of the labor force yet continued to blame white women for rampant unemployment. “Very few women had the luxury of working for pin money...But the issue of whether married women could work was chewed over constantly in the newspapers and women’s magazines, with the consensus coming down on the side of not...Legislators in twenty-six states introduced laws completely banning the hiring of married women.”⁷ White women were occupying a gendered

⁴ Greenberg, Cheryl Lynn. *To Ask for an Equal Chance: African Americans in the Great Depression*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011. Pp. 29.

⁵ Holder, Michelle. *African American Men and the Labor Market during the Great Recession*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2017. Pp. 23-34.

⁶ McComb, Mary C. *Great Depression and the Middle Class Experts, Collegiate Youth and Business Ideology, 1929-1941*. London: Taylor and Francis, 2013. Pp. 22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 363.

labor space that was rarely, if ever, occupied by men even prior to the Depression. However, they were still used as a national scapegoat to justify the breakdown of the male breadwinner and nuclear family. "The average family income dropped 40 percent between 1929 and 1933, and while men took second jobs...most of their [middle-class] wives stayed at home...At the bottom of the middleclass, women worried about losing their homes and falling back into the class of renters."⁸ Not only was the crisis destabilizing family and gender archetypes, it was also drastically shifting class lines. Women from the middle class were entering the lower class. Unemployment for African Americans was at an all-time high in urban settings with both men and women forced to find labor wherever they could. These individuals were already faced with life within the lower class. Evidence is present of white female employment rising during the Depression even though they were discouraged from entering the workforce. African American male employment decreased, which raises the question: what about African American women?

Great Migration

Prior to and during WWI, there was a significant influx of citizens from rural areas to urban settings. This rural migration flooded the working-class job market. An estimated eight hundred thousand to one million African American men and women left the South. Another million would soon join them headed for urban environments during the roaring 1920s.⁹ There were myriad factors contributing to this great move. One was as a result of the poverty faced in the south in the decades following the Civil War. African American men and women fled these poverty-stricken areas attempting to find alternative economic opportunities other than the

⁸ Collins, Gail. *Americas Women: Four Hundred Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2007, pp. 353.

⁹ Trotter, Joe William. "The Great Migration." *OAH Magazine of History* 17, no. 1 (2002): 31-33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163561>, pp. 31.

sharecropping and disenfranchisement that gripped the rural south.¹⁰ Extreme racism was also a factor. During WWI, with men serving overseas, there was a labor vacuum in urban settings, which was also a draw as men sought a less competitive job market; this catalyzed a move for many African Americans into these cities in search of work.¹¹ “The labor demands of northern industries, immigration restriction legislation, and greater access to the rights of citizens...all encouraged the movement of blacks into northern cities.”¹²

In the words of W.E.B Du Bois,

Much has been written of the recent migration of colored people from the South to the North, but there have been very few attempts to give a definite, coherent picture of the whole movement. Aided by the funds of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, THE CRISIS has attempted to put into concrete form such knowledge as we have of this movement. The data at hand are vague and have been collected from a hundred different sources. While the margin of error is large, the actual information which we have gathered is most valuable. First, as to the number who have migrated to the North, there is wide difference of opinion. Our own conclusion is that about 250,000 colored workmen have come northward. This figure has been builded up from reports like the following which we take from various personal sources and local newspaper accounts... As to the reasons of the migration, undoubtedly, the immediate cause was economic, and the movement began because of floods in middle Alabama and Mississippi and because the latest devastation of the boll weevil came in these same districts. A second economic cause was the cutting off of immigration from Europe to the North and the consequently wide-spread demand for common labor... The third reason has been outbreaks of mob violence in northern and southwestern Georgia and in western South Carolina. These have been the three immediate causes, but back of them is, undoubtedly, the general dissatisfaction with the conditions of the South... How great his migration will eventually prove depends upon a number of things. The entrance of the United States into the war will undoubtedly have some effect. When the war ends it is doubtful if the labor shortage in Europe will allow a very large migration to the United States for a generation or more. This will mean increased demand for colored laborers in the North... At any rate, we face here a social change among American Negroes of great moment, and one which needs to be watched with intelligent interest.¹³

Prior to the Great Depression, many men who sought to enter this labor force were

¹⁰ Ibid., 31.

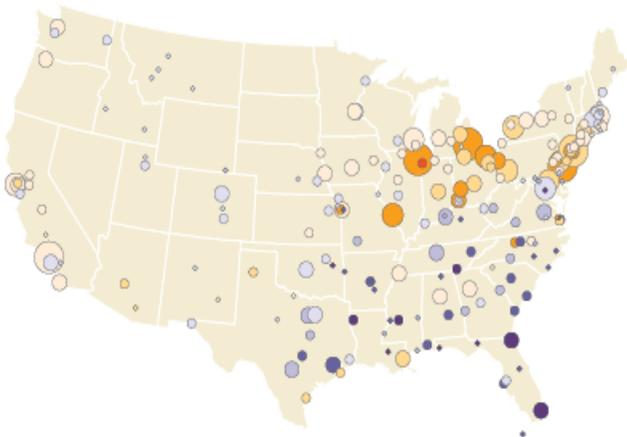
¹¹ Banner-Haley, Charles Pete. “The Philadelphia Tribune and the Persistence of Black Republicanism during the Great Depression.” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*, vol. 65, no. 2, 1998. Pp. 191.

¹² Trotter, pp. 31-32.

