

Forget the Master's Tools, We Will Build Our Own House: The Woman's Era as a Rhetorical Forum for the Invention of African American Womanhood

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Abstract: *While many scholars (Logan; Gere; McHenry; Royster) have discussed the Woman's Era (1894-1897), this article adds to this research by revisiting the periodical as a single text (composed of years of articles and arguments) and as an example of rhetorical invention. By rethinking invention, this article argues that this aspect of the rhetorical canon can be understood not only as an act that helps create a text but also as something a text can do. In order to illustrate how the first publication by and for African American women invented their own vision of African American womanhood, this article looks specifically at the editors and contributors use of rhetorical methods of response and epideictic rhetoric as well as their creation of a formal communication network that connected thousands of women from across the country.*

Keywords: *Woman's Era; periodicals; invention; 19th century; epideictic rhetoric; African American women; lynch law; intersectionality*

I know of no publication having for its existence and possibilities such inspirations and rare opportuneness as your bright journal. The Woman's Era is the face of our colored women turned upward to the star of hope. It is the timely message of love and sympathy from colored women to women everywhere. It happily suggests that we can do so much for each other in all the most important interests of our lives, that we will have more time and reason for courage than for despair. To thousands of our women your paper will come as the first intimation of the wideness of the world about them and the stretch of human interest and sympathy. Thousands of them will discover their own strength and a certain sense of importance in this gradual coming together of our women all over the land in clubs and leagues organized for high purposes.

-Fannie Barrier Williams, Woman's Era (June 1, 1894)

On March 24, 1894, the *Woman's Era*, the first periodical published both by and for African American women, ran its first issue.¹ While African American journalists had been fighting for racial uplift since before the Civil War, this publication was the first edited and funded solely by African American women. Shirley Wilson Logan, Anne Ruggles Gere, and Elizabeth McHenry have all recognized the periodical as an important site for racial uplift, literary work, rhetorical education, and collaboration; yet even these praises do not fully investigate the import of this rhetorical space in the lives of African American women at the end of the nineteenth century. The *Women's Era* not only allowed women to publish their writing but also sparked the first National Conference of Colored Women and played a direct role in the formation of the National Association of Colored Women.

The *Woman's Era* is generally discussed as a publication in which African American women presented evidence of rhetorical and literary practices. The pages of the *Women's Era* are filled with fiction, political arguments, poems, advice for the home, and celebrations of African American women. Both Logan and Gere use articles published in the *Woman's Era* in order to support their arguments concerning African American rhetorical practices. Logan explains that the reports on African Americans' accomplishments "appear in the pages of the *Woman's Era* as evidence of enacted rhetorical activity" (*Liberating* 117). Gere and Logan agree that the publication also served as a place for African American women to make their accomplishments public for white and

1 The date of origin of the *Woman's Era* has been questioned by some who claim the publication originated in 1890 rather than in 1894. Rodger Streitmatter explains that two letters written from Ruffin to Cheney (possibly Edna Cheney) and dated 1890 reference the *Era* and are written on stationary with the heading "The Woman's Era." However, upon requesting the letters from Boston Public Library and examining them, it is clear that Ruffin wrote these letters in 1896. Her 6, however, looks very similar to a 0, and when someone else (evidenced by different penmanship) wrote the date of the letters on the back, they took Ruffin's 6 for a 0 and dated them 1890 rather than 1896. Further, the issue from March of 1894 includes a section entitled, "Greeting," which explains, "Of the makers of papers there be not a few, and an additional one may seem a superfluity unless a vacant spot is found in an apparently already overgrown field. Such a void, we think, exists, and it is to help fill it that we presume to make our first bow as editors of THE WOMAN'S ERA" (8). This first issue also includes an editorial written by Ellen Battelle Deitrick that notes, "It is pleasant to record a number of subscriptions on the strength of the prospectus alone. May the subscribers never have reason to regret their actions. The WOMAN'S ERA hopes to succeed on its merits" (7). If the paper had been in print since 1890, then the subscribers would not have needed to rely on "the prospectus alone" in 1894 nor would the editors have needed to explain why they were filling a void in journalism.

black audiences. McHenry elaborates on the publication and argues that the *Woman's Era* "is representative of the ways that black women created through their literary work a collaborative space in which to represent themselves and expand their identities" (190). She further argues that, "by claiming the right to represent themselves and exercise authority over the terms in which they described themselves and their activities, black women used the *Woman's Era* and *National Association Notes* to refute the negative and thoughtless representations of black womanhood that surrounded them" (223). The *Woman's Era*, then, has been primarily understood as a forum in which African American women presented their own vision of the African American woman for others (though Logan notes that they also praised the accomplishments of African Americans in an epideictic manner and McHenry recognizes that the publication allowed them to represent themselves). Perhaps the greatest impact of this publication was not what it did publicly, but rather what it did privately for the African American woman published in and reading its pages. African American women were not just presenting themselves in these pages; they were inventing African American womanhood. In doing so, they were not simply mimicking other publications or continuing the practices of the black press that was dominated by the African American male. Instead, they were creating something new—something so new, in fact, that it has been referred to as a newspaper by some, a periodical by others, and a magazine by still others. The reason scholars cannot agree on a name for this publication is because we have no name for what these women created. It was something entirely their own.

The sources on print culture I reference below—many of which include lists of publications from the late nineteenth century—contain no mention of the *Woman's Era*. The lack of scholarly attention paid to the *Woman's Era* could be partially attributed to the fact that the only known copy of the *Women's Era* was on microfilm at the Boston Public Library until Emory's *Women's Writers Research Project* digitized and transcribed the three volumes of the publication.² No known print copies remain. The limited accessibility of *Woman's Era*, combined with the lack of scholarly research on this publication in the fifteen plus years since it first gained scholarly attention, indicates a continued need for a reassessment of knowledge-production. In Royster and William's words,

2 Most of the primary research found in this article was done within the digital archives made possible through Emory's *Women Writers Resource Project*. The pages of the *Woman's Era* are not scanned and digitized but have instead been transcribed. I compared some of the transcriptions with the microfilm version from Boston Public Library, and they were accurate, but due to constraints in time and access, most of my research was done online rather than through the microfilm version.

we need to “se[e] the gaps in our knowledge” and “generat[e] the research that can help us fill those gaps” (581). While this publication has been discussed, the hundreds of pages, articles, and contributions of this periodical have not been done justice. Jessica Enoch found that by “changing our methods we change our histories” (62), and with that in mind, I present a new history of the *Woman’s Era* by revisiting this publication as a single text (composed of years of articles and arguments) and as an example of rhetorical invention—rather than evidence of rhetorical education or women’s club practices. By rethinking invention, this aspect of the rhetorical canon can be understood as an act that helps create a text and as something a text can do. This approach alters the way we understand what the *Women’s Era* accomplished. This history does not counter those presented by Gere, Logan, McHenry, and others but builds upon those histories, complicating and multiplying the contributions of the *Women’s Era*.

To fully investigate the role *Woman’s Era* played in the lives of nineteenth-century African American women, this article presents a variety of texts from the publication that evidence how contributors collaborated in order to invent a new vision of African American womanhood. After overviewing the publications that were intended for women prior to and during the 1890s, I explain how the *Woman’s Era* combined aspects of each of these genres in their periodical—making something new, unique, and revolutionary. The following section discusses how the publication used rhetorical methods of response in order to invent a new vision of the African American woman. Another part of this revolutionary publication was the communication network that allowed women’s clubs from across the country to celebrate their achievements via epideictic rhetoric. It concurrently encouraged growth and activism in clubs that had not yet reached the size or activity of a club like the Woman’s Era Club. Thus, the article continues with a discussion of this communication network before arguing that the publication served two primary purposes. These two purposes, enacted simultaneously, present counter-narratives to the public and, more importantly, invent the African American woman for themselves. The article concludes by discussing what the *Woman’s Era* teaches us, as feminist researchers, regarding methods of recovery and research on activist periodicals.

