Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood

African American Women's Clubs in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago

Anne Meis Knupfer

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To my grandparents, Alfonsus and Marcelinda Meis,
who taught me their language and culture,

and to my son, Franz Paul Knupfer

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TOWARD A TENDERER HUMANITY AND A NOBLER WOMANHOOD

INTRODUCTION

ORIGINALLY I WAS GOING TO WRITE A BOOK ABOUT mothers' clubs in Chicago, comparing those of African American, native-born white, Jewish, and Italian women. Although I was able to locate many historical materials on native-born white mothers' clubs, there were few sources on African American mothers' clubs or the kindergartens with which most clubs were affiliated. However, when I turned to two Chicago African American newspapers published during the Progressive Era, the *Chicago Defender* and the *Broad Ax,* I found materials not only on kindergartens and mothers' clubs, but also about a multitude of women's clubs—more than 150. These clubs were involved not only in kindergarten and mothering, but also in suffrage, antilynching laws, literary contests, political debates, embroidery, sewing, municipal reform, philosophy, youth activities, child welfare, care for the elderly, drama study, safe lodging for working women, health care, orphanages, home life, and rotating economic credit.

In the tradition of Dewey and other Progressive educators, I have always held to a broad definition of education, looking to nonformal community institutions as learning sites that hold particular promise and value for study. This is especially true for the African American communities in Chicago from 1890 to 1920. Club women made tremendous contributions to their communities, contributions that have yet to be fully documented, chronicled, and analyzed. Such contributions included the founding and sustenance of nonformal community facilities, such as kindergartens, day nurseries, reading rooms, employment agencies, homes for the elderly and infirm, homes for working girls, youth clubs, settlements, and summer outings and camps for children. Working in conjunction with local churches, businesses, and urban chapters of national organizations, African American women participated in numerous educational and social uplift activities. Presentations through forums, debates, discussions, oratories, addresses, and lyceums not only gave voice to the club women's perspectives on community concerns, but also socialized young girls into a political and social consciousness. Through fund-raising activities as various as bazaars, raffles, picnics, dances, theater productions, and musical concerts, club women financially supported the institutions they created and provided in-kind gifts and moneys to poorer African Americans in Chicago. Furthermore, such occasions provided rich contexts for celebrating African American traditions and culture.

This is not to suggest that there was only one African American community in Chicago. There were *many* of them, in the neighborhoods of Woodlawn, Englewood, Hyde Park, Evanston, Morgan Park, and the Black Belt. These communities were stratified according to social class, educational attainment, and type of employment. Like many other cities, Chicago had its own African American "Elite 400," who attended exclusive social clubs, charity balls, dances, and promenades. Although this side of history is not always included in the club scholarship, it is critical to fully understanding the lives and deeds of the club women. For this reason, a social class stratification model, which examines notions of class, status, and prestige, is used. Such a model relies heavily on Weber's concepts of class, party, and status, as well as on his concern with multidimensionality.

However, social stratification is only one part of the history. A multilayered analysis is necessary to portray the complexity and richness of

the African American women's clubs. Therefore, I draw also from sociological, historical, and anthropological frameworks that examine the cultural expressions and practices of the women's clubs, particularly as they were grounded in community ways of knowing and doing. The central questions were these: What was culturally unique about African American women's clubs? How were they different from other ethnic women's clubs? The answers to these questions entailed a thorough examination of the economic, social, political, and cultural aspects of the many African American communities and their social institutions in Chicago. What I found was a web of various issues, agendas, practices, and ideologies not only within the communities, but within the women's clubs as well.

In addition to social stratification and an examination of a community ethos, the analysis relies upon feminist scholarship, particularly from an African American female perspective. In particular, I am partial to historical and sociological scholarship that insists on the interlocking of race, class, and gender. The historical work of club scholars Darlene Clark Hine, Deborah Gray White, Dorothy Salem, and many others come readily to mind. In terms of sociological studies, those by Bonnie Thornton Dill, Patricia Hill Collins, and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes have continually reminded me of how critical it is to ground scholarly interpretations in the daily experiences of people's lives.