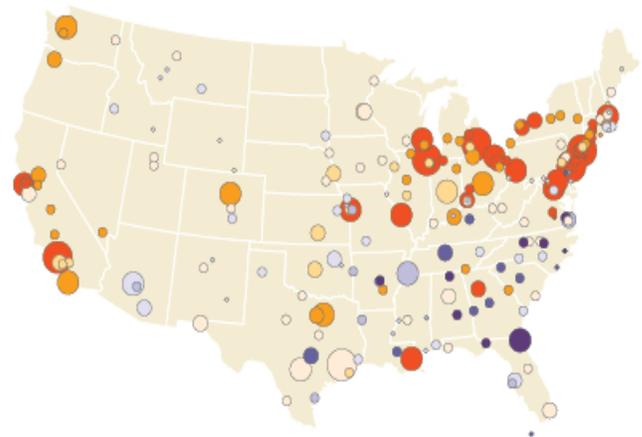
¹³ W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Migration of Negroes," *Crisis* (June 1917): Pp. 63-66.

African Americans. “As African Americans moved into northern cities in growing numbers, a black industrial working class emerged.”¹⁴ Already in competition with soldiers returning to American post-WWI, African Americans were hit particularly hard during the economic crisis of 1929. Prior to the crash, they faced discrimination as a result of their burgeoning numbers in Northern cities. Race riots as well as neighborhood segregation became commonplace. African Americans responded to these setbacks by “intensifying their institution building, cultural, political, economic and civil rights activities. They built churches, mutual aid societies...and launched diverse labor, civil rights, and political organizations...culminat[ing] in the rise of the “new Negro” movement,”¹⁵ which would later be a term synonymous with the Harlem Renaissance. Despite this infrastructure and community building, the Great Depression had

The First Great Migration:
1910-1940



The Second Great Migration:
1940-1970



The change in share of Blacks in cities is based on the percentage point difference in the percent of population that was Black in the later time period compared to the earlier. For example, 18.3 percent of the population in Gary, IN was Black in 1940 but was just 2.3 in 1910, which represented a 16.0 percentage-point change in the share of Blacks in the city. It was the largest change in share during the First Great Migration. By the end of the Second Great Migration, Newark, NJ had realized the largest increase in Black population share, with the Black proportion of the city rising from 10.8 in 1940 to 54.2 in 1970.

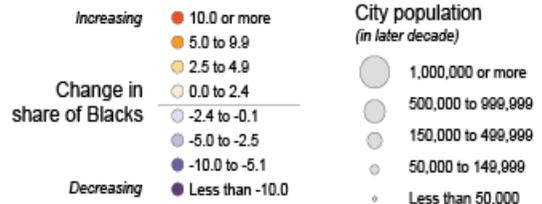


Figure 3 Calculating the Great Migration (Found Online. Website Services & Coordination Staff, and US Census Bureau. "The Great Migration, 1910 to 1970." U.S. Census. March 01, 1994.)

¹⁴ Trotter ,Pp. 32.

¹⁵Ibid., 33.

devastating effects on African Americans — particularly women.

However, the draw of labor in lieu of extreme racism and discrimination drew many to flock north even during the Depression era. With the southern agricultural economy facing severe setbacks during this era, urban areas continued to draw attention. “Despite declining opportunities to work in...northern cities, black migration continued during the depression years. The percentage of urban blacks rose from about forty-four percent in 1930 to nearly fifty percent during the depression years....Public social services played an increasing role in decisions to move...The increasing migration of blacks to cities intensified the poverty of established citizens.”¹⁶ Urban labor markets were the site of major upheaval as a result of the Great Depression, which was seen prominently in African American communities because of the Great Migration increasing their population in these settings.

Research Statistics

Women during the Great Depression were discouraged from pursuing jobs, particularly in households where men were previously the primary provider. This was seen as an affront to masculinity not only in the way that it took power away from men in the private sphere but also as it limited access to the work force for men in the public sphere. This concept of separate spheres is one that predominantly affected the middle class. Domestic spheres excluded women from public participation in the economy as well as policy. “Historians...first perceived separate spheres as an ideology adopted by women to justify their exclusion from public life and to rationalize the effects of the economy that increasingly removed production from the household...Stretched across class lines and now widely applied to analyses of poor, black, and immigrant women, the idea of separate spheres [also] underlines female participation in, and

¹⁶ Joe William Trotter, Jr., "From a Raw Deal to a New Deal?: 1929-1945," in *To Make Our World Anew*, ed. Robin D. G. Kelley and Earl Lewis. New York. 2000.

control of, neighborhood activity.”¹⁷ However, during this tumultuous time period, more women entered the workforce further blurring the already blurred line between public and private spheres. This was a trend in primarily Caucasian households; on the other hand, African American jobs decreased drastically. White men were more willing to pursue jobs that were previously deemed ‘black’ jobs than occupations that were seen as ‘women’s work.’ However, African American women had been involved in the workforce for, colloquially, forever. In some cases, “[m]en did take job as teachers and librarians and social workers, reducing the number of women in those professions,”¹⁸ yet these occupations were primarily held by Caucasian women from prior to the economic crisis.

Masculinity in American culture is a shifting ideology. What defines masculinity has been debated in academia; the easiest answer to this question is that it is changing. Hegemonic concepts of manhood in the United States have shifted from participation in political culture to martial masculinity and during the time of the Great Depression labor and restrained masculinity. One typology focused on physical masculinity and aggressive expansionism while the other was more influenced by domesticity, virtue, and public service (respectively). Martial masculinity was keen on annexation while restrained masculinity was focused on trade expansion, which was indicative of regional differences at the time. Masculinity simply took a different form — economic and trade expansionism. Martial masculinity was still a great point of interest even in lieu of actual annexation and is a caustic aspect of American masculinity even to this day.¹⁹

Money can be gendered particularly in households where men had access and authority

¹⁷ Kessler-Harris, Alice. *A Womans Wage: Historical Meanings and Social Consequences*. Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1990. Pp. 59.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 364.