The Emergence of Print Culture

The 1860s saw the emergence of mass-circulation of newspapers due to the public’s desire for news of the Civil War and improvements in print technologies. After the war, technological advances allowed for massive changes in print: “Between 1870 and 1900, the number of daily newspapers quadrupled

and the number of weekly publications tripled. The plummeting price of newsprint—publishers who paid \$440 a ton for paper during the Civil War were paying only \$42 a ton by 1899—allowed the average newspaper to expand dramatically in size” (Lutes 99). With the ability to reach a larger portion of the population (as opposed to earlier nineteenth-century publications that only the wealthy could afford), newspapers like Joseph Pulitzer’s the *New York World* began to “[cultivate] a female audience by printing household hints and fashion and society news; [Pulitzer] also made a point of hiring at least a few women reporters to write for the city desk, not just for the women’s pages” (Lutes 100). Thus technological advances, that gave publishers more space and consequently more freedom in content, opened the door for women journalists—however small the door may have been.

The years between 1880 and 1920 are also considered the “Golden Age” of magazines. While magazine giants, such as *Scribner’s* and *Harper’s*, presented their readers with literary journalism, smaller magazines began the muckraking trend that eventually became a popular form of political news. Most popular magazines addressed the public sphere, while other magazines, primarily women’s magazines, began to address the private sphere. These magazines generally “instructed white middle-class women on how to live and how to keep the home a sanctuary away from work and the public. Women’s magazines provided practical instruction, delivered from a trusted friend. They were first to spearhead the profit formula of news-stand prices below cost, large circulations, and selling those circulations to advertisers” (Hinnant and Hudson 123). Often referred to as women’s journals, these magazines were remarkably—and at the time shockingly—profitable which led to the domination of this market by the “Big Six.”³ Women’s magazines were largely “practical” and aimed to help women in their home while profiting off of the advertisers who used the magazines to target a new consumer (the homemaker). Mary Ellen Zuckerman explains the content of women’s magazines such as the *Ladies’ Home Journal* (LHJ): “Often billing themselves as trade papers, these journals carried numerous service departments designed to help middle class women in their jobs as housewives, a change from the ante-bellum publications targeted primarily at the elite. Now columns appeared advising readers about

3 The “Big Six” refers to the most popular women’s magazines at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries: *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Woman’s Home Companion*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Delineator*, *McCall’s*, and *Pictorial Review*.

cleaning, cooking, making clothes, buying goods, supervising servants, child care, and the home needs of husbands" (xiii).

Despite the popularity of newspapers like the *New York World* and women's magazines like the *Ladies' Home Journal*, these publications were not without their failings. Women's magazines and the women's pages from newspapers reinforced the status quo and failed to recognize the life challenges of minority or non-middle-class women. Zuckerman concludes that "Despite publishing articles on political and social issues, women's journals generally reflected mainstream thinking. They did not typically try to radically reconfigure women's lives or society although they did at times work to reform and improve both" (xii). While women's magazines often failed to recognize differences between their readership (in race, class, and ideology), newspapers also failed to successfully address such political issues as the rise in racial violence. Lynchings and instances of mob violence were rarely reported, and when they were, the new objective reporting style of journalism was used. Jean Lutes observes that objective journalism was useful in reporting racial violence and other controversial matters by citing a report of the mob murder of an African American postmaster and his three-year-old daughter from the *New York Herald*. She recognizes that "the appearance of neutrality served the commercial interests of the *Herald*, allowing it to avoid antagonizing readers who may well have disagreed with each other about how to respond to such violence" (104). Unsurprisingly, the emergence of mass media coincided with this emergence of objective reporting as well as the media's tendency to reinforce rather than challenge the status quo, leaving individuals and groups who sought social change little choice but to go out on their own.

Consequently, this same time period saw a rapid increase in small, non-commercial, special interest publications, such as the *Evening Star*, *Freedom's Journal*, *The Revolution*, *Woman's Journal*, *The Woman's Cycle*, and *The Club Woman*. The *Woman's Era* followed these and other publications' lead with their creation of a publication that sought to counter dominant narratives and create a space for the presentation of non-mainstream, non-commercial ideas. Lutes explains,

Many suffragists, socialists, labour organizers, and racial and ethnic minorities established their own newspapers. Few of these alternative presses existed to make money... Many of these journals were short-lived and had limited readership, but they served as critical venues for expressing resistance to oppression; they also acted as platforms for reformers who used them to attract attention from mainstream presses. (105)

Long before the first publication of the *Woman's Era*, the black press advocated for change and racial uplift in the United States (*Liberating* 97). African American journalism provided an important site for rhetorical education as well as for racial uplift in the nineteenth century. These important rhetorical spaces included four newspapers edited by Frederick Douglass between 1847 and 1874 and the *Evening Star*, which elected Ida B. Wells as editor in the 1880s.⁴ Beginning more than a century later than the white press (137 years according to Roland E. Wolseley), the black press began in protest. The weekly *Freedom's Journal* (the first African American publication in the United States) "originally was issued in New York City as a means of answering attacks on blacks by another newspaper of that city, the white New York *Enquirer*" (Wolseley 25). Before and during the Civil War, the black press fought to end slavery. When changes in print technologies provided more opportunities for publication, the black press, too, began to change. Wolseley explains, "After 1865...[the black press] began to resemble the white press in its division: some publications continuing to crusade for more freedom, others supporting reaction, and still others interesting themselves more in profits than in social progress" (24).

While publications began to vary based on purpose and interest, the number of black papers began to increase drastically, totaling 575 by 1890 (Wolseley 38). The reasons for this upsurge are many and include an increase in education and literacy rates as well as an increase in violent crimes committed by whites against blacks. The black press also combined different aspects of print genres which complicated the general notion that these publications were newspapers:

Although little news appeared in these early papers and much of the material that did appear was of the kind usually bound into magazines of opinion, they are classified generally as newspapers rather than periodicals because of their appearance, frequency of issue, and their habit of calling themselves news organs. Charles S. Johnson... has observed that the first black publications were like magazines. (Wolseley 36)

4 Disliking her work as a teacher, Wells had been looking for a new avenue for her race work when the editor of the *Evening Star* resumed his job in Washington, D.C., and Wells was elected to fill his place (*Liberating* 102). For more information on Ida B. Wells and her work in journalism, see Shirley Wilson Logan's *Liberating Language* (particularly the chapter "Organs of Propaganda").

ily digested and good food, as are wheat, rice, potatoes, turnips, beets, carrots, parsnips and fruit. Chocolate or cocoa powdered and mixed with water or milk heated to the boiling point is refreshing and highly nutritious. All these foods are more or less valuable as blood and strength producers as they are properly or improperly prepared and eaten. The time of eating must be regular and the amount of food at each meal must be neither too much nor too little. As a general rule for an active person two and a half pounds of solid food and three pints of liquid food and three pints of water make a day's allowance.

The tone, the health and life of the human body are dependent upon the blood. And the health; the strength and life-giving quality of the blood depend upon the food we eat and the air we breathe. Air is mainly composed of nitrogen and oxygen, four parts of the former and one part of the latter. And when air is deprived of its oxygen it will not support human life. And each time that the same air passes through the lungs it loses a part of its oxygen. The blood starts from the heart fresh and pure and strong. It goes through the arteries to various parts of the body, deposits its nutrition or flesh making qualities, and then goes back through the veins to the heart again. On its return before reaching the heart, it passes through the lungs and exchanges the carbonic acid gas which it has gathered in going about the body, and which will not support animal life, for oxygen, which is necessary to the support of animal life.

