

WHAT NOT TO WEAR TO A RIOT:

Fashioning Race, Class, and Gender Respectability Amidst Racial Violence

BY LOU W. ROBINSON





Daisy and Cora Westbrook probably survived because the collapse of the Broadway Opera House disturbed an attacking mob. (Image: "Broadway Opera House After the Fire. \$700,000 Damage Was Done In This Vicinity," *The Crisis*, September 1917. Original photo, St. Louis Globe-Democrat)

INTRODUCTION

During the East St. Louis Race Riot of July 2, 1917, *Post-Dispatch* reporter Carlos Hurd observed "white women of the baser sort" terrorizing and murdering African Americans.¹ The next day, Hurd further described the presumed prostitutes for the *St. Louis Republic* as "dressed in silk stockings and kimonos, with last night's paint still unwashed on their cheeks." He immediately distinguished those prostitutes from the "white womanhood" of East St. Louis.²

Clothing and the appearance of black women survivors figured prominently in the report Ida B. Wells-Barnett, anti-lynching crusader, black rights activist, and reformist clubwoman, submitted to the Illinois governor following her investigations of the East St. Louis Race Riot.³ However, the letter written by black survivor Daisy Westbrook to a friend about the hasty rescue by national guardsmen from her home further personalized the importance of women's clothing. Westbrook, the music director at the local black high school, expressed consternation that they had lost everything "but what we had on and that was very little-bungalow aprons, no hats, and sister did not have on any shoes."⁴

Although statements from mass media, reformers, and individual citizens about the behaviors and appearance of white prostitutes, "white womanhood," and black women survivors may have appeared incidental, they embodied issues of race, class, and gender. Events occurring in that rapidly changing

(Left) A mob surrounding a trolley in East St. Louis in 1917; *The Crisis*, the publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) reported it as "Colored Man, In Front of Car, Being Mobbed. Militia Looking On." (Image: "The Massacre of East St. Louis," *The Crisis*, September 1917)

urban environment reflected national anxieties over contemporaneous and controversial social and moral expectations for women. What was it about white and black women's fashions and behaviors that warranted documenting amidst the death and destruction of a race riot? The commentaries from multiple sources illuminated at the local level national anxieties about blacks' and women's claims to civil rights and equal treatment, evolving meanings and expressions of female respectability, and contested prescriptions for women's use of public space.

Extensive scholarship has analyzed relationships between expectations for socially and morally acceptable African American behavior, appearance, civil rights, and racial violence. This article especially mines the archives of Progressive Era



Frances Willard helped set standards for style and independent behavior when she learned to ride a bicycle. (Image: Frances Willard House, Willard On Her Bicycle "Gladys." Galleries, Frances Willard's House Museum and Archives. <https://franceswillardhouse.org/frances-willard/galleries-virtual-tour>)

contributors to national discourses, including Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC), the *Chicago Defender*, W.E.B. DuBois and the National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the House Congressional Hearings Report on the East St. Louis Race.⁵ And, it extends and deepens analyses by contemporary scholars on the importance of how women dressed and behaved especially in relation to the East St. Louis Race Riot.⁶

The East St. Louis Race Riot occurred near the end of a long struggle for women's rights alongside other reform efforts. The work of white women's rights activists, volunteer organizations dedicated to social and moral reform, and municipal housekeeping

and the social gospel, has provided critical insights into national discourses on expectations of women's behaviors as exhibited through their attire. Early women's rights activists, including Jane Addams, played major roles during the nineteenth century, and some of them into the twentieth century.⁷ Frances Willard, president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), strongly denounced what women sometimes wore during an 1888 International Council of Women Conference. She disparaged women who wore low-cut dresses as imitative of prostitutes, stage dressing and roadhouse dancing as suggestive of impurity, and advertisers for using half-naked models.⁸



Reformers like Frances Willard disparaged women who dressed like stage actresses such as Jennie Lee, pictured here, as impure and imitative of prostitutes. (Image: Sarony Studios, Full-length Portrait of Jennie Lee Sitting on a Chair, With Her Hands Up Holding a Hair-Dress On Her Head. 1890. Charles H. McCaghy Collection of Exotic Dance from Burlesque to Clubs. <http://hdl.handle.net/1811/47635>)

Willard's complaints about women's appearance, purity, and prostitution expressed national concerns, as black migration, European immigration, and industrialization reshaped the nation and women's roles in it. In 1895, the Purity Congress, a meeting of women's and men's social and moral reform organizations, established a single moral standard that required men and women to abstain from sex until marriage. Reformers committed to actions to support their mandates that included repression of commercialized vice in red-light districts catering

to prostitution and sale of alcohol through state regulation, preventative, and educational activities.⁹