¹⁹ Greenberg, Amy S. *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2005. Pp. 3-38.

over fiscal interactions. With husbands and fathers having the greatest access to capital, as well as the only means in which to distribute it, this creates a gendered hierarchy centered on the work force. This closely ties masculinity to money.²⁰ With this in mind, labor and money defined manhood at the time of the Great Depression. These masculine identities apply primarily to Caucasian men. African American men, and consequently the African American gender structure, was not formed through annexation or martial masculinity. Rather, it was founded in something else. Therefore, the economic crisis threatened Caucasian masculinity and family structure because of the loss of capital earned. The crisis affected African American families in a dissimilar way.

A way to start to deconstruct this discourse is the careful analysis of economic statistics of African American women prior to the Great Depression juxtaposed with post-depression era, as many African American women were already working while white women were just stepping into the job market. While white women were searching for space in the public sphere to work, African American women have always been in the work force in one form or another. Around the turn of the twentieth century, “[o]ne in every four married African American women labored for profit or wages, while only three in one hundred white wives pursued paid work.”²¹ Research into this phenomenon is brief. With African American women always present in the public sphere and labor market, ideology surrounding their participation during this era is difficult to deconstruct. As work was already a part of many African American women’s lives they felt not only greater disenfranchisement from all groups, but were also amongst the worst off in the wake of the crisis; they were faced with a loss of wage for primarily two-wage households. This

²⁰ Zelizer, Vivian. *The Social Meaning of Money. Pin Money, Paychecks, Poor Relief, and Other Currencies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1997.

²¹ Blackwelder, Julia Kirk. *Now Hiring the Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995*. College Station: Texas A & M UP, 1997. Pp. 13-15.

demographic tended to lean toward taking over more labor-intensive jobs, which was seen as primarily ‘African American’ male work. African American men were more reticent with their disapproval of African American women working than white men were. African American men at this time were faced with lower wages and higher job discrimination; women in African American families were already working to help keep their families fed even before the economic crisis.

These women were working in fields that were different than their husbands, but they were nevertheless greatly hindered by the Great Depression. Many labor statistics cite African American women working in the service industry, primarily as household laborers for middle and upper class white families.²² However, focusing on African American women in predominantly urban settings does not ignore the fact that these women were employed in a variety of fields outside of domestic work and the service industry. For the purpose of this project, the focus is on these specific women and how the Great Depression affected them.

As money was drained from the economy and white families were unable to afford maids or nannies in their homes, African American women were pushed out of white homes. With white families unable to support this area of the service industry, African American women had to search for work elsewhere. With African American women losing a pivotal niche in the labor market, and with many African American households relying on two incomes, their families faced greater poverty struggles while Caucasian families shifted how their children were reared. “Until the 1940s, majority of women employed in service jobs were domestic servants. Among those domestics a disproportionate share were black women...who simply continued to perform the kind of service they had given under slavery. These black women faced discrimination in

²² Ibid. 13-17.

their efforts to enter the ranks of the new service workers in offices and stores, but because they often had to support their families as the primary breadwinner, they took whatever work was available in the lowest status, lowest-paying service occupation.”²³ These women were forced to struggle to an even greater degree than what they were previously facing.

Outside of the lack of employment opportunities, where labor jobs were being taken by white men and women in domestic fields were unable to find regular income, blatant racism in urban centers reached an all-time high during the Depression. Some labor unions outright refused membership. Department stores, hotels, and major employers in the public sector in northern urban centers refused to hire African Americans — favoring white employment during the crisis. The major employers in cities, such as the transit system and public utilities, that would still employ African Americans during the Depression refused to allow them jobs outside of custodial or menial labor.²⁴ Though claims were made that relief agencies in the north were less discriminatory than in the south, African Americans were still faced with high rates of unemployment. This crisis became so apparent that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) which had previously focused on educational and legal rights for African Americans turned their focus to the large scale unemployment of African Americans.²⁵

More to this point, the effect of the Great Depression on the service industry in general is worth comment. Many African American men who were not primarily working in the labor industry had roles in the service industry, such as bell hops and busboys. As these urban settings,

²³ Brownlee, W. Elliot, and Mary M. Brownlee. *Women in the American Economy: A Documentary History, 1675 to 1929*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976, pp. 243.

²⁴ Zieger, Robert H. "Race and Labor in Depression and War." In *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America since 1865*, 106-38. University Press of Kentucky, 2007.
<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/stable/j.ctt5vkkh1.8>. Pp. 107.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

which thrived on various aspects of this entertainment industry, became increasingly economically downtrodden, African American men were suddenly and drastically unemployed. With white families unable to spend money on things, such as going out to eat or participating in night culture, African American men lost another valuable source of revenue. As white men were pushing into labor jobs and money was not going into other avenues of employment for African American men, the strenuous race relations in urban settings became more pronounced, as did African American family relations with male unemployment at an all-time high. This aspect of the economy shifted family paradigms for African Americans, specifically on whether these women, who were already working to keep their families out of poverty, were discouraged from doing so as their husbands lost their breadwinner identities. “The people who suffered most during the Depression had generally been poor all along...Few women were actually on the Breadlines...and there were no cheap flophouses for women as there were for men.”²⁶ There were greater poverty allowances afforded for men than women, yet women were still tasked with providing for children and family.