If the blood does not exchange its carbonic acid gas for oxygen when it goes through the lungs on its way back to the heart, it becomes sluggish, loses its tone and health and instead of carrying nutrition and health and life to all parts of the body, it carries poison and we quickly see the result in pale faces, physical weakness, nervousness, depressed spirits, sallow complexions, weak minds and stunted growth.

How different is the result of vigorous blood, full of oxygen and life. The person who breathes fresh air, not air already breathed by himself or other persons once



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WHY YOU SHOULD SUBSCRIBE FOR THE WOMAN'S ERA.

Because it represents the best thought and work of the most advanced women of your race, and should therefore interest you.

Because it will keep you informed of matters you cannot afford to be ignorant of.

Because being a woman's movement, it is bound to succeed.

Because it is readable it contains sixteen pages of solid matter, no plate matter, reprints, no filling up with headings and leads.*

Because its subscription price is only one dollar a year.

or many times, will grow up strong, ruddy, active, with healthy body, skin and brain; and in condition for the very best physical and mental work.

Too much emphasis cannot be put upon the necessity for an abundance of pure, fresh air in the sleeping room, the sitting room, the school room, concert hall, lecture room, sick room, and wherever time is spent. Wearing apparel, bedding, rugs, carpets, and indeed every thing that can hold disease germs ought to be thoroughly aired each day.

Dressing is a matter of taste as well as health. One of the most satisfactory evidences of the progress of women is seen in the change from a style of tight lacing and tight dressing which cause the body to grow out of natural symmetry and grace, for a style of easy, comfortable and sensible dressing which allows the limbs to have free play and gives the blood a chance to circulate and flow to all parts of the body. Lacing and tight waists compress the liver and stomach and interfere with the movements of the diaphragm; this often causes headache, dyspepsia, shortness of breath, womb disease, weak back and many, many aches and pains. Women are beginning to learn that it is better to dress for health than for style, and that the best

dressing is that which aids and does not hinder healthy growth.

When taking physical exercise the dress should be light and loose and so made that the limb can have free and easy play in all directions.

Any rule regulating bathing must be elastic. Too much bathing is as dangerous as too little is bad. Frequent cold water sponge baths properly taken are among the best aids to good health because they strengthen the skin and keep it free from the impurities which the body is constantly trying to throw off through the pores. The best time for the bath is immediately after rising because the body is then rested and the circulation is at the best. Bathing immediately before or after a meal should be avoided because the rubbing removes the blood from the stomach to the surface. Care must be taken to avoid the shock to a delicate organization given by cold water. Begin with the tepid bath and gradually work up to cold water. All vigorous physical exercise should be followed by a bath to remove the impurities brought to the surface, avoiding a bath while the body is too heated. Take it after the heart has begun to beat normally and follow it with brisk rubbing with a coarse towel

Fig. 1: Example of the Woman's Era.

The *Woman's Era* was also referred to as an organ and looked like a newspaper despite combining a variety of genres more typical of magazines (see fig. 1). Avoiding the "objective journalism" that had become commonplace (and convenient for commercial publications), black publications were generally

opinionated and honest about their desire to prompt social change—a tradition the *Woman's Era* would follow.

Suffrage newspapers also emerged during this era. Of particular note are Lucy Stone and husband Henry Browne Blackwell's *Woman's Journal* (1870-1917) and Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Revolution* (1868-1872). *The Revolution* openly opposed the Fifteenth Amendment in favor of an Amendment that would allow both African American men and women the right to vote (Beasley and Gibbons 81). Published in reaction to the "radical politics" of *The Revolution*, the *Woman's Journal*, published in Boston, felt the two issues should remain separate and prioritized the vote for African American men over women despite being a Suffrage publication (Beasley and Gibbons 83). Though not focused on race issues, these alternative publications supported the idea that African Americans should have more rights, but with all white editors, the most prominent Suffrage publications continued to generally exclude African American women from discussions regarding voting rights.

The Woman's Era Club was not the only group of clubwomen to publish their own periodical. Despite the publishing industry's newfound desire to sell their publications (and the advertisements within them) to women, Gere explains that the industry generally remained hostile to women:

Newspapers, magazines, and book publishing remained male-governed throughout the nineteenth century, and women who tried to succeed in the world of print encountered enormous difficulties. By underwriting their own publications and regulating their contents, clubwomen created an alternative to the male controlled mass market in which women could only rarely present themselves in their own terms. (29)

Six months after the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) was founded in 1889, journalist Jane Cunningham Crowley began as editor of *The Woman's Cycle*, which functioned as the GFWC's club magazine. The publication only lasted a year, but Crowley would attempt another club magazine, this time named *The New Cycle*, that would be the organ of the GFWC from 1892 to 1896. Articles in this publication discussed "parenting, municipal affairs, public education, public health, and woman workers" (Endres and Lueck 133). When Crowley was asked to write the history of the GFWC, Helen M. Winslow's *The Club Woman* took over the publication of the "Club News" section that had previously been found in Crowley's publications. As Endres and Lueck explain, "[Winslow] said her publication would provide guidance to young clubs that were seeking ways to expand their interests into their communities" (133). While these publications were directed at the growing number of clubwomen

across the United States, they failed to embrace the African American clubwomen. Although not stated explicitly, an incident from 1900 illustrates that inclusion of African American clubwomen was not a top priority for the GFWC. In 1900, the Woman's Era Club was admitted to membership without the GFWC realizing the club was composed of African American women. When Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, editor of the *Woman's Era*, traveled to Milwaukee for the GFWC convention, she was refused admittance unless she agreed to represent another club that was not composed solely of African American women. She refused to enter as anything other than a representative of the *Woman's Era* and the GFWC did not back down for fear of offending their many Southern members. Thus, when the *Woman's Era* began their publication and welcomed African American clubs from across the country to share Club News, the GFWC did not allow African American clubs to be members (thus their ideas were not presented in the publications of the GFWC).

Consequently, the editors of the *Woman's Era* were responding to and blending different aspects of the variety of publications suddenly available to women at the end of the century. When the *Woman's Era* published its first issue, the editors and columnists joined a burgeoning industry that was changing as quickly as it was growing. This publication, however, was unique because it was the first periodical published both by and for African American women and also because it combined aspects of a variety of print genres to create an amalgamation unlike any other. While other publications meshed genres as well, the *Woman's Era's* combination of genre is notable for its creation of a rhetorical forum where African American women could discuss all of the challenges they faced. Like woman's magazines, the publication provided advice for the home while simultaneously countering the narratives of perfection found in such publications. Like newspapers, the publication provided information about events and people, though the *Woman's Era's* writers focused on individuals that the major presses were sure to ignore and did not use the new objective reporting style, favoring columns that presented a position on a social or political issue. Like the other publications in the black press, the *Woman's Era* combined and challenged a variety of genres and fought for the improvement of life for their race. Like the Suffrage publications of the time, the *Woman's Era* had female editors that were not scared to argue for real political change in their Editorials. Like the publications that provided "Club News" for the GFWC, the *Woman's Era* also published club news and reports that would eventually become the primary purpose of the publication. Thus the readers of the *Woman's Era* found a publication where the challenges they faced intersected, and in doing so, they created a publication that was interested in an inclusive vision of female African American life. The combination of these many disparate parts created a rhetorical forum where African

American women shaped, for the first time in print, their own vision of the African American woman.