Alarm about the city and threats to purity were raised by mass media like the *Farm Journal*, which offered farm girls advice, including proper dress.¹⁰ The Illinois Vigilance Committee declared that drinking and dancing could push an at-risk girl into a downward spiral whereby she became "immodest, indecent, lawless, homeless, and a victim and distributor of vile diseases."¹¹ By World War I, many reformers believed that prostitutes and promiscuous working-class and poor women in urban areas spread venereal disease that threatened military readiness. Such beliefs created a shift among reformers from protection espoused by the Purity Congress toward persecution. Many states, including Illinois, had passed some form of Sex Repressive Law that labeled all sexually active single women prostitutes by 1921.¹² Unmarried women accused of fornication could be fined or jailed.¹³

EROSION OF BLACK CIVIL RIGHTS AND RISE OF BLACK CLUBWOMEN

Rapid social and economic changes produced national anxieties during the Progressive Era that centered on issues of equal rights, privileges, and protections for African Americans and white women. Blacks faced ongoing loss of equal rights assigned to them by the Emancipation Proclamation and subsequent Constitutional Amendments. They attempted to counter the trend through various means, including the uplift agenda, or racial uplift ideology. According to historian Kevin Gaines, "What historians refer to as racial uplift ideology describes a prominent response of black middle-class leaders, spokespersons, and activists to the crisis marked by the assault on the civil and political rights of African Americans primarily in the U.S. South from roughly the 1880s to 1914."¹⁴

A confirmation of the erosion of African American civil rights occurred in 1883. Wells-Barnett, a staunch supporter of the uplift agenda, won a lawsuit against the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad that directed the company to honor the 14th Amendment's provision governing equal access to transportation accommodations. In a legal brief, she described her refusal to ride in the segregated "Jim Crow" car that housed whites' waste, animals, smokers, and vagrants. She was subsequently ejected from the train with clothes tattered and askew. The Tennessee Supreme Court reversed the ruling in 1887.¹⁵ That reversal altered blacks' civil rights at a time when escalating mob violence against them in the form of



Ida Wells-Barnett and other members of NACWC set standards for African Americans' moral behavior and fashion as indicative of readiness for civil rights. (Image: Special Collections Research Center University of Chicago Library)

lynchings began to exceed white lynchings for the first time.¹⁶

The impetus to assemble local, state, and national colored women's clubs together under one umbrella began officially with the refusal of the 1893 World's Fair/Columbian Exposition to allow an exhibit fully representing African American women's quarter-century of progress since slavery. This exclusion set off a firestorm of protests by black clubwomen and other proponents of equal rights for African Americans. Wells-Barnett along with Frederick Douglass and several other rights' activists responded with a treatise denouncing the World's Fair's decision.¹⁷ Wells-Barnett's fervor towards preventing civil rights violations had begun with her own expulsion from public transportation.

Shortly after the World's Fair's affront, a Missouri white man's letter published in the United States and England, disdaining the "character and morals" of black womanhood, rallied several African American

clubs to gather for an emergency meeting in Boston in 1896 to strategize ways to salvage their damaged reputations.¹⁸ They arrived at a consensus that dress reform would present visible signifiers of moral integrity and the race's progress. Along with moral improvements, they included educational approaches to prevent further erosion of black civil rights.¹⁹ The Missouri man's letter underscored what black clubwomen understood about the pervasiveness of negative beliefs about black women's sexuality, which influenced their exclusion from claims to respectable womanhood and subjected them to sexual violations for which they were made responsible. While black women were concerned about white women reformers' exclusions of them from clubs that addressed multiple social concerns, they were especially sensitive to how this sexualized view of them had contributed to their recent exclusion from the 1893 Columbian Exposition for accusations of immorality.²⁰ Countering perceptions of black women as "ignorant and immoral," and protecting themselves from continuing debasements by white men that shame and humiliation kept them from admitting were assigned high priority. Thus, elevating and dignifying African American womanhood, as demonstrated through dress and behavior, rose to the top of their list of practical solutions, as did pledging to protest the untruthfulness of the "foul slander" placed on the race.²¹

However, as blacks moved out of the South and violent mob attacks intensified and expanded, black and white supporters of the uplift agenda believed it even more imperative to influence white perceptions of blacks by shaping and controlling how blacks appeared and behaved in public. While the *Chicago Defender* newspaper aided this agenda through its national socialization program targeting all black migrants, the NACWC and Detroit Urban League pressed middle-class black women into service to socialize black women, especially Southern migrants and women of ill-repute. Black women, as exemplars of the moral rectitude of the race by which justification for equal rights and treatment could be measured, endured significant pressure to model acceptable, respectable behavior.