By presenting the devastating effect of the Great Depression on men of varying classes as a catalyst for the discouragement of women in the labor force, a more holistic study of family structure as well as femininity at the time can be achieved. The union between employment and manhood are significant when regarding a stratified America. Gender has been used as a way to signify power relations. By examining nuances within gender ideology in terms of class and race, as well as gender, during the Depression era, questions about these power relations and subsequent developments arise. The study of these differences brings into focus more than one voice and viewpoint of this tumultuous era in the early twentieth century.

²⁶ Ibid., 354.

Family Structure

Similar to major crises throughout history, the Great Depression had an explicit effect on the family structure in the United States. Outside of the debate between public versus private, or ‘breadwinner’ masculinity ideology, the crash not only dramatically changed the ways in which families operated, but in some cases it completely destroyed them. Women, forced not only to tend to their familial obligations as homemakers but also to enter the workforce to stave off extreme poverty, found many ways in which to fill their new roles. However, in many cases conflict arose as a result of this added strain between men and women, women and other women, as well as women and children. Increased responsibility and pressure in some cases led women to become not only used as scapegoats in the public because of their perceived threat to masculinity in labor, but also treated poorly in the private sphere.

Though the concept of public versus private is a narrow sphere for categorizing women, particularly outside of the middle class, sentimentality regarding this necessary divide was alive and well in early twentieth century America. One model historians have used to begin breaking down this system, the ‘family economy’ model,²⁷ focuses on lower-class women working cohesively with their family unit to maximize the monetary benefits a family would or could receive. “Whether women contributed unwaged but necessary labor or earned wages...women’s economic significance was central to their families’ survival.”²⁸ This counters the completely binary public versus private sphere by maintaining that women worked in cooperation with the rest of their household to maintain economic stability — whether through wages or domestic work. However, this model is problematically limiting. One reason this is the case is that it

²⁷ Helmbold, Lois Rita. "Beyond the Family Economy: Black and White Working-Class Women during the Great Depression." *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 3 (1987): 629-55. doi:10.2307/3177885. Pp, 633.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 632.

applies a female stereotype to an entire population. It assumes that women are either a “dutiful daughter...[or a] malleable matron,”²⁹ with little reference to other genres of women. It also exclusively focuses of the experiences of *white* women in the earliest twentieth century.

Family structure was drastically different for African American families versus Caucasian families “due, most importantly, to the experiences of slavery, racism, and African and Afro-American cultural practices and values.”³⁰ The concept of the nuclear family is uniquely Caucasian. African American women have consistently existed in the so-called ‘public’ sphere, working outside of their homes, while still maintaining a family. Recent scholarship on African American family structure has focused on more extensive kinship systems, which challenges this family economy binary model. This scholarship “does not exclude from consideration women who are neither wives nor daughters, nor does it credit marital and parental relations with the sole power to explain family decisions.”³¹ Though both white and black women used elements of cooperation in their domestic lives, the Great Depression highlights some specific differences in the ways in which families coped as well as struggled through the crisis. Family stability for both groups suffered; however, the fact that family structure was arguably different prior to the crisis means the women suffered in different ways.

More Caucasian women entered the workforce. They were not greatly accepted in their public roles, yet they continued to be involved in various labor activities throughout the Depression era. This put a strain on the perceived ‘nuclear’ family structure. It threatened masculinity and also left a vacuum in the domestic sphere that others were forced to fill. However, in some cases their entry into the public sphere was seen as commitment to their

²⁹ Ibid., 632.

³⁰ Ibid., 634.

³¹ Ibid., 635.

families — seen as sacrifice.³² On one hand, they were targeted in the public for ‘taking male jobs,’ while on the other hand, they were heralded in the private for their sacrifice. In this sense, Caucasian women were able to make great progress in efforts to gain autonomy and equality.

African American women suffered the worst during this crisis in terms of perception because not only had they already been doing this work, therefore they garnered no great recognition for continuing to do so, whereas white women were in some cases being heralded for their sacrifice in domesticity. “White women replaced black women by moving down the occupational ladder of desirability. For black women already on the bottom run, there was no lower step, and they were effectively pushed out of the labor force.”³³ In households that relied on two incomes even before the economic crash, this created greater tension and dissension in the home. African American women were forced to do whatever possible to maintain a stable familial economy while facing external pressure with little to no support from the government or legislative processes. This can be seen in the problematic and at times racist application of New Deal policy.

New Deal Policy

The New Deal is defined as “the domestic program of the administration of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt between 1933 and 1939, which took action to bring about immediate economic relief as well as reforms in industry, agriculture, finance, waterpower, labor, and housing, vastly increasing the scope of the federal government’s activities.”³⁴ Though many efforts were made during the New Deal legislation process to offer protection and aid for workers and unemployed members of the American public, there were significant corners of the

³² Ibid., 635-636.

³³ Ibid., 636.

³⁴ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "New Deal." Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/New-Deal>.

population that were ignored in favor of others. Minority groups suffered the heaviest with employers and laws catering to white Americans. More to the point, few specific policies were intended to help African American men. Hardly any were implemented to assist women in the workforce. It has been argued that the New Deal, and its subsequent welfare initiatives, was implemented predominantly for the ‘breadwinner.’³⁵ Legislation created a multitude of federal