The Woman's Era's Kairotic Moment

In February of 1893, just over a year before the first issue of the *Woman's Era* was published, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, her daughter Florida Ruffin Ridley, and Maria Louise Baldwin founded the Woman's Era Club—a woman's club composed of African American women of all ages. In the first issue of the periodical, the club's section in "Club News" explains the reason for the formation of the club: "at the time Miss Wells was creating so much interest in her crusade against lynch-law, it was a good time to carry out the club's idea, call the women together and organize, not for race work alone, but for work along all the lines that make for women's progress. The result was that a club was formed with a membership of twenty which has more than doubled since that time" ("Boston" 4). In the prior year, more than 250 lynchings occurred in the United States—more than any other year in U.S. history. In response to this startling increase in violence, the club's first foray into print took the form of a leaflet that condemned the Denmark Lynching of Barnwell County, South Carolina. The club later reported that this leaflet, "sent in every direction... brought back numerous and encouraging" responses ("Boston" 4). Indeed, the club received requests for additional hundreds of leaflets to be sent cross-country.

The responses to this leaflet indicated that the women of the WEC had altered opinions and even convinced readers to act with the purpose of "awaken[ing] public sentiment" ("Boston" 4). Consequently, the Woman's Era Club saw an opportunity and used the first issue of the *Woman's Era* to explain the impetus for their work:

This reception of the leaflets has revealed to the club a line of work which has been little used and which the club can incorporate with its other work with advantage. This is the publication and circulation of matter that refers especially to the race, not alone, but also such matter as shall be for the advancement and encouragement of the race and to quote from our constitution "to collect all facts obtainable, showing the moral, intellectual, industrial and social growth and attainment of our people." ("Boston" 4)

The combination of the periodical's name and the published mission of the club make their dual-purpose quite clear. In naming the publication, the women emphasize their devotion to their gender, and in the above statement of the paper's purpose, they make their devotion to the improvement of the race

explicit. Thus in the *Woman's Era*, gender and race were to work in tandem rather than in opposition.

When editors Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin and Florida Ruffin Ridley published the *Woman's Era* as the official organ of the Woman's Era Club, they became the first African American women to fund and edit a publication intended for an African American female audience. While the periodical began as one club's periodical, with time it became a publication for all African American women's clubs. Within this publication, African American women found an opportunity to voice their own perspectives on eclectic subjects. Other publications of this time period either neglected the topics the editors found important or covered these topics from a white or male perspective, leaving few opportunities for the women published in the pages of the *Woman's Era* to publish their own writing and ideas from an African American and a female perspective.

In her discussion on how intersectionality and identity politics impact rape and domestic violence legislation, Kimberlé Crenshaw observes that African American women are "within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas" (1252) and "fail women of color by not acknowledging the 'additional' issue of race or patriarchy" (1282). Logan further explains that the sociohistorical context surrounding African American women rhetors in the last two decades of the nineteenth century was molded by the "overlapping issues [of] the abolition of slavery, women's rights, mob violence, and racial uplift" (*We Are Coming* 3). When the *Woman's Era* first went to print, the editors and contributors were responding to a complex set of circumstances prompting their desire for a rhetorical space that allowed for reactions to publications directed toward women while also celebrating their own accomplishments. Indeed, the pages of the publication respond to all of the issues Logan identifies. Consequently, the *Woman's Era* created a rhetorical space where it was not race or gender that was valued first and foremost but rather the person that intersected at these two identity categories and her experiences and opinions. While the space for such a person to speak had been created, this does not mean that suddenly she knew who she was outside of white and male rhetoric. These women created the African American woman for themselves, and they did so through a combination of response to other publications and epideictic rhetoric. Within the pages of the publication, many African American women (some prominent, some new to writing) condemned unflattering, public depictions of African American womanhood while others used rhetorics of praise in order to present a new vision.

In the first issue, the Women's Era Club's "Club News" section presents a succinct description of the club's goals:

It is not our desire to narrow ourselves to race work, however necessary it is that such work should be done and particularly by colored women. It cannot but be admitted that we, as a race, have too frequently limited ourselves to this field with the result of contracting our vision, enfeebling our impulses and weakening our powers. We the women of the Women's Era Club enter the field to work hand in hand with women, generally for the humanity's interests, not the Negro alone but the Chinese, the Hawaiian, the Russian Jew, the oppressed everywhere as subjects for our consideration, not the needs of the colored women, but women everywhere are our interest. ("Boston" 4)

As the "official organ of the Women's Era Club," these goals would have been extended to not just the members of the club but also to their publication. Their claim that individuals often focus so much on their own oppression that they limit themselves challenged the readers of the periodical to attempt to consider the oppressions of those with whom they were not as familiar while also welcoming readers of different races, genders, and classes. This presentation of their intent (as a club) evidences a desire for African American women to do work for the improvement of all members of society, and with their publication of the *Woman's Era*, they provided a space for women across the country to do just that.

Inventing through Response

Of course, there were other forums through which African American women could speak and publish in the last decade of the twentieth century, but these opportunities were not abundant (and were often only available to the very privileged and educated). One of the *Woman's Era's* most important contributions was that it provided a place for numerous women to publish their own writing. Simultaneously, it provided evidence to women who may not have imagined that they could write fiction or political commentary—let alone publish that writing—that African American women could produce a variety of forms of journalistic and literary work. The publication's varied content allowed many women publishing opportunities that were not otherwise available. One of the primary ways women contributed to this publication was through response to other publications. This took many forms, from mocking home and domestic science columns to responding to rhetoric published (or spoken) elsewhere. At a time when few popular publications allowed or encouraged African American contributors, these responses gave African American women a voice, providing them with a public forum in which they could finally react to and counter unflattering and offensive depictions of African American

life while also presenting evidence of their literacy and rhetorical prowess. Logan discusses the black press's commentary on political speeches as a way to both provide rhetorical education and to "[showcase] their rhetorical performances for the benefit of black and white readers skeptical about their abilities" (*Liberating* 128). The *Woman's Era* often praised speeches given by African American men and women, and they also often responded to what they saw as hypocritical rhetoric from a variety of sources, especially Christian publications and white Suffragists. Their praise drew attention to many successes of the race, reinforcing their presentation of a literate, talented African American public. Their critiques allowed them to enter conversations that concerned them but to which they had not been invited. The *Woman's Era* served as the first public space where African American women could continue the response work of other African American publications with particular attention to women's issues, ranging from domestic science to suffrage.

While smaller publications and African American publications accepted work written by African American women, larger, more commercial publications (and those that discussed the home and child rearing) were not as friendly. In the second volume of the *Woman's Era*, an anonymous author notes the silencing of black women in "The Open Court," a section composed of contributions from readers reflecting on or simply calling attention to texts and speeches published or given elsewhere. Responding to her article (published elsewhere) that had been cut to such a degree that she feared her intent was misunderstood, the anonymous author explains:

The policy of Mr. Edward Bok, editor of the Home Journal, is to accept such articles as have been deemed worthy, yet emanating from the pen of our women, but in two cases at least they have drawn out protests from the subscribers of the dominant race. Now the matter is of great interest to us as a race for the reason that we have long wondered why we could not secure space for good work in white journals, not yet able replies to attacks on our own race published in great monthlies of the country...The point for us to take heart is to inquire in other quarters whether protests are being made against the admission of our writers into the higher grade journals, and find out the remedy, if there be any, to offset this system of oppression, and if none, let us at least see the necessity of keeping our dollars at home and continue to build up our journals until they can compete with these from which we are being excluded. ("The Open Court" 21)⁵

5 No author is assigned to this column, but that may have been a mistake as Ruffin had previously referred to this incident as being presented to her by Mrs. Moswell who was the editor of "The Open Court" columns where this excerpt was published.