Daisy Westbrook and her sister's wearing of their bungalow aprons outside, garments typically worn in and around the home, possibly created transgressions of several social and cultural contracts inherent in the relationship of colored women's clubs and the African American population.²² As middle-class professional women, the Westbrook sisters would have qualified for membership in a state club of the NACWC, whose chapters were active throughout

Illinois and Missouri, including St. Louis and East St. Louis.²³ The NACWC had declared that neither black women nor the black race could afford the slightest fashion faux pas or hints of behavioral impropriety.²⁴

Black East St. Louis women who may have prescribed to the NACWC's uplift agenda carried the weight of the race on their backs. Black clubwomen imbued the behavior of black women with extraordinary power to influence others. "Fallen" black women, the NACWC contended, through their "mistakes and stumbling" risked dragging not only women, but also the race and the nation down with them.²⁵ Consequently, black middle-class women were to "begin to carry reform through dress," and "dress with purity," because in elevating and purifying themselves and society, they demonstrated that black people deserved the same rights, privileges, and protections as other "patriotic, brave, and loyal" persons with an American birthright.²⁶ The NACWC's identification as All-American during the World War I years inundated their reformist activities with patriotic fervor. This action aligned them with the nation during the violent phase of the war, in hopes of diminishing white mob violence against them and assuring their inclusion in the country's democracy and privileges. The country's failure to do so prompted W.E.B. Du Bois to express his anger in a jeremiad.²⁷

Prior to WWI, the Illinois Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, a state chapter of the NACWC, made reaching "every black woman in every part of the State" a major focus of its activities.²⁸ The NACWC's uplift agenda for personal moral improvements and dress reform required that black women "Keep their souls and bodies free from the taint of sin," for it was only through self-improvement that they could "help women in slums and back alleys."²⁹ To further those goals, the Illinois Federation directed a stringent campaign in East St. Louis between 1910–1912 that targeted working-class black women they deemed unsuccessful in meeting high standards for morality. The program encouraged women to control their sexuality as an antidote to persistent perceptions of "black women as lewd and immoral."³⁰

The uplift agenda seemed more imperative as the nation failed to embrace black civil rights and as racial mob violence escalated after WWI. But implementation of the agenda did not progress without conflicts when black reformers classified the appearance and behaviors of some black Southern migrants as social transgressions. Those new arrivals, whether because of ignorance or unwillingness, balked at conceding control of their personal

decisions about style to clubwomen's dictates. Historian Valerie Grim's research on southern blacks who migrated to the midwest, and East St. Louis migrants' attitudes toward reform during the second



Race riot survivors Daisy and Cora Westbrook were rescued wearing bungalow aprons, or house dresses like these, which black reformers deemed appropriate only for wear at home. (Image: "Circular, Issues 263–292, 1922 Circular 280, Organization and Direction of Clothing Club." In *Clothing Club Manual*, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

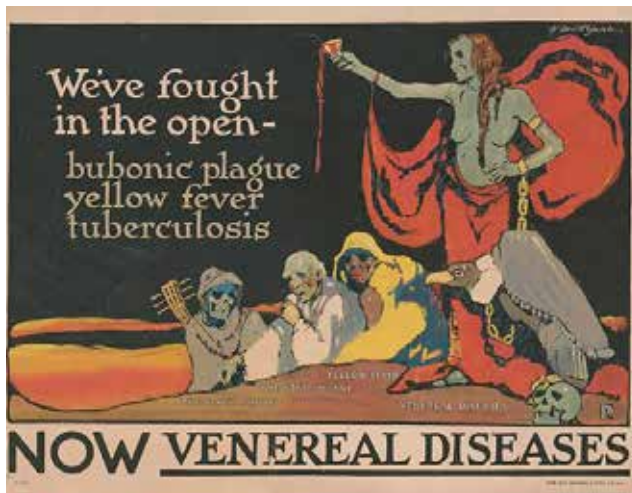
decade of the twentieth century, revealed only partial receptivity to fashion and morality uplift activities.

Southern migrants, according to Grim's oral history, expressed a liking for the fashions they saw in the city. However, they did not appreciate the emphasis on dressing a certain way every day. The migrants reported that unlike in the midwest, what one wore did not receive special attention in their rural southern communities, except for a general expectation of dressing-up on Sundays. These migrants resented reformers' suggestions of what to wear for tasks as simple as shopping.³¹ Such resentments thwarted black clubwomen's attempts to exert total control over the dress and behavior of black migrants and other poor persons in the midwest. In fact, some working- and lower-class blacks saw black middle-class reformers as "arrogant, self-appointed leaders of the race."³²

The *Chicago Defender*, a major ally of the NACWC read nationally, aggressively recruited black migrants to the north. However, beginning in 1917, as northern racial violence occurred in increased frequency and intensity, the newspaper published specific guidelines to socialize black migrants to appropriate fashion and behavior. Columns addressing dos and don'ts, with titles such as "How to Act in Public Places," appeared in the newspaper until the 1920s. These prescriptions reflected reformers' beliefs about how blacks could

best integrate into African American culture and survive in the north.³³ The *Chicago Defender's* national actions coincided with local reforms of the Detroit, Michigan, Urban League. The League established the Dress Well Club, which served many functions beyond its focus on appearance and proper etiquette education. Desired outcomes for Club participation included impressing white potential employers, minimizing segregation, and enhancing black female respectability.³⁴

In the aftermath of the Chicago Race Riot of 1919, the *Chicago Defender* partnered with the Chicago Urban League to socialize black migrants to demonstrate more acceptable fashion choices and