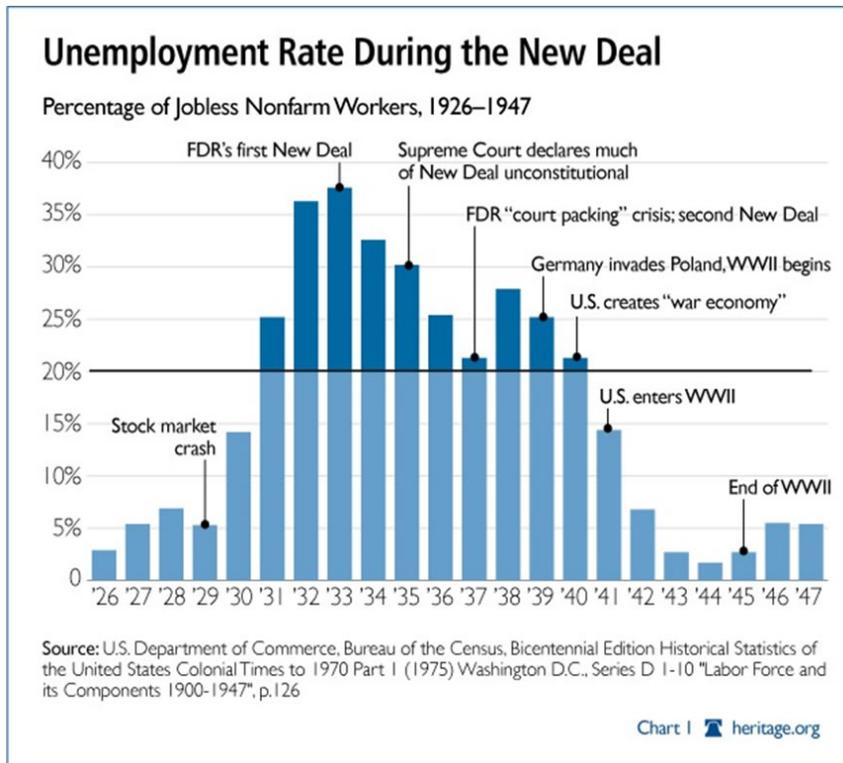


Figure 4 Unemployment Rate Prior to and Post New Deal Implementation. (Found Online. Unemployment." The Great Depression: 1929-1939. Accessed April 14, 2018.)

organizations to provide immediate aid to the disenfranchised, to revitalize agrarian communities, and to create jobs in areas of infrastructure. Yet, few of these groups seemed concerned with women in the work force. Even less were concerned about African Americans.

After the fall of 1929, the

American public became painfully aware of the fact that POTUS Herbert Hoover was floundering in response to the economic crisis. He assumed the stock market crash was a temporary problem that would rectify itself within a short time span. This belief did very little to help the millions of unemployed and starving Americans. In a radio address in 1931 he stated that, “[n]o governmental action, no economic doctrine, no economic plan or project can replace

³⁵ Self, Robert O. *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2013. Print. Pp. 18.

that God-imposed responsibility of the individual man and woman to their neighbors. That is a vital part of the very soul of a people. If we shall gain in this spirit from this painful time, we shall have created a greater and more glorious America. The trial of it is here now. It is a trial of the heart and the conscience, of individual men and women”³⁶ asserting that it was up to the individual as well as community outreach to rectify the depression and that governmental aid would be unnecessary. African American men and women were particularly unimpressed with Herbert Hoover’s administration efforts. Outside of his inability to find solutions to the economic crisis, Hoover nominated John Parker as a Supreme Court Justice. This man was condemned by the NAACP as having a history of enacting legislation that was particularly racially biased and discriminatory toward African Americans³⁷.

In juxtaposition to Hoover’s hands-off governmental approach to dealing with the Great Depression crisis, Roosevelt ran his 1932 election on the concept of government assistance. “His first major official act after he took office on March 4, 1933, was to save the big banks and big depositors at the expense of the small[er] banks.”³⁸ His clear intention of big government and federal intervention shaped the New Deal policies that were to come. “Roosevelt’s reforms were introduced in peace time, were stabilized and routinized during the war, and then developed enough resiliency to enable organized labor to survive the post war retrenchment.”³⁹ However, it would become clear that certain members of the American public were not considered high priority when it came to administrative assistance. Leaps and bounds were made in terms of

³⁶ "Herbert Hoover: Radio Address to the Nation on Unemployment Relief - October 18, 1931." The American Presidency Project. Accessed April 16, 2018. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=22855>.

³⁷ Sklaroff, Lauren Rebecca. "Ambivalent Inclusion." In *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era*, 15-32. University of North Carolina Press, 2009. doi:10.5149/9780807899243_sklaroff.5. Pp. 16.

³⁸ Preis, Art. *Labor's Giant Step: The First Twenty Years of the CIO, 1936-1955*. New York: Pathfinder, 2009. Pp. 10.

³⁹ Dubofsky, Melvyn, and Joseph Anthony. McCartin. *Hard Work: The Making of Labor History*. Pp 125.

helping the poverty stricken citizens of the United States, but it is clear through the study of specific legislation that these policies were reflective of the racial views of the time.

One such instance is with the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). Passed in the Spring of 1933, the AAA was focused on the preservation of the agricultural industry in the



"I think I'll plow under every third parsnip."

Figure 5 Cartoon Criticizing the Agricultural Adjustment Act (Found Online. Shellhase, George. June 1935. Bearish News. November 13, 2009. <http://www.bearishnews.com/post/2580>.)

United States. Already tenuous, as the farming economy had been in somewhat of a crisis since the early 1920s, the Great Depression made this economic crisis even more dire. In the early twentieth century agrarian practices played a large role in the American economy. New Deal legislators saw the failing agricultural economy just as important as industrial crises and acted swiftly to remedy it. The largest problem facing the agricultural community was falling prices happening simultaneously

with overproduction.⁴⁰ With the AAA,

the government paid farmers to limit their

production and to use only portions of their land. At the same time, the government promised a reasonable and stable price for the crops these farmers did produce. The legislation also offered protection for smaller farms to be able to compete with larger agrarian monopolies. This was to

⁴⁰ Brinkley, Alan. "The New Deal Experiments." In *The Achievement of American Liberalism: The New Deal and Its Legacies*, edited by Chafe William H., 1-20. NEW YORK: Columbia University Press, 2003. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/chaf11212.5>. Pp. 13-14.

afford sustainable sources of income for tenant farmers, sharecroppers, as well as small family farms.⁴¹ However, “most landowners simply ignored the provisions requiring them to keep tenants on the land”⁴² because the president had allowed the farmers in certain regions to be in charge of creating and administering certain reform policies. In rural southern communities, the majority of sharecroppers and tenant farmers were African Americans. The AAA, though successful in stabilizing the agrarian economy and supplementing American farmers, greatly hindered African Americans leading to even greater migration to urban settings.