African American women subscribed to such publications; however, unless their experiences reflected those of the middle-class white women, those experiences were not important to these commercial publications. The *Woman's Era* presented the opposite message by challenging the limited views produced by major magazines like the *Ladies' Home Journal* and by providing a rhetorical forum where African American women could react to these other publications. These reactions provided the readers of the *Woman's Era* with an alternate womanhood, one that did not have to live up to the impossible standards of publications like the *Ladies' Home Journal*. Within the pages of the periodical, African American women could read: literary fiction with African American women as main characters; domestic science columns that recognized the limits of class; Club News from African American women's clubs all over the country; editorials on political issues that faced African American women, such as "The Problems of the Unemployed" and "Woman's Place"; articles that condemned "Apologists for Lynching"; recurring columns like "Health and Beauty from Exercise" and "Literature Department"; reports on various meetings and public events; and "Chats with Girls," a column they could share with their daughters. The *Woman's Era's* combined a variety of content found in women's magazines, newspapers, and the Black Press, creating a publication that not only intended to help produce well-rounded African American women but that also served as a space for the invention of African American womanhood in the public, the private, and all the spaces in between.

The *Woman's Era* was published monthly in Boston, and while primarily funded by Ruffin, it charged a small subscription fee. A single issue cost ten cents, a year's subscription cost a dollar, and clubs could purchase 100 copies for seven dollars. The *LHJ* subscription rates were the same in 1894, though they did not offer clubs discounted rates. This is unsurprising, as editor Edward W. Bok felt that "the self-culture of women's clubs, which he described as 'unintelligent,' had done 'incalculable harm' by fostering 'what is jocularly known as woman's club knowledge but what is actually undigested, superficial knowledge that is worse than no knowledge at all'" (Gere 180). Since the *LHJ* relied on advertisements to make money, it is clear that Ruffin's intent was not financial gain; she could not possibly acquire the kind or amount of advertisement investments that the larger magazines could secure. The *Woman's Era* contained advertisements, though many of them offered premiums for readers who were able to secure the most subscriptions to the publication. The largest advertisement was from Atlanta University (see fig. 1), and most others were from small businesses in Boston (dressmakers, business advisors, condensed milk, etc.). It was also likely not a coincidence that Ruffin and Ridley chose to match their subscription rates to the rates of the more popular publication. In an editorial from 1895, Ruffin argues:

Thousands of colored women subscribe for the Ladies' Home Journal; hundreds of colored women are active in getting subscribers; and yet its editor tells Mrs. Moswell that he can not accept contributions to the columns of his paper from women known to be colored for fear of antagonizing his southern white subscribers. Think of this, you colored women whose dollars and efforts are going that this man may live in princely style; think of your money going to support in luxury [sic] the writers of that paper, while you hesitate to give ten cents toward the encouragement of writers of your own race! O, the pity of it! ("Editorial" 8)

This passage as well as the existence of columns like "Domestic Science" within the pages of the *Woman's Era* indicate that Ruffin, if not the entire editorial staff, saw the *LHJ* as their competition and perhaps even their rival. At that time, the *LHJ* had the largest distribution rate of any periodical in the country, and the editors' references to the publication indicate that many of these subscribers were African American women. Multiple editorials explicitly state their intention to take readers away from this publication and others like it. Ruffin and others involved in the publication of the *Woman's Era* clearly recognized the importance of creating a rhetorical space where African American women could find their own voice without the fear of rejection or of being so heavily edited that their original intent was lost. Their periodical provided this space for African American women, and in doing so they hoped to steal readers from the larger publications that presented womanhood as white and white alone. Their responses (particularly the domestic science column) recognized that race, class, and location impacted the kind of woman the reader could be. With that recognition came a resistance to the popular depictions of the ideal wife and mother, thus allowing for the creation of an African American womanhood that did not attempt to live up to an impossible ideal.

The "Domestic Science" column indicates that the editors and contributors were aware that their readers were diverse, and it further indicates that they were also interested in using the publication to help their readers improve their personal lives. The article begins with a description of the duties expected of a good wife and mother. After this detailed description, no doubt imitating domestic science columns from other publications, Ellen Dietrick recognizes the impossibility of this vision for most (if not all) women. Without explicitly mentioning race and class differences among women, Dietrick alludes to these identity markers saying, "without considering all the cost of imitation at once the woman with no fixed income, with many children and with no servants, strives to rival the other's expenditure" (Dietrick 6). The column then continues with a call for women to rely on one another to help with housework, telling the readers to develop community with one another in order to

make the domestic labor more bearable and possible. For example, the author encourages women's clubs to rotate laundry duties or even to co-purchase a laundry machine to help with the labor. These columns speak about African American women's lives in African American women's voices, providing readers with a realistic discussion of the home—one that focused on practical ways women could make housework more manageable.

The differences between the "Domestic Science" articles of the *Woman's Era* and those of the magazines and periodicals more frequently directed toward women during this time period would not have been lost on the readers. While not a "Domestic Science" article, "At Home With the Editor," by male *LHJ* editor Edward Bok, serves as a useful comparison because the *Woman's Era* explicitly opposed and critiqued this publication. In the February 1894 issue, his column reads:

when a woman loves a man she lives for him. From the moment she awakens in the morning until she closes her eyes at night a loving wife's thoughts are of her husband. All day she performs her duties with the thought of his pleasure uppermost in her mind, and his image in her heart. Nearly everything she does is with the thought of him. If she puts a dainty touch to a room she instinctively wonders what he will think of it when he comes home...When she plans the dinner his tastes are regarded first. What would he like best is her constant thought. She dresses her children, having in mind a little suggestion or thought which he may have dropped days, yes, even months ago...What honey is to a bee, a man's love is to his wife. It is her very existence—upon its knowledge she lives better, she does her chosen tasks more easily, she loves her children more; it makes her smile brighter and her laugh heartier, and it keeps her heart young. And considering what we men owe to women, it is, indeed, a very modest return that we offer them. (Bok 16)

It is this sort of column that the first published "Domestic Science" column in the *Woman's Era* was imitating—even mocking. The sharp contrast between the above passage and the following entry from the *Woman's Era*, however, is even more noteworthy:

The first result of a true training in domestic science is the gaining of courage to be one's own self, to live one's own life, to model one's own home in blissful independence of the rule of that social tyrant, Mrs. Grundy, the courage to have one's floors bare and serviceably painted, if one cannot afford a carpet in the first place, or the still greater expense of having a carpet properly and frequently renovated

thereafter. The courage to have sleeping-rooms and kitchen well and comfortably furnished and equipped, even if the parlor has to wait long for any furniture whatever. Here the domestic scientist is strong. Honest comfort and health she will have first, luxury, if it come at all must wait her perfect convenience. (Deitrick 6)⁶

The first difference between the two columns is the emphasis on self. The column from the *LHJ* emphasizes a woman's lack of agency—her devotion to and reliance on her husband and his needs to dictate her every decision and her happiness. The column from the *Woman's Era*, on the other hand, barely mentions the husband and instead encourages the housewife to be herself in spite of societal expectations for her to be an ideal wife, mother, and homemaker. The second difference between the two articles is the attention to how class differences will affect a woman's ability to live up to society's expectations. The patriarchal woman described in *LHJ* is one of privilege; Deitrick, however, is not willing to assume all of her readers have the same experiences. Consequently, while the content of the two articles is quite different, this comparison illustrates the significance of the *Woman's Era's* recognition of the differences among class, location, race, and ability, as well as the impact of these differences on everyday life. This recognition of difference and the rejection of the impossible standards perpetuated by the media (as seen in the example from Bok) present a counter-narrative for all women to embrace—a narrative that does not expect perfection but instead celebrates pragmatism.