The outbreak of venereal disease, believed to negatively affect military readiness during WWI, helped Shift reformers' attitudes towards prostitutes and loose women from supportive to punitive, as this poster suggests. (Image: Library of Congress)

respectable behaviors in public. A patriotic urban socialization campaign went into high gear, one that harkened back to Daisy Westbrook's concerns about wearing the bungalow apron in public during the East St. Louis Riot. The League created a leaflet with an American flag design that strongly discouraged migrants' practices of "wearing dust caps, bungalow aprons, house clothing and bedroom shoes out of doors," as well as "loud talking and objectionable deportment on street cars."³⁵ While the local Illinois Federation of Colored Women's Clubs distributed the leaflets door-to-door, the *Chicago Defender* sent the messages across the country via its newspaper.³⁶ Reformers' prescriptive educational campaigns demonstrated their continuing beliefs that socializing black migrants to northern social conventions would minimize the increasing racial mob violence against blacks.

Black uplift reformers focused on assimilation and social controls, consistent with national reform trends that addressed perceived threats from venereal disease, immigration, and foreign enemies. However, their strategies, while not fully negating or minimizing the violent behavior of whites, appeared to make the victims responsible for their own violations. The appearance of blaming the victim was not relegated to black reformers and black women. In fact, the issue acquired ambiguous meanings when white reformers targeted white female prostitution, immigration, and white slavery nationally, then turned their sights to the local municipality of East St. Louis.

FAILURES OF RESPECTABILITY AND OTHER REASONS TO RIOT

When Carlos Hurd reported on the appearance and behavior of white prostitutes violently attacking blacks during the East St. Louis Race Riot, he continued a longstanding reformist commentary expressing anxieties over women, work, and moral access to respectability. Hurd drew a clear distinction between the "womanhood of East St. Louis" and the white prostitutes brutalizing black women. Those white women's "faces showed all too plainly exactly who and what they were."³⁷ Hurd's categorization of women into distinct groups spoke not only to issues of class, but also race and visible markers for social control prominent in reform discourse.³⁸ By attaching a certain appearance and aggressive behavior to prostitutes and their work, he reinforced the accepted norm that such characteristics were outside the domain of "respectable" womanhood, especially as defined by the ideology of true womanhood and the tenets of purity and piety.³⁹ This reassurance affirmed the importance of true womanhood and diminished misinterpretation of his statements.

Anxieties over urbanization and the huge influx of less desirable Southern and Eastern European immigrants combined to push early twentieth century white reformers toward a frenzy of activities to suppress "white slavery" prostitution and socialize the new arrivals. White reformers' strategies included efforts to force immigrants' conformity to specific fashion styles as a sign of Americanization. This included young girls' and women's erasure of obvious signs of foreignness and lower-class status to diminish their vulnerability to prostitution. However, some immigrant domestic workers thwarted reformers' attempts to use fashion as class markers by dressing like their middle-class employers.⁴⁰

Despite this blurring of social class, immigrant females remained at risk.

National discourses by nativists demonized European female immigrants as fertile “brood mares” with questionable morals, responsible for white “race suicide,” and the men as paupers.⁴¹ Jane Addams, social worker, moral reformer, and co-founder of Chicago’s Hull House, the first settlement house in the United States, provided a crucial intervention for all new immigrants.⁴² Addams had a wide reach from co-founder of the NAACP to only female member of the Board of the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA), an alliance of social, moral, and hygiene organizations. Infusing her programs with social gospel and municipal housekeeping, she insisted on the importance of structures and spaces in communicating her mission and Americanizing immigrants through social, educational, and practical



Jane Addams (right) and settlement house programs attempted to counter negative nativist rhetoric about European immigrants through social gospel, municipal housekeeping, and other programs that sought to “Americanize” new arrivals. (Image: Wikimedia)

programs.⁴³ East St. Louis had absorbed immigrants from Hungary, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Armenia by the time of the race riot. They had established churches and other social and recreational institutions that provided mutual support and maintained their cultural heritage.⁴⁴ Addams’ work served as a model for actively engaging with social and moral issues. She participated in national discourses throughout her adult life, including those on prostitution.⁴⁵

Lawmakers passed several pieces of anti-immigration and prostitution legislation in the early 1900s.⁴⁶ Beliefs that prostitutes infected with

venereal disease presented a major health threat to soldiers during World War I resulted in aggressive campaigns to close brothels, especially those located near military installations.⁴⁷ Reformers’ concerns that both foreign and native white males seduced new immigrant girls into prostitution spurred the passage of the Mann Act in 1910, an extension of previous anti-immigration legislation that criminalized the transportation of females across state lines for the purposes of prostitution. Chicago, more than East St. Louis, confronted prostitution and attempted to control it. The public regularly expressed its views, from ridicule of reformers to objections by prostitutes of their image.⁴⁸ In fact, identifying prostitutes by their use of excessive make-up and provocative clothing created cultural confusion. Even “respectable” women embraced the new beauty culture of wearing make-up.