I did not limit my study to the contemporary voices of feminist scholarship. Perhaps most importantly, I have drawn from the African American club women themselves. Indeed, many club women wrote their views on female suffrage, the importance of home life, motherhood, community uplift, and race progress in African American magazines, journals, and newspapers. Many delivered addresses and speeches, wrote editorials and letters, and kept club records. Such documentation has provided another layer of historical sources, with the momentous challenge of teasing out the rhetoric and ideology from the actual practices and activities of the club women. (This was especially problematic given the lack of archival materials on African American club women in Chicago.) Each issue revealed its own complexity, whether it was deliberating on an alderman candidate, discussing the merits of industrial education, or inspecting the vice areas in Chicago's Black Belt. Often there was no single view; when there was agreement, the reasons might be various. I discuss more fully below the three interlocking

frameworks of social class stratification, community emics, and feminist scholarship.

A Weberian stratification model moves beyond that of Marx, in that social class and position are not simply related to an economic framework. Rather, it fleshes out social class positioning to include the concepts of privilege, status, and prestige, particularly in terms of group legitimacy. Weber found status groups particularly worthy of study, because they reflected practices, expressions, and lifestyles of particular social classes. His concept of parties or power groups is particularly useful for understanding the patterns of leadership in the African American communities, especially as they were expressed in the various institutions of church, clubs, and political organizations. These three interrelated concepts of class, status, and parties provide us with an analysis that is multidimensional and attempts to arrive at an understanding of the subjective meanings of individuals involved.[1]

A Weberian framework is critical for examining the African American women's clubs. As will become evident throughout the book, there were many types of African American women's clubs in Chicago. Although social uplift activities were expected and embedded in many of the clubs' functions, most African American club women were of middle- or upper-class status. Status was measured in various ways. For example, certain clubs reserved membership for those from the first African American families in Chicago. Some clubs proudly described themselves as "elite" and "exclusive." Matrimony clubs selected members from prominent families, thus ensuring that one's social class position would not be compromised in the future.

However, this framework, if used alone, would grossly distort the history of African American communities. Despite social class differences, African Americans in Chicago were united through the historical and persistent practices of racism. There were also cultural expressions that crossed over social class lines, uniting African American communities throughout Chicago. Such unity was critical in political campaigns, in advocating for antidiscriminatory legislation, in creating community facilities, and in fund-raising efforts. A model is needed, then, that also examines cultural and community practices, to provide an emic

perspective. To arrive at such an understanding, I referred to African American newspapers, journals, magazines, addresses, and speeches as primary sources. In particular, the women's, church, and society columns of the Chicago newspapers contained contextually rich information on the women's clubs. Editorials and letters written for the newspapers reflected diverse perspectives on political, social, economic, and even moral issues. These voices represented various organizations within the Chicago communities: churches, settlements, women's and men's clubs, and local chapters of national organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) or the National Urban League.

In these multiple sources I found many cultural practices and expressions that were unique to the African American communities in Chicago. For example, lyceums for the youths continued the literate and oral traditions of oratory, elocution, and dramatic renditions that dated back to the all-day church meetings during slavery. African American jubilee quartets, choirs, and orchestras performed at charity balls and other fund-raising events. Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry and Frederick Douglass's addresses were frequently read and recited at the club meetings. Certain annual celebrations, such as Emancipation Day on the first of January, Mothers' Day, and Frederick Douglass's and Abraham Lincoln's birthdays, held particular cultural significance for African Americans. In the tradition of "other mothering," club women set up kindergartens, nurseries, and homes for the aged. At their club meetings they gave testimonials and recitations and enjoyed spirituals and popular African American songs on the victrola. Even fund-raising efforts by the club women relied on the traditional handiwork of quilting, knitting, and embroidery. Such richness was documented and examined within these multiple conceptual frameworks.

Even economic matters became subject to multiple interpretations. For example, a Marxist analysis would interpret the elaborate evening gowns of club women or their expensive prizes in whist contests as examples of cultural capital. However, there are other interpretations to consider. First, supporting local dressmakers and hairdressers kept money circulating in the African American communities, an issue that received as much attention then as it does today. One could argue that a club woman was not simply buying a dress. Rather, she was helping to keep

food on the table, to pay the rent, and to keep a dressmaker in business. Embedded in such business transactions, then, were social and community transactions. Second, these small businesses allowed women a livelihood, in addition to giving them an opportunity to work in their homes, where they could care for their children. Employment opportunities for African American women were severely restricted, most of them working as domestic servants, laundry workers, and cooks. Third, the aesthetic and technical skills of dressmakers, hairdressers, milliners, and beauty culturists deserve acknowledgment. Many of the club women's dresses were intricately designed and embellished with imported Irish lace and crocheted collars. Several African American milliner shops, located on State Street—the fashion hub of Chicago—were so renowned that a number of wealthy white women patronized them.