The "Domestic Science" column indicates that the editors and contributors were not only aware that their readers were diverse and also indicates that they were interested in using the publication to help these women improve their personal lives. At a time when women were bombarded with media about how to be better wives and mothers in their own individual spheres, the *Woman's Era* took a different approach. This column illustrates the *Woman's Era's* desire to discuss all aspects of a woman's life. The publication's authors do not limit themselves to the political but instead include a recurring column devoted to the private lives of women. The "Domestic Science" column counters the dominant narratives about woman and the home while it encourages sisterhood among clubwomen. Deitrick further recommends that clubs work together to make housework less time-consuming. She provided tips that would not improve appearances or a husband's life but rather that would make a woman's work easier, more bearable, and less lonely. Dietrick's "Domestic Science" columns provide advice on how to make housework more efficient and affordable while also encouraging readers to think of themselves

6 Mrs. Grundy is a literary reference that began with Thomas Morton's *Speed the Plough* (1798) and became a well-known figure of domestic tyranny.

not as an individual woman working in the house alone but rather as community members that could improve their lives together.

In addition to providing a response to unrealistic and chauvinistic domestic pressures, the *Women's Era* was also interested in the fight against the racial violence in the South. A letter written by secretary Florida Ruffin Ridley, published in the Woman's Era Club's club notes, addresses Laura Ormiston Chant's (a white woman who spoke at a meeting of the Woman's Era Club) involvement in the defeat of an anti-lynching resolution at the National Council of the Unitarian Church:

We, the members of the Women's Era Club, believe we speak for the colored women of America. We have organized, as have our women everywhere, to help in the world's work, not only by endeavoring to uplift ourselves and our race, but by giving a helping hand and an encouraging word wherever they may be called for. As colored women, we have suffered and do suffer too much to be blind to the sufferings [sic] of others, but naturally, we are more keenly alive to our own sufferings than to others', and we feel that we would be false to ourselves, to our opportunities and to our race, should we keep silence [sic] in a case like this.... (Ridley 6)

This letter's claim that the WEC speaks both for themselves and for the women of their race illustrates their awareness that the black female perspective was different—even contrary to—the white woman's as a consequence of their own experiences and sufferings. Yet at the same time, this letter also does not claim to speak for the race as a whole but instead only for women of that race. This distinction illustrates an awareness of the intersectionality that Crenshaw discusses:

....the narratives of gender are based on the experience of white, middle-class women, and the narratives of race are based on the experience of Black men. The solution does not merely entail arguing for the multiplicity of identities or challenging essentialism generally. Instead, in [Anita] Hill's case, for example, it would have been necessary to answer those crucial aspects of her location that were erased, even by many of her advocates—that is, to state what difference her difference made. (1299)

In arguing that Chant's fight for lynch law in the defense of her gender's safety in the South ignores the actual problems of violence in the South, the Woman's Era Club posits that narratives of gender exclude narratives of race, particularly with the presentation of the following claim: "We feel assured and do truly believe that you opposed the resolution from a high moral standpoint,

but we also feel assured that your position on this subject is the result of influences entirely one-sided, and that you will it [sic] least be interested to hear the other side" (Ridley 6). Once again, the founders of the publication present their own awareness of how difference (in race in particular) influences people's understanding of gender and racial issues and the ways in which violence can be both social and systemic. Thus they argue for the recognition of their intersectionality that Chant's lack of recognition of such a multiplicity results in her inability to understand the reality of racial violence in the South. This lack of recognition results in her argument against the denouncement of the lynchings. Because she considers the lynching problem from only a gendered perspective, Chant failed to fully understand the situation, and, in doing so, she negatively impacted her previously good relationship with the members of the Woman's Era Club.

The import of the difference between Chant and the members and readers of the *Woman's Era* becomes more evident as the letter continues:

We know positively of case after case where innocent men have died horrible deaths; we know positively of cases that have been "made up"; we know positively of cases where black men have been lynched for white men's crimes. We know positively of black men murdered for insignificant offences. All that we ask for is justice, not mercy or palliation, simple justice, surely that is not too much for loyal citizens of a free country to demand. We do not pretend to say there are no black villains [sic]; baseness is not confined to race; we read with horror of two different colored girls who have recently been horribly assaulted by white men in the South. We should regret any lynchings of the offenders by black men, but we shall not have occasion; should these offenders receive any punishment, it will be a marvel. We do not brand the white race because of these many atrocities committed by white men, but because lynch law is not visited upon this class of offenders, we repudiate the claim that lynching is the natural and commendable outburst of a high-spirited people. We do not expect white women shall feel as deeply as we. We know of good and high-minded women made widows, of sweet and innocent children, fatherless, by a mob of unbridled men and boys "looking for fun." In their name we utter our solemn protest. For their sakes we call upon workers of humanity everywhere, if they can do nothing for us, in mercy's name not to raise their voices against us. (Ridley 6)

With this, the Woman's Era Club continued to argue that their dual position should be recognized, particularly by a white woman who had previously spent time with them only to later openly fight against racial justice. In not

arguing for the innocence of their race as a whole, but rather arguing for a legal system that condemned lynch law and required proof before violence, the women show that they are both defending the men of their race from narratives of rape and violence and, more importantly, asking for a legal system that deals with white and black violence in the same way. They reference two assaults of African American girls in the South in order to argue that violence against women does not automatically beget violence against men. Contrary to Chant's claims, lynch law is not a natural result of such violence. While gaining sympathy from their readers, the inclusion of this example also points out the hypocritical logic used to defend racial violence in the South. They end with the recognition that white women will never fully understand the plight of the African American woman, further illustrating their awareness that difference influences perceptions of the world. This example presents compelling evidence for what the *Woman's Era* provided: a rhetorical space where black women could finally argue for both their race and their gender rather than one or the other, where they could speak not as black or as women but as black women, and where they could respond to and disagree with prominent white women whom they respected.

The editors were also vocal about their opinions concerning women's rights and Suffrage. In an editorial entitled "Woman's Place," the editors respond to two articles from the *Virginia Baptist* that "claim[ed] to prove through Bible authority that the only place for woman in the church is that of a singer and prayer, and that in teaching and preaching she (woman) is acting contrary to divine authority and that the exercise of the right of suffrage would be it [sic] deplorable climax to these transgressions" ("Woman's Place" 8).⁷ In this Editorial, the editors make their support for Suffrage clear: "It does seem sometimes that the best weapon to use against those who are so alarmed at the thought of woman losing her womanliness and sphere in the near future,

7 While no author is listed, the column is referred to as an Editorial, and it and the many other editorials mentioned throughout this article were written by editors Ruffin or Ridley. It is also possible, though never stated explicitly, that they wrote these editorials together. The other departments also sometimes lack clearly referenced authors, but the "Publisher's Announcement" notes the names of the departmental editors, and references throughout the publication indicate that these departmental editors wrote the columns in their department. Sometimes their names are listed twice within the column, once directly below the title and another after the word Editor. This indicates that they both edited the department and wrote the columns within the department. The *Woman's Era* Club's notes, published in the paper, also often provide the names of authors, as is the case for the first issue. This, of course, excludes the departments that welcomed submissions from around the country like the "Club News" section and "The Open Court."

is absolute silence; so few of the arguments of these people are worth answering and in so many cases does it seem beneath one's dignity to answer" ("Woman's Place" 8). After noting that those who posit Biblical arguments are all too willing to hold strictly to some scripture while ignoring other aspects that do not fit their needs, the editors continue:

It is according to law, gospel, history and common sense that woman's place is where she is needed and where she fits in and to say that the place will affect her womanliness is bosh; womanliness is an attribute not a condition, it is not supplied or withdrawn by surroundings, it may be lacking in the most feeble and protected woman, and strong in her who is the sole support of her little ones and has to fight the flesh, the devil and the world too, in their behalf. It is spurious womanliness that only manifests itself in certain surroundings...The weak effusive arguments against suffrage can have but one effect on the indifferent, and that is to turn them into suffragists so that by no mistake they may be counted among these remonstrants. The thing that strikes the readers more than anything else is the constantly repeated argument and fear that through suffrage woman will lose her womanliness, this is the strength of the opposition and it means only one of two things, either the opposition is weak or it is blind, in either case it merits little attention. ("Woman's Place" 8)

With this response, the *Woman's Era* indicates that they support women's suffrage, but also that they feel the argument for it is so strong (and that against it so weak) that it needs little attention. The inclusion of suffrage in the *Woman's Era* is important because it continues to value multiple aspects of the readers' identities, welcoming readers from a variety of places, classes, and races. This inclusion was essential to the publication's attempts to invent an African American womanhood. As opposed to the womanhood found in commercial publications, the *Woman's Era* presented womanhood as malleable and multifaceted, recognizing that womanhood could and would change with circumstance.