Carlos Hurd’s reference to prostitutes with “... last night’s paint still unwashed on their cheeks,” contradicted the beauty trends that began in the late 1800s.⁴⁹ Respectable women began to embrace make-up as a fashion enhancement, contesting its suitability for only prostitutes and actresses. Those women negotiated acceptance of their appearance by agreeing to continue to wear the confining fashions of the times in exchange for at least discretely wearing rouge, lipstick, and eye make-up. They considered adoption of this new make-up culture a sign of independence and forward fashion and not as disrespect for womanhood. Their appeals to merchants to increase access to products ushered in the placement of cosmetics in department stores.⁵⁰ Merchants’ advertising of cosmetics helped white women overcome their concerns about make-up and morality, and transformed what had once been the domain of “public” women into a public commodity for respectable women.⁵¹

Regardless of whether “respectable” womanhood in East St. Louis engaged in contemporaneous beauty trends during the time of the race riot, East St. Louis and its women had gained reputations that invited frequent comments and visitors from outside the city. Young working-class women in search of leisure made the city’s saloons and dance halls popular destinations. Like first-generation immigrant “charity girls” described by historian Kathy Peiss, their expressions of sexuality and independence associated them with women who traded sexual favors for amusement, and contrasted with expectations for respectable female behavior. In dance halls, they engaged in provocative dance, imbibed alcohol, smoked cigarettes, propped their feet on tables, and cavorted with men by sitting



Addams' Hull House provided spaces that allowed embattled immigrants to come together, like this coffee shop, for support and socialization. (Image: *The Jane Addams Paper Project, Ramapo College of New Jersey*)

on their laps.⁵² Their actions conflated perceptions of progressive, independent single women with prostitutes. Both reformers targeting saloons and “tourists” from St. Louis visited East St. Louis, but with different objectives. Reformers sought to rescue “fallen” women, while upscale “tourists” and others participated in “slumming” to get a peek at prostitutes as though they were exotic creatures.⁵³ However, prostitutes’ preferences for open-front kimonos and silk stockings, and their reputation for walking the streets “scantily-dressed” while soliciting customers often differentiated them from more conservatively dressed fun-seeking “charity girls.”⁵⁴

Both their attire and make-up identified the white prostitutes whose brutality toward black women during the riot appeared both personal and designed to humiliate. Prostitutes “beat the Negresses faces and breasts with fists, stones, and sticks.” And, they clawed black women’s hair, ripped their sleeves, and hit them with a broomstick.⁵⁵ In fact, the Congressional Committee’s report of the riot concluded that those women were, “if possible, more brutal than the men.”⁵⁶ White prostitutes regularly had to contend with perceptions of black women as hypersexual, and therefore more desirable. European males heightened tensions around race and female sexuality. They defined the sexual nature of black women by the hyperdeveloped buttocks and genitals of an African woman, Sarah Baartman, also called the Black or Hottentot Venus. Black female sexuality became associated with deviance as mass media

presented Baartman as a caged spectacle in Europe with smiling white men gawking at her body. Even after her death, display of some of her body parts continued.⁵⁷

In addition, white men’s fascination with the sexuality of women of color inextricably entwined desire and power. As gender and postcolonial scholar Sandra Ponzanesi stated, “The white male gaze desires to unveil the female body but also fixes the black woman in her place.”⁵⁸ For the NACWC, a black woman’s place was beside every other respectable woman, regardless of race or class. But, white prostitutes’ attacks that publicly unclashed and humiliated black women underscored their historical representations as immoral, subjugated sex objects. At the same time, the unclashing offered white men the pleasure of a spectacle, as exhibition of Black Venus had done. The aggression of white prostitutes during the riot elevated them above the cowering black women victims to a closer proximity to the white males with whom they shared the public domain.

Even without the debasement during the East St. Louis Race Riot, achieving respectability presented special challenges for black women. African American studies scholar Farah Griffin suggested that “promise of protection” and “politics of respectability” within the black uplift agenda brokered an exchange of protection from black men for black women’s presentation of positive images critical to black progress and survival. However, for this reinforcement of black masculinity, black



W.E.B. DuBois' Paris Exhibition photographs like this one provided an intervention on behalf of African Americans to counter negative representations and to demonstrate respectability and readiness for equal rights, as did the pictorial of the East St. Louis race riot. (Image: Library of Congress)

women had to submit to “a stance of victimization.”⁵⁹ The caveat, however, was that nonconformity could be misinterpreted as resistance and rejection of the social contract, rather than a misunderstanding of the required behavior of black men and women for the purposes of protection.⁶⁰

W.E.B. DuBois, an uplift advocate, understood the power of black representation in achieving respectability. His prolific literature and the award-winning photographic collection exhibited at the 1900 Paris Exposition stood as proof of blacks' diversity, dignity, and humanity, and contradicted eugenicists' claims of black inferiority.⁶¹ The pictorial story of the East St. Louis Race Riot in the NAACP's *Crisis*, with DuBois as editor, provided another intervention in the discourse on black respectability. It captured both black residents' victimization and dignity, with most of the rescued women properly attired with head coverings.⁶² Thus, the absence of a hat, or wearing the bungalow apron outside the home, always contributed to discourses on black female respectability.