Focusing on the plight of not only African Americans but also other tenant farmers, or owners of small farms, a small grassroots organization called the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) was founded in 1934 to protest the AAA.⁴³ This organization grew to represent thousands of farmers in the American South and was also genuinely integrated with just as many African American members as Caucasian members. Though many members faced poverty and vulnerability during this crisis, large scale efforts were made to protest the AAA. Protests and demonstrations were mobilized quickly with a focus on labor and class exploitation rather

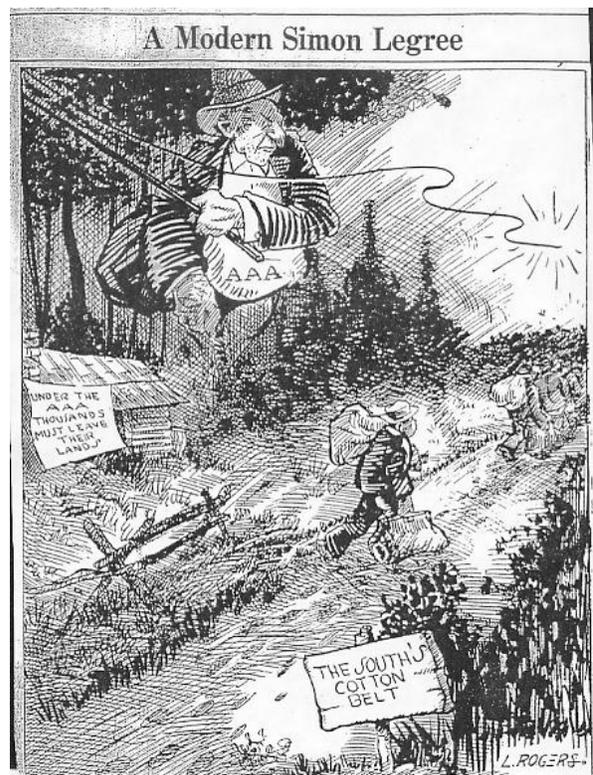


Figure 6 Cartoon Criticizing the AAA Highlighting the Struggle of Sharecroppers. (Found Online. Rogers, L. May 1934. Bearish News. November 13, 2009.)

⁴¹ Brinkley, 14.

⁴² Ibid., 14.

⁴³ Zieger, Robert H. "Race and Labor in Depression and War." In *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America since 1865*, 106-38. University Press of Kentucky, 2007.
<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/stable/j.ctt5vkkh1.8>. Pp. 109.

than explicitly race. The STFU rapidly gained congressional support as well as media coverage. In 1935, the first AAA was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court and a new Agricultural Adjustment Act was passed in 1937 due to the efforts of this integrated movement. This new AAA “contained stronger – though still inadequate – language designed to protect the interests of tenants and croppers”⁴⁴ though many still saw the effort as a great success in terms of African American and Caucasian collaboration during the Depression era. STFU worked together cohesively for years.

Specifically regarding women, many New Deal policy and legislation boxed women into seemingly ‘traditional’ domestic and gender roles. The Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC), created in 1933, explicitly excluded women.⁴⁵ They had policy against hiring women, while women were offered less options than men. In lieu of CCC work, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) created camps specifically for women that focused on domestic work. These relief programs narrowed the already small employment field for women by having them focus on things such as producing clothing, food, and also helped these women find employment as housekeepers. As this was previously niche occupied by African American women, many found themselves out of work and worse off than prior to the Depression.⁴⁶

Other ways that African American women were negatively affected by New Deal policies were simply through exclusion. The Fair Labor Standards Act, created in 1938, was focused on minimum wages as well as standard sustainable maximum hour regulations to maintain worker

⁴⁴ Ibid. 110.

⁴⁵ Bass, Melissa. "The CCC's Tools, Rules, and Targets." In *The Politics and Civics of National Service: Lessons from the Civilian Conservation Corps, VISTA, and AmeriCorps*, 56-78. Brookings Institution Press, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctt4cg79r.9>. Pp. 67.

⁴⁶ "Impact of the Great Depression on Women." Encyclopedia.com. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/economics/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/women-impact-great-depression>.

safety. This act was intended to standardized labor practices across the country.⁴⁷ However, this act specifically excluded domestic workers as well as farmers. These two positions were predominantly held by African American as a result of centuries of racism, slavery, and misogyny. African American women domestic workers were being forced out of their traditional occupation roles by FERA camps, and when able to retain said roles, they were faced with discriminatory and unsafe labor practices.