The third and last framework, that of feminist scholarship, attempts to portray the perspective of the club women and of African American female scholars. As mentioned, I have relied mostly upon scholarship that is grounded in the daily experiences of community members, as well as that which acknowledges how race, class, and gender are intricately connected. However, I would add a fourth dimension, that of regionalism, which was particularly significant because of the migration of Southern African Americans to Chicago. The club women's views ranged from traditional, even conservative at times, to what we might consider progressive and visionary. For example, some women were disinterested in the vote; some thought that women shouldn't meddle in what was a man's affair. Others protested and marched for it. These multiple views are presented in the book, as they portray the complex and rich textures of club life and community uplift.

In chapter 1 the discourses, ideologies, motifs, and images of the club women are examined. I argue that the club women conjoined the dominant ideologies of true womanhood, progressive maternalism, the Republican motherhood, and municipal housekeeping to their own culturally veritable beliefs. Although motherhood and home life were twin concerns of the women's club movement in general, the roles, practices, and images of African American women were quintessentially singular. Historically denied the opportunity of expressing their mother-

hood in culturally specific ways, the club women articulated their own vision—rooted in the community mores of "other mothering," a deep-seated Christianity, and an admixture of Du Boisian and Washingtonian tenets. Respectability, tucked within the prevailing concerns of race advancement and progress, assumed gendered and classed forms as club women constructed various layers of sisterhood and allegiances to poorer women while also maintaining class distinctions. Such positions were not contradictory. Rather, they pointed to a resilience in the club women's rhetoric, demonstrated by adapting their language to the multiple audiences of African American men, white club women, and poorer African American women.

Chapter 2 traces the histories of the various African American communities in Chicago, in particular examining class stratification through shifting residential patterns, church and club life, and the formation of Chicago's Black Belt. As Chicago's African American population increased during the 1890s, tensions between the African American elite and the middle class emerged, although as members of the "Elite 400," they mutually participated in charity events. Proceedings from their charity balls, dances, whist tournaments, and theater productions were collected for the newly created settlements, missions, kindergartens, day nurseries, and other facilities. Located primarily in the Black Belt, these institutions provided lodging, employment referrals, day care, manual and industrial training, and health services to the increasing number of Southern migrants. Again, social distinctions and concerns were intertwined, as the club women sustained these community institutions through exclusive philanthropic events.

The political activities of the club women are detailed in chapter 3. Because suffrage was one of the primary concerns, much of the discussion is devoted to the club women's involvement in political campaigns, voter registration, and suffrage debates and parades. The club women played a decidedly key role in the election of the first African American alderman in Chicago, Oscar de Priest. Nonetheless, I conclude that their potential for political leadership was limited, because it was primarily circumscribed around their traditional female roles as guardians of children and the family. This is not to suggest that the club women did not protest discrimination in employment or work toward antilynching legislation and legal redress. There are numerous examples of letter-

writing campaigns, editorials, forums, and discussions on these matters. However, the club women's influence in these arenas was tenuous; they wielded little power in the larger business and political world.

Four social welfare institutions or "other homes" created and sustained by the African American women's clubs are examined in chapter 4: the Louise Juvenile Home and school for dependent boys; the Amanda Smith Home and school for dependent girls; the Phyllis Wheatley Home for young working girls; and the Home for the Aged and Infirm Colored People. The financial and administrative autonomy of the first two homes, and later schools, was complicated by their affiliation with the Cook County Juvenile Court. Facilities for African American dependent and delinquent children were limited, so the demands placed upon these two homes often exceeded their capacities. But the founders, Elizabeth McDonald and Amanda Smith, informed by their respective rescue and mission work, turned no children away. Although the club women assisted through fund-raising, donating clothing and Christmas gifts, and visiting the children, their efforts were more directed toward the Phyllis Wheatley Home and the Old Folks' Home (an alternative name for the Home for the Aged and Infirm Colored People). The clubs' networking and collaborative fund-raising activities ensured the latter two homes' financial security. The homes' annual reports indicated the deep involvement of many of the women's clubs, through in-kind gifts of food and clothing, contributions to the coal fund, monetary donations, and providing "good cheer" or counsel to the elderly and to the young working girls. Truly, the club women considered these community institutions, whereas the homes for dependent children, because of their court entanglements, were less so.