Spaces outside black homes required careful navigation to preserve respectability, as residents often encountered black and white prostitutes and vice in red-light districts located in or adjacent to their neighborhoods.⁶³ Saloons and gambling houses filled East St. Louis communities, and in black neighborhoods, half-clad or naked prostitutes performed lewd dances in dance halls. In addition, blacks had been associated with a rise in lawlessness

prior to the race riot. Whites expressed anger at perceived disrespect of white women by blacks. The litany of complaints contended that “White women were afraid to walk the streets at night; negroes sat on their laps on street cars, black women crowded them from their seats; they were openly insulted by drunken negroes.”⁶⁴ The House Hearings Report likened East St. Louis to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, declaring those cities to have been “more Christian.”⁶⁵ Long-held beliefs about blacks' inherent shortcomings, including criminality, aberrant sexuality, and violence fueled white reformers' acceptance of locating vice in black neighborhoods.⁶⁶ Less than a decade after the Illinois Federation campaigned to quash misconceptions about black women's moral character and respectability, East St. Louis in 1917 perpetuated those stereotypes.



Reformers portrayed dance halls, especially those associated with hotels, as sites of sexual victimization for vulnerable women initially. By the time of the riot they also represented spaces of unsavory and inappropriate sexual behavior and fashion. (Image: <http://www.archive.org/stream/fightingtraffici00bell#page/n59/mode/2up>)

POLITICS OF PLACE AND CONTROL OF PUBLIC SPACE

Investigations of the East St. Louis Race Riot by black civil rights activists, newspapers, and Congress shone a national spotlight on the inner workings of a dysfunctional city. They exposed the politics of place as the city struggled with racial strife, prostitution, immigration, and protection of “respectable womanhood” in public places. However, neither the city's reputation as a “wide open” party town where gambling, prostitution, and alcohol



Reformer Miller's complaint of an "Army of Prostitutes" congregating near the Y.M.C.A. in East St. Louis spoke to the shift to streetwalking following the closure of brothels in Illinois. These Chicago prostitutes dressed far more conservatively than those who participated in the East St. Louis Race Riot. (Image: Wikimedia)

went unchecked, nor its thriving saloon culture and red-light district distinguished it.⁶⁷ It was East St. Louis' Mississippi River location that made it especially important. Illinois Attorney General Edward Brundage declared that "East St. Louis lies at the gateway to the southwestern markets, factories, and carrier system tributaries to St. Louis Missouri." Thus, East St. Louis' affairs proved relevant to the local municipality and the regional economy.⁶⁸

This listing of the city's values suggested capital sufficient to support the people and its services. However, financial deficits left vice a major yet inadequate source for filling the city's coffers. Without revenue derived from taxing establishments of prostitution and other attendant vices, East St. Louis' ability to meet its basic needs would have been severely compromised.⁶⁹ Its importance to the national and regional economy belied the dire environment the city had created for many of its residents. By the time of the 1917 race riot, prostitution flourished and vice bosses controlled the city with the permission of the administration.⁷⁰

The city's depravity was not lost on the public. After the riot, letters to newspaper editors poured in from near and far with complaints about the city's corruption. One writer indicted the city for being "the most finished example of corporate-owned city government in the U.S." He decried the proportion of saloons to other community organizations and noted that they exceeded churches and schools combined.⁷¹ Roger Baldwin of the St. Louis Civic League, and future founder of the American Civil Liberties Union in 1920, referred to East St. Louis as the "Hoboken of St. Louis," referring to the city's reputation as St. Louis' industrial suburb. Baldwin

further asserted that the city was representative of the worst abuses, including prostitution, that reformers like himself addressed.⁷² An African American reformer from New York lambasted the rioters' cruelty for "throwing babies into the fire and shooting mothers," and the city's lawlessness for assigning no consequences to those responsible for so many black deaths.⁷³

East St. Louis' lawlessness and vice, as in many cities of the time, was not confined to black neighborhoods. The red-light district spread over a large area of the integrated "Valley" located adjacent to the central business, government, and police districts. Race riot survivor Daisy Westbrook observed that prostitutes regularly congregated near a popular corner practically across the street from law enforcement and down the street from her home



Wells-Barnett objected to East St. Louis residents evacuating the city caught without shoes and appropriate head wear. African American reformers later deemed the dust cap worn by children as unacceptable. (Image: "Refugees," *The Crisis*, September 1917)

located among whites. That location initially spared her home from rioters who believed that whites occupied it.⁷⁴ And, while prostitution also proliferated throughout the Valley, segregated white residential communities excluded both prostitution and vice.⁷⁵ The segregated "Black Valley," home of many blacks, adjacent to and south of City Hall, received very negative press. The *St. Louis Republic* painted a picture of depravity for the Black Valley and its residents, describing it as "cocaine dives, houses of pollution, gambling dens, and thieves' resorts" occupied by the "negroes of the lowest form of two-legged existence."⁷⁶