Outside of policy that outright favored Caucasian Americans, the handling of certain New Deal policies left African Americans lacking sufficient aid. Many New Deal agencies participated in racially discriminatory practices. During Roosevelt's initial administration many agencies were decentralized. As a result, relief practices as well as distribution of aid were left to local officials. In many areas, both rural and urban, this resulted in widespread discrimination against minorities.⁴⁸ One element of discrimination was wage differences between racial groups. In this sense, not only were certain acts discriminatory but rather the entire system was reflective of the racial tensions and prejudices of the time. This would come under great criticism by the NAACP. When a new position was created within the New Deal to focus explicitly on racial issues and the economy, the NAACP greatly opposed Clark Foreman as the appointee.⁴⁹ Foreman was a white man. A white man specifically in charge of how New Deal policies affected African American men and women did not sit well with the African American public. "Over time [many] factors contributed to black Americans' support for Roosevelt," as well as his administration throughout the course of the New Deal experiment, though, "the president would

⁴⁷ Tait, John W. "The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938." *The University of Toronto Law Journal* 6, no. 1 (1945): 192-233. doi:10.2307/824285.

⁴⁸ Sklaroff, pp. 19.

⁴⁹ Sklaroff, pp. 20.

never support any far-reaching structural change[s].”⁵⁰ This left many African Americans feeling disenfranchised during a recovery project that was intended to help *all* Americans survive the economic collapse.

Housing

Long-term poverty has adverse effects on all. However, men and women have vastly different experiences with long-term unemployment, particularly at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this sense, poverty is gendered. Some arguments have been made that poverty leading to homelessness was felt proportionally more for women during this time period. Prior to this particular era, women had never fully been separated from the domestic sphere with identities still strongly routed in family and home.⁵¹ This was not universal, and on a large scale women “ha[d] been bound to the home by ideology, moral structures, and idealized notions about motherhood and the family”⁵² for centuries. During the course of the Great Depression many women became homeless. This had a debilitating effect on sentiment of the time.

Not only were these women losing work and necessary income, they were also vilified in the public. Outside of being considered interlopers in the male dominated public field of employment, women also faced other bias in the public eye. Where men also were negatively affected by the economic collapse, both mentally and physically, the public opinion surrounding men unable to find work were on the whole fairly positive. It was looking forward. “Representations of the unemployed an...were generally optimistic, pointing...to a strong sense of responsibility and determination to provide for his family, even if it ultimately means

⁵⁰ Slaroff, pp. 25.

⁵¹ Abelson, Elaine S. ""Women Who Have No Men to Work for Them": Gender and Homelessness in the Great Depression, 1930-1934." *Feminist Studies* 29, no. 1 (2003): 105-27.
<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/stable/3178478>. Pp. 106.

⁵² *Ibid.* 106.

accepting relief.”⁵³ Men would rise above. Women, in contrast, were spoken of in the media as basically losing their minds over the crisis. They were depicted as over-emotional and borderline hysteric.

Certain articles printed in the 1930s clearly display this. One article in the *New York Herald Tribune* used the example of one singular woman who was unemployed for months and had a nervous breakdown to label the entirety of the female race as unable to cope with the economic crisis.⁵⁴ In 1931, *Survey Magazine* wrote articles entitled “Women at the Breaking Point” and “Ragged White Collars” while advocating for the aid of these women who were close to mental collapse.⁵⁵ Women were highlighted as existing in a state of panic while men remained stoic and well organized, and “for social welfare agencies homeless men were a management problem; they were numbers. Women became gender issues above all.”⁵⁶ A specific image was created to codify these women and categorize them. They were hysterical, single, young, and in extreme peril. They were also always classified as white.

These contemporary accounts completely whitewashed the problems facing unemployed and homeless African American women. A term ‘new poor’ became popular to describe the women who were suddenly so downtrodden. This term excluded lower class individuals as well as racial minorities. However, in general the rate of homelessness was reactionary to a city’s relative racial population, with African American women facing the brunt of the crisis. Traditionally African American churches and religiously affiliated organizations that were normally the institutions that offered the most aid to the homeless were overwhelmed, nearly buckling under the high rate of unemployed black women. These women faced racial

⁵³ Ibid., 108.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 108.

⁵⁵ Ibid.,109

⁵⁶ Ibid., 109.

discrimination at shelters, which were seen particularly in New York City. In fact, the Welfare Council in the 1930s, charged with placing women in safe housing situations, singled out black women as being the most difficult to place.⁵⁷ However, due to lack of clear evidence and data, since African American women have *largely* been ignored in the historic record, the exact number of homeless African American women is still unknown. Visibility of this crisis was focused on middle class white women, the ‘new poor,’ at the expense of African American women and their voice.

Harlem Renaissance

A heavily influenced urban setting prior to and during the Great Depression within the African American community was Harlem in the early twentieth century. This cultural melting pot was indicative of the time and sentiment in the wake of the crisis. The Great Migration set off a chain of events that culminated in a rapid cultural and artistic explosion, the most famous of which was the Harlem Renaissance in New York City. “To outsiders – even to some participants - Harlem arts and letters seemed to be a natural consequence of the great folk migration begun during the war. Like foam over a robust beer, they were thought to have risen to the top under pressure from ten times ten thousand Afro-Americans pouring into the generous, well-cut glass handed them at the end of Manhattan Island.”⁵⁸ Though the Great Depression played a part in the eventual decline of the Harlem Renaissance, it is no question that the entertainment industry was irrevocably changed as a result of it. Harlem, prior to the Depression, was a place for many, white and African American alike, to seek entertainment and was the birth place of many types of cultural expression that are still present today. Harlem’s nightlife attracted many New Yorkers and tourists. It was popularized mainly as a result of city authorities choosing to turn a blind eye

⁵⁷ Ibid., 109.