While the above reference to Suffrage did not mention racial differences, the next reference to the issue focused on race. In an editorial entitled "A Word to the A.A.W.," the editors ask the Association for the Advancement of Women and association president Julia Ward Howe to finally face the race question. They begin by recognizing how very different white women's lives were than their own:

The association stands now in an enviable position; it sees its labors crowned with much success, and very little standing in the way of

future efforts; it sees--as we all see--the almost boundless possibilities of the American white woman; it sees the especial consideration which she enjoys in this country, anything being possible to her except the act of voting, and her growing influence now almost unlimited. ("A Word" 8)

Following this recognition, they call for both white and black women to address the racial problems in the United States, recognizing that they must approach the problem differently:

In spite of this, it has been one of woman's strong points that she has put right before expediency, and we would suggest to the A.A.W. that they cast aside policy and expediency, and boldly face this race question. It is it [sic] question which they can not longer evade. We thoroughly believe that it is the women of America--black and white--who are to solve this race problem, and we do not ignore the duty of the black women in the matter. They must arouse, educate and advance themselves; they are to exert that influence through the homes, the schools and the churches that will build up an intelligent, industrious and moral people. Their duty is plain and must be done. But the white woman has a duty in the matter also; she must see to it that no obstructions are placed in the way of a weak, struggling people; She must no longer consent to be passive. We call upon her to take her stand. ("A Word" 8)

Here the editors call on white women to "take a stand," and they also identify themselves as a party interested in both Suffrage and racial uplift. With these words, they further define their own role in solving the race problem as different than that of the white woman or the black man. With this column, the *Woman's Era* continued to define the role of the African American woman by focusing on African American female strength (in both morals and intelligence) while presenting beautifully written and compelling rhetoric.

Within the pages of the *Woman's Era*, African American women created a rhetorical forum through which they could speak from their specific subject position while recognizing their race, gender, and other identity factors that contributed to their own unique perspective (be they of location, class, etc.). The combination of the "Domestic Science" column, the "Woman's Place" Editorial, the letter to Chant, and the call to the A.A.W. illustrates how African American women used this publication as a forum through which they could respond to both dominant ideologies and individuals' speeches and actions. Indeed, the Open Court's purpose was to allow people to respond to speeches and published writings from different perspectives. The editors and other contributors made their desire for such a space clear in their own recognition that

their perspectives had been limited by their own sufferings. Thus one of the primary functions and contributions of this publication was to allow for this creation of counter-narratives and responses that were not always welcome in other publications.

By combining specific aspects of a variety of genres, the *Woman's Era* addressed every aspect of female African American life. While it initially may appear that they were simply emulating other publications, further investigation shows that they carefully chose which aspects of other publications they needed to combine in order to invent the African American woman for themselves. In doing so, the publication countered narratives of suffragists that erased the black woman, narratives of woman's magazines that erased anyone who was not middle class, and narratives of Christians that ignored race. With this combination, they provided counter-narratives that, when read together, invented a new African American woman in print. This African American woman, created out of counter-narratives, served as a representation of who the readers and contributors were and who they should strive to be. In using rhetorical methods of response, the editors, writers, and readers of the *Woman's Era* invented their own African American woman unlike any other representation of her in print. Their African American woman was an activist who fought for her race, a teacher who actively sought education and knowledge, a suffragist who understood that oppression was not a problem unique to her kind, and a mother who did her best not only to raise her own children but to help her sisters with their families as well. Thus through their responses to other publications, the women who published in and edited the *Woman's Era* created a new intersectional identity for themselves and for African American women across the country.

A Collaborative Vision of the African American Woman

While these counter-narratives followed in the tradition of the black press, the *Woman's Era's* creation of a communication network did not. Beginning with the first issue, the *Woman's Era* welcomed "Club News" from across the country. However, the second issue asked for women to respond to three prompts, asking if there should be a national convention of African American women's clubs. This prompt brought forth many responses (including the epigraph above by Fannie Barrier Williams) and eventually led to a July 1895 conference held at Berkeley Hall in Boston. During this convention, the National Federation of Afro-American women was founded, and the *Woman's Era* became the official organ of the organization. In 1896, this federation would combine with the National League of Colored Women to form the National

Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC). The communication network that began with the *Woman's Era* continued to impact African American women for many, many years to come. The NACWC, who would adopt the publication as their national notes in 1896, eventually changed their name to the NACW. Mary Church Terrell, the first president of the NACWC, later proposed the formation of a council, and Mary Mcleod Bethune answered her call in 1935 with the formation of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). The NCNW continues to "lead, develop, and advocate for women of African descent as they support their families and communities" today ("Mission").

Beginning with the eighth issue of Volume I (published in November of 1894), the *Woman's Era* opened new departments with editors from New York, Washington D.C., Chicago, Kansas City, Denver, and New Orleans. These new sections gave clubs from cities other than Boston a greater role in the production of the periodical, though other cities had been contributing letters, Club News, and even articles for many issues. The New York department was edited by Victoria Earle Matthews, the Washington section by Mary Church Terrell, and the Chicago department by Fannie Barrier Williams. While prominent and elite women edited the new departments (possibly decreasing the likelihood of less prominent women to publish their writing in the publication), their inclusion meant that women across the country were now formally collaborating to publish work on race and gender and to continue (and perhaps diversify) a public invention of African American womanhood. With this new organizational structure, women from other locations could now add to the vision of African American womanhood that had previously been presented primarily from Boston and cities nearby. These new sections focused on events and women from their city, and this broadened the vision of African American womanhood to include Southern women and women from as far west as Kansas City.

With the inclusion of these new departments, the *Woman's Era* began their most important endeavor yet: they created a public communication network among African American women. Endres and Lueck explain:

From temperance to abolitionism, from woman's rights to suffrage, from feminism to pacifism, women have worked within reform groups to change American society. Among these reform-minded women, an informal communication network developed. Sometimes these were as informal as conversations among like-minded women at the various reform meetings held in the nineteenth century. The temperance, abolitionist, and woman's rights movements were especially marked by this type of activity. Between meetings, women were forced to rely on the mails to retain these informal communication

networks alive.... In general, these communication networks have been informal and have served women on a personal level, providing information, inspiration, and motivation. (Endres and Lueck xvi-ii).

Unlike the informal communication networks Endres and Lueck refer to, this communication network was quite formal. So while the *Woman's Era* utilized a common women's rhetorical practice by creating this network, they made it their own by publishing these communications for women all over the country to read. The published network then served as inspiration for African American women who had not yet been able to join such networks. The content of the *Woman's Era*, now edited by a variety of women in all different regions of the country, was intended to inform, inspire, and motivate the many rather than the few.