Despite the challenges of East St. Louis' public spaces, Westbrook and her sister, both middle-class professional women, had been charged by



Kimono nightgowns like these modeled after Japanese Kimonos were associated with prostitutes, so the references in coverage of the riot of African American women wearing them carried negative connotations. (Image: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Agricultural Experiment Station, "Variations in the Kimono Nightgown," Circular 280, Clothing Club Manual, 1922)

the NACWC with uplifting black womanhood for two decades. Westbrook's description of the clothes she had purchased and the jewelry she wore when rescued affirmed her attention to appropriate fashion.⁷⁷ However, the bungalow aprons, or housedresses, Westbrook and her sister wore when rescued may have complicated perceptions of their class and respectability. Although the garment had been originally marketed to white middle-class suburban women for its comfort and style for doing housework and lounging, its similarity to the stylish kimono nightgown sometimes worn by prostitutes could create fashion confusion.⁷⁸

Thus, Westbrook's bungalow apron, contrary to her usual public attire, would not readily distinguish her from black prostitutes, lower-class blacks, or the black migrants who sometimes wore the bungalow apron outside.⁷⁹ During the riot, news reports reinforced the stereotypes of blacks in East St. Louis as poor, ragged, living in squalor, and mostly recent migrants from the South. The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* led with the headline, "Barefoot and in Rags Refugees Depart: Others Better Off, Pay Way to South," on July 3, 1917.⁸⁰ It described only one black woman as dressed neatly. That headline implied that many black residents were poor and ragged, but Wells-Barnett's tour of the city with residents, and the NAACP *Crisis* photos, showed otherwise.

Wells-Barnett's post-riot report countered negative perceptions newspapers had disseminated about blacks in East St. Louis. As founder of the Chicago Ida B. Wells Club, she supported the charge of the black uplift agenda for black women to show the black race's readiness for civil rights through their behavior and dress.⁸¹ Her investigation had begun at City Hall, accompanied by a black nurse, Delores Farrow, where they met several black women returning from St. Louis to retrieve clothes and other items they could salvage. She described some women as "bareheaded and their clothing dirty," partly confirming newspaper reports of some survivors.⁸² Her attention to the absence of hats spoke to the importance of fashion and expectations of dress for respectable women at that time. Hats, by their design and material, could indicate status and were required apparel for properly attired women.⁸³ Outward signs of respectability, like appearance, carried more weight in the fight for civil rights than emotional state. Wells-Barnett's commentary on the dirty, hatless women reminded society not only of the material losses the women incurred from the riot, but also of the indignities respectable women suffered when forced to move about in public space in an unacceptable state. Her findings also challenged

newspapers' causes for the riots, such as a large influx of black migrants, and the perception that all blacks were uneducated and lived in grinding poverty.

From City Hall, Wells-Barnett and Farrow accompanied the black women to what was left of their homes. Those women had lived in East St. Louis from a few months to almost twenty years. The fair to excellent quality of the furnishings the women had owned, including pianos, offered further evidence of the class of some of East St. Louis' black residents.⁸⁴ Wells-Barnett recounted that a white neighbor had taken the clothes of one survivor, subtly suggesting that the quality of those clothes made them desirable to white people. The white woman justified taking the clothes because others were doing the same thing. That woman's confession confirmed the stories of looting that blacks had claimed.⁸⁵ Daisy Westbrook's letter of her own nice clothes and piano also confirmed Wells-Barnett's findings. Westbrook's letter expressed the pain of losing "everything." The music teacher had lamented that while she had recently purchased new furniture and nice dresses for a trip, "I miss my piano more than anything else."⁸⁶

While Wells-Barnett's investigation revealed the effects of the riot and the politics of place on some black residents, the House Investigation exposed the negative effects of prostitution on residents. William Miller, director of the East St. Louis Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), complained during the House Hearings that an "army of prostitutes" hung out in the central business district near his building and harassed his tenants. Prostitutes stood around in kimonos, knocked on doors, and often interfered with the men's sleep.⁸⁷ But, neither prostitution legislation nor the 1915 Illinois law allowing suits against brothels as public nuisances had majorly impacted East St. Louis prostitution.⁸⁸ Rather, brothel closures in East St. Louis and other cities increased the visibility and practices of prostitution. Prostitutes took to the streets, flaunted their sexuality and beauty, and confounded ideas about women's place and acceptable behavior in the public sphere.⁸⁹

Such behavior aggravated Miller's anxieties about public decency, especially since middle- and upper-class women had brought their concerns for the poor, and their skills and dedication to clean, orderly homes immersed in Protestant values, into cities' public spaces.⁹⁰ Volunteer organizations, including the YMCA's sister organization, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the Salvation Army, and the NACWC, often embraced municipal housekeeping combined with social gospel. They