Five African American settlements and their programs for young children, youths, and working women are discussed in chapter 5. The chapter begins with an examination of the mainstream social settlement workers' ideologies as compared to African Americans' beliefs and practices. Although there were points of convergence, there were three essential differences. First, white settlement workers focused more on racialized differences between immigrants and African Americans, whereas African American reformers cited class and regional disparities, especially among African Americans. Second, white workers formulated African Americans' "maladjustment" to urban life as an inability to "assimilate"; conversely, African Americans framed the issues as ones of

segregation, discrimination, and difficult urban conditions. Third, unlike white reformers who viewed African Americans as uprooted and disconnected from their traditions and customs, African American social workers and reformers spoke of the loss of dignity and family life during slavery.

Furthermore, many of the African American settlement workers discussed how their practices were informed by a deep-seated Christian faith. Their religious expressions were reflected in the range of social service institutions created within the African American communities: church missions, social centers, and settlements, which were often less secular than nondenominational. The settlement founders and workers especially nurtured these church affiliations, although not specific denominations, thereby creating collaborative webs of community institutions and support.

The club women's involvement was critical in the sustenance of the settlements. They supervised kindergartens and day nurseries; they taught domestic classes in sewing, crocheting, and embroidery; and they chaperoned dance clubs for youths. The various settlement activities were not merely social or educative but also had economic value. Sewing classes, according to Clotee Scott, provided another employment alternative to women, besides domestic and laundry work. Day nurseries and kindergartens provided child care for women who previously may have had to leave the younger children in the care of an older sibling. Employment referral agencies were organized to assist women in procuring respectable employment.

Chapter 6 begins with a discussion of the historical antecedents of the African American literary clubs: the literary societies, the lyceums, and the chautauqua movement. As pictured in the novels of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, African American women formed literary societies and circles in which they spoke on political and social issues while developing their elocution and literary skills. The "literature" of the former societies, and of the Chicago literary clubs, embraced many topics and genres, as the written word was merged with the spoken, and social and political uplift with literary discussion. The African American female literary clubs in Chicago are examined alongside those of white women, reflecting how, once again, African American women persisted in the dual purpose of self-improvement and community uplift. To illustrate, the club women sponsored

dramatic productions, musicals, and literary contests, which provided educative experiences and raised much-needed moneys for the poor. These twin roles were enacted through the church lyceums as well. Women not only spoke before the audiences on the "female" issues of children's welfare, probation work, and home life, but also formed lyceums for youths. Through participation in essay contests, debates, and oratory, the young were socialized into community forms of knowledge and activism and provided with "wholesome" forms of entertainment.

Whist clubs, dancing clubs, and matrimony clubs—which were often considered frivolous and self-indulgent—are explored in chapter 7. On the surface they seemed to be superficial because such clubs were primarily engaged in whist, progressive whist, and lawn tennis; six-course luncheons; masquerades; and dancing parties. Yet such activities were not always self-serving. Over teas and extravaganzas, charity cases were discussed and resolved; money for the poor was often collected during whist tournaments. Furthermore, there were multiple economic tiers embedded in these social extravaganzas. Such philanthropic events benefited both the poor and the many women engaged in the service businesses of dressmaking, millinery work, beauty culture, and chiropody who relied upon the club women's patronage.

As the following chapters document, the club women were instrumental in founding and sustaining a multitude of social welfare institutions. Their volunteer efforts in the Second Ward's political campaigns were crucial in terms of voter registration, coalition building, and the election of the first African American alderman. Through their clubs they not only engaged in literary, musical, and educational activities, but also sponsored various fund-raisers to support the community institutions they created. As Fannie Barrier Williams testified, the African American women of Chicago displayed a "passion" for clubs that promoted refinement as well as social uplift.[2] True to the motto of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), the Chicago club women "lifted" others while they, indeed, "climbed."

ONE

AFRICAN AMERICAN CLUB WOMEN'S IDEOLOGIES AND DISCOURSES

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CLUB WOMEN'S MOVEMENT evoked multiple ideologies, discourses, motifs, and images of womanhood, motherhood, and home life. Club members conjoined the dominant ideologies of the cult of true womanhood, progressive maternalism, the Republican motherhood, and municipal housekeeping with culturally specific ones: African American Christianity, Booker T. Washington's industrial education, and W. E. B. Du Bois's model of "talented tenth" leadership.[1] For example, the club women's allegiances to Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois were not neatly cleaved, as they wedded self-help strategies to political protest.[2] Likewise, in promoting female suffrage, the African American club women not only espoused the tenets of the Republican motherhood, progressive maternalism, and municipal housekeeping but also emphasized their traditional community roles as "other mothers" and caretakers.[3] Such admixtures pointed to the complex ways in which African American club women mediated various