⁵⁸ Lewis, David Levering. *When Harlem Was in Vogue*. New York: Oxford UP, 1989. Pp. 119.

to so called 'white vice' in a predominantly African American neighborhood.⁵⁹ As such, during the Great Depression it was a site of many cultures meeting and intermingling. It was also the site of most New York's major African American social organizations.⁶⁰ Many African American artists gained great popularity and following during this Renaissance and the subsequent Depression, changing not only the way entertainment occurred in Harlem but also how it was received throughout the nation. This was as a result of not only the exchange of cultures but also the close proximity of nightclubs with social and political organizations. Many prominent writers of this time worked closely with, for example, the NAACP.⁶¹ "Because of...deteriorating living conditions, Harlem in the 1930s became the site of intense organizing and social reform efforts by a spectrum of political groups...such as the NAACP and the Urban League...and broad based community advocacy coalitions."⁶²

The date, range, and name of the Harlem Renaissance has been highly contested in recent history. Though the nomenclature would assume that this movement was born out of Harlem New York, many writers and artists at this time were not geographically located in New York City. As such, many contemporaries of this era called this the *New Negro Movement*, not the Harlem Renaissance, though the phrase is what it is most frequently referred to. Langston Hughes has written about the movement roughly beginning in 1921 and ending with the stock market crash in 1929. However, this has also been contested heavily, as many authors continued to produce important work throughout the Great Depression.⁶³ As a result, much of the work

⁵⁹ Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: The Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. London: Flamingo, 1995. Print. Pp. 247.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 245.

⁶¹ Lewis, 248-251.

⁶² Johnson, Lauri. "A Generation of Women Activists: African American Female Educators in Harlem, 1930-1950." *The Journal of African American History* 89, no. 3 (2004): 223-40. doi:10.2307/4134076. Pp. 225.

⁶³ Jimoh, A. Yemisi. "African American Review." *African American Review*, vol. 33, no. 3, 1999, pp. 526-528. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2901222.

became political in nature particularly when considering the racist New Deal policies influencing poverty stricken urban neighborhoods. Political organizations, such as the NAACP, centered in Harlem addressed and dealt with these issues through various forms of social expression.

The exchange of ideology between these organizations and the entertainment industry became a catalyst for social change during the Great Depression and afterward. Harlem as a site of cultural exchange, particularly during the Harlem Renaissance and the Great Depression, aids greatly to uncover predominant gendered narratives of the times. Its importance ranged far outside just the outpouring of art and entertainment, but also as a cultural hub and opened dialogue between African American and white New Yorkers. This is discussed in *When Harlem was in Vogue* by David Levering Lewis. A work that deconstructs various figures of the time, from Langston Hughes to Zora Neale Hurston, Lewis attempts to show the sociological impact of the Harlem Renaissance on cultural exchanges at the time.⁶⁴ It was a time of artistic expression, but also political and cultural importance in the way it shaped relationships between African Americans and Caucasians in New York City. Though “[n]othing could have seemed to most Afro-Americans more extravagantly impractical as a means of improving racial standing than writing poetry or novels, or painting...a few Harlem luminaries were keenly aware that some white writers had already found the Afro-American a salable commodity in the literary world. The times were obviously ripe.”⁶⁵ This literary exchange opened new venues of creation. The Harlem Renaissance created a new platform of racial expression that changed the conversation regarding race and gender in America — with the Great Depression heavily influencing it.

Outside of political activism and cultural geographical upheaval, the Harlem Renaissance

⁶⁴ Lewis, David Levering. *When Harlem Was in Vogue*. New York: Oxford UP, 1989. Pp. 88-91.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

brought to light many changing gender roles. Gender, previously considered a juxtaposition of public versus private, masculinity versus femininity, took a drastic turn post WWI. It also afforded African American women great changes in terms of recognition and education. “Higher education prepared black women for the world’s work, not simply by showing them better ways to work but by showing them a better world. Women left seminaries, normal schools, and colleges with much more than a finite body of knowledge or a set of skills; they departed imbued with a reformist zeal for racial ‘uplift’ and armed with a full quiver of intellectual weapons to aim at poverty and discrimination.”⁶⁶ The Harlem Renaissance both reacted to changing social and political elements as well as commented on this social change through myriad forms of expression which remained pivotal throughout the Great Depression.

Conclusion

Seeking to escape poverty and racial prejudice in the South, African American men and women migrated north in droves. There, though faced with similar discrimination, men became firmly entrenched in urban labor while black women continued to work, as they had done immemorial, to help support their families. Familial structure depended on two parents’ income to exist. Women occupied service industry and domestic jobs as men who could not find work in heavy labor also joined many facets of the service industry. With the economic crash of 1929, men were forced out of these roles as lower and middle class white men sought alternate forms of income. This produced heavy strain on African American families dependent on two paychecks to survive with basic necessities. African American women lost domestic roles, with Caucasian women opting to either take these roles themselves or seek monetary compensation through domestic work. African American families suffered the heaviest throughout the Great

⁶⁶ Gilmore, Glenda Elizabeth. *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2006. Pp. 31.

Depression. New Deal policies intended to help protect and support the American public, yet turned a blind eye to their struggle in lieu of white men and women in highly racialized ways. Certain neighborhoods, such as Harlem in New York City, banded together to try and assuage the crisis yet the poverty gap continued to stretch inordinate amounts. Historical data from this time period fails to account for the everyday struggle of African American women — women who were discouraged from participating in the work force they had continuously occupied. Throughout this crisis, these women suffered most heavily as mothers, wives, and workers. Their voices unheard, they continued to support and protect their families and ways of life through whatever means possible. It is through statistical analysis, political commentary, and focus on their struggles that a more holistic and pivotal interpretation of this crisis can be gleaned. Over the course of this research project, in-depth historical analysis was employed. Throughout this process there was a significant voice missing from the narrative. Works from multiple disciplines failed to recognize and applaud the struggle and work of African American women in this time period. This problematic scenario is not new in the historic record. This is something necessary to remedy for academia moving forward.

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