Elaborate kimono and make-up worn by Japanese prostitutes influenced American fashion, including that of prostitutes in East St. Louis. (Image: Library of Congress)

believed in providing "redemptive places," sites with added moral guidance, for persons in need without regard for race, religion, or ethnic origins.⁹¹ However, the Congressional Committee blamed the corrupt St. Clair County attorney general, Hubert Schaumleffel, for lack of "moral courage," "civic pride," and "character" for allowing prostitution and other vices to thrive in East St. Louis.⁹² Miller chastised Mayor Mollman and the police department for failing to get prostitutes off the streets. He complained that Mollman lacked a "moral vision" for feigning ignorance about the vice problem. Miller acted on his own when local government failed to support him. Only after he enlisted a reporter who wrote an exposé about the situation did the city's government respond.⁹³

The city had previously enacted anti-prostitution legislation that required white women to justify walking the streets at night or risk arrest, and,

prohibited them from going to saloons. However, in 1913 reformers convinced the city's administration to repeal policies that severely restricted the mobility of white women and where they could go.⁹⁴ Restricting only females' mobility and use of public space blatantly discriminated based on gender. The government's assumption of superiority in determining proper female conduct harkened back to the cult of domesticity and separate spheres. Women who navigated certain city spaces at night encroached on men's place, the public domain.⁹⁵ Restrictive mobility suggested the home as the proper place for white women after dark, and that women did not possess the moral fortitude for making appropriate decisions about their actions. While the policing of prostitutes and respectable white women may have appeared protective, women with ambiguous identities who frequented saloons and dance halls lost a source of leisure during implementation of the restrictive anti-prostitution campaign.

However, as Paul Anderson reported in the *Post-Dispatch*, saloon owners showed little regard for the safety and welfare of girls and women, and often rented upstairs saloon rooms to young girls for prostitution.⁹⁶ Several hundred girls between thirteen and sixteen years old were noted to have visited connected venues in East St. Louis that included dance halls, saloons, and hotels. Described as having hair loose down their backs and wearing short dresses, they engaged in public, lascivious dancing with drunken "toughs." Rape of teens who found themselves in compromised situations was not uncommon in those environments.⁹⁷ Those young girls ran afoul of social reformers concerned with social purity, regulation of consent in sexual interactions, and the risks of "white slavery" prostitution.⁹⁸ Hence, parents and guardians of the city's youth may have viewed policing actions as preventative and protective measures rather than punitive.

CONCLUSION

Local newspapers' commentaries about black and white women's behavior, make-up, and fashions amidst the violence of the East St. Louis Race Riot offered strong confirmation of the nation's

anxieties over race, class, and gender. Daisy Westbrook's concern about wearing her bungalow apron outside was an expression of that complex interplay during the Progressive Era. East St. Louis and other cities where race riots occurred acted as local stages on which some of society's national concerns played out. Local anxieties over fashion and public behaviors manifested the nation's concerns about the changing roles of blacks and women in American society. Black reformers and civil rights organizations, via the uplift agenda, placed their hopes on black women for justifying equal rights for the whole race. Reformers' efforts to demonstrate blacks' readiness for equal rights through black women's behavior and appearance, as indicators of respectability, met with mixed results. This was especially true for new black migrants who co-opted to wear outside the bungalow apron and other garments typically worn inside, and further resisted assimilation by rejecting modification of their public behavior. In addition, the pervasiveness of red-light districts, vice, and prostitution challenged all women's claims to respectability.

Clear markers of respectable white womanhood and class were diminished by the new beauty culture, white women's progressive fashion choices, and some immigrant domestic workers' preferences for dressing up like their employers. Women who behaved like "charity girls," whose sexual behavior demonstrated changing sexual mores, challenged expectations of what some would consider public displays of mannish behavior. Interventions, such as municipal housekeeping in places like Chicago and temporary legal restrictions on women's public mobility in East St. Louis reflected national concerns about women, who had moved into the public domain alongside men.

Reformers who initially deemed white women prostitutes as victims needing protection later turned punitive as war loomed and venereal disease threatened the readiness of the nation's military. Prostitutes' visibility in public places, and the physical displays of aggression toward blacks during the race riot, underscored some white women's lack of concern for the social controls reformers tried to place on their appearance and public behaviors.

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- ⁹⁴ McLaughlin, *Power, Community*, 62.
- ⁹⁵ Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 64-66.
- ⁹⁶ Paul Anderson, *Post-Dispatch* July 4, 1917, East St. Louis, Illinois Newspaper Clippings, Missouri Historical Society, IL 9.11 Ea7r:208.
- ⁹⁷ "No. 1231: Report on Investigation of East St. Louis Riots," 17.
- ⁹⁸ Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Girls* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 1-4, 31-32; Bell, *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls*, 112.