Further, the addition of departments from across the country created a collective similar to those associated with second wave feminism, creating a collaborative publication that unified thousands of women from cities across the country. Unaware of the *Woman's Era*, Endres and Lueck claim that "the preference for the collective is a recent development. The largest number of periodicals profiled in this book—and all the periodicals prior to 1960—had editorial staffs organized along traditional, hierarchical lines. An editor, working alone, made the editorial decisions on what would appear in the periodical" (xviii). While the *Woman's Era* began with a traditional editor and associate editor, the inclusion of editors from across the country can hardly be considered a traditional, hierarchical arrangement for the late nineteenth century. While the local departments were organized hierarchically, the national-level organization gave the editors of each department the power to decide what would appear in their sections—making this a collaborative publication too complex for the hierarchical classification. This collaboration allowed for a more inclusive vision of what it meant to be an African American woman, and it also fostered an understanding of womanhood as not a fixed quality one could have but rather as something a woman could mold and define for herself, depending upon her circumstances.

With the addition of these departments, the epideictic rhetoric that the *Woman's Era* frequently used in the first seven editions of the paper, especially in columns like "Women Worth Knowing," became more diverse. These columns and others celebrated the accomplishments of African American women, from the literary to the musical. With the addition of departments edited by women all over the country, this epideictic/ceremonial tradition became even more evident. In Victoria Earle's (someone who had herself been praised in the second issue of the *Woman's Era*) entry in the ninth issue, she praises a variety of women from New York who would begin contributing to the New York department in the following issue. Mary Church Terrell's entry in the

same issue continues this tradition, celebrating an individual's appointment as the charge of nurses in the surgical department of Freedman's hospital as well as the efforts of some thirty women enrolled in a nursing course at the same hospital. Indeed, the New Orleans column, edited by Alice Ruth Moore, celebrated women who had recently performed in New Orleans. Earle celebrated literary women, Terrell celebrated medically trained women, and Moore celebrated musical women. This variety illustrates how their differences in location affected their epideictic rhetoric and how their inclusion as editors made the *Woman's Era's* praises more diverse.

These examples of rhetorics of praise are just a few of the many found within the pages of the *Woman's Era*. Through epideictic rhetoric, the editors of each department continued to invent the African American woman for themselves and for the women of their race. In celebrating these women, they presented their readers (primarily African American women) with role models. They provided evidence that despite all of the factors working against them, African American women were successful in a variety of endeavors. By expanding to include editors from other cities, the *Woman's Era* presented its readers with six new examples of African American womanhood. Yet these women continued to provide more representations within their columns, celebrating the women from their cities and continuing to present a positive vision of the African American woman for its African American female readership.

This collaboration itself is remarkable. While other women (particularly suffragists) had been utilizing collaborative methods for production, they were often small collaborations conducted in person. The collaborators of the *Woman's Era*, on the other hand, were large in number and distributed across the country. The result of this collaboration was a prolific publication that spoke not to one issue but to many of the issues confronting African American women at the end of the century while also presenting a sustained argument about African American womanhood.

Building Their Own (Rhetorical) House

With the combination of a variety of genres and the later addition of a collaborative editorial body, the *Woman's Era* was not simply taking what had been done before and repurposing it for their own needs. They created something new. As Audre Lorde famously claimed in 1984:

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference -- those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older -- know that survival is not an academic skill. It

is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. (113)

Nearly a century earlier, the members of the Woman's Era Club, *Woman's Era* editors Ruffin and Ridley, and later editors and contributors from across the country brought about genuine change with their publication. This change, however, cannot be quantified in new laws or other political (and patriarchal) understandings of change. The real change the *Woman's Era* created was in opportunity and vision. The publication created an opportunity for African American women to finally decide who they were for themselves. Through epideictic rhetoric and responses to a variety of work published elsewhere, the contributors and readers of the *Woman's Era* altered their own realities through the power of the written word. With the *Woman's Era*, African American women changed who they were and who they could be.

The columns, editorials, and social notes presented new narratives of African American womanhood that countered the negative, the impossible, and the incorrect. Moreover, the *Woman's Era* encouraged all women, black or white, poor or rich, married or single, to live the life that best suited them as long as, in doing so, they were actively attempting to "make the world better."⁸ As members of two oppressed groups, African American women found a new rhetorical forum through which they had a variety of opportunities that they did not have anywhere else. Their differences were emphasized rather than ignored and celebrated rather than scorned. Indeed, they were the very makings of a new rhetorical house for African American women: one they had created, one they had designed, and one with which they could continue their attempts to dismantle the master's house for years to come.

Learning from the Recovery of the Woman's Era

In 1896, the National Federation of Afro-American Women and the National League of Colored Women met and "consolidated their forces" as the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. This organization celebrated their 118th anniversary in 2014 as the "oldest African-American secular organization in existence" (Records vii). In 1896 (with the third issue of Volume III), the *Woman's Era* became the "organ of the National Association of Colored

8 "Make the world better" was the motto of the Woman's Era Club, and this quote was taken from a speech given by Lucy Stone who had given one of her last speeches to the Woman's Era Club and was praised with a long article in their very first issue which ran shortly after Stone's death.

Women." In 1897, the *Woman's Era* changed its name to the *National Notes* because the original publication placed an incredible financial burden on Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin. The publication continued to "unite women and educate them in the science and techniques of reform" (Records x). Publication of the *National Notes* continued until July of 1935, when it ceased because of the Great Depression (Records xvi).

Although the *Woman's Era* relinquished the name of their publication to the NACWC in 1897, and thus was an official publication for only three years, the importance of this publication to African American women at the end of the nineteenth century is immeasurable. Ultimately, within the pages of the *Woman's Era* we find a collaborative rhetoric created not by a group of women writing a single text but through the combination of the arguments in many articles and by many authors throughout the entirety of a publication. All of the texts presented here do different things when read as individual arguments, but, when read together, they present a unified argument about African American womanhood: they argue that the African American woman is ethical, literate, active, and caring, and that beyond these foundations, circumstance alone dictate what she might achieve. The many women whose words we find in the *Woman's Era* further argue that together African American women across the country were the only ones with the ability and the right to define African American womanhood—a womanhood that, like womanhood more generally, was inherently diverse.

Enoch argues that "unarticulated assumptions...stand at the center of much historiographic work...[and] also have the potential to stand in the way of historiographic exploration and revision" (49). In "Changing Research Methods, Changing History: A Reflection on Language, Location, and Archive," she explains that alternate texts not written in English force us to revise our understanding of rhetorical education in the United States. With Enoch's discoveries in mind, this revision of the *Woman's Era's* history implicates another assumption that hinders our ability to revise histories. Despite research concerning collaboration by Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford, Lindal Buchanan, Anne Ruggles Gere, and others, our individualistic biases continue to force us to look at texts and sites as unconnected, and these assumptions ignore a bigger picture. The *Woman's Era* shows us that texts can also be read together as different parts of a unified whole. Periodicals, especially those with political affiliations and activist goals, can be revisited not only as publications that contain arguments but also as rhetorical sites that present their own sustained, collective argument. In our continued efforts to revise women's (and other marginalized groups') rhetorical histories, our most challenging obstacle is to question our assumptions about what an argument is and how it is delivered. The *Woman's Era*, however, shows us that overcoming these obstacles and

finding alternative methods to understand and identify rhetorical practices can provide new ways to appreciate and uncover the rhetorical histories of the marginalized and the oppressed. These histories challenge us to reconsider who is part of the history of rhetoric and also erase false histories of voicelessness and replace those false histories with dynamic collaborative rhetorics that were once forgotten.

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