The Robes of Womanhood: Dress and Authenticity among African American Methodist Women in the Nineteenth Century

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When Hallie Q. Brown (1850–1949) took the podium at the 1893 Chicago World Fair’s Congress of Representative Women, the Dean of Women at the Tuskegee Institute meant to convey her message both through her spoken words and her clothed body. Representing the “women of black belt Alabama,” Brown was an eloquent and elegant defender of the “earnest” African American girls of Tuskegee’s vocational school, declaring: “If you would have a slight idea of the work they can do, they instructed me to say that you should look at the gown their representative wears, made by girls who six months ago could handle only the hoe and the plow. . . . The gospel of honorable manual labor sinks into the mind with every stitch that is taken.” 1 By virtue of her endorsement of vocational schooling and by the power of her example as a college-educated African American woman, Brown’s performance simultaneously affirmed both sides of the African American debate on the value of vocational versus academic schooling, while insisting on the symbolic and religious power of making and wearing elegant clothing. With her rhetorical and sartorial statement, Brown joined a long tradition of nineteenth-century African American women who invested the cultural tool of dress with religious meaning, while using clothing as an ambiguous and indispensable means to establish themselves as legitimate public figures.

When any nineteenth-century American woman ventured onto a public stage, clothing was a necessary and evocative medium for her message. Whether actress, suffragist, or preacher, clothing was a self-consciously defining and communicative feature for a woman in public, capable of conveying a range of meanings including sexual license or restraint, respectability, and very particular kinds of authenticity. 2 Women who insisted on inserting themselves into provocative roles as public speakers risked attacks, both verbal and physical,
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as their detractors called them “female monsters.” To defuse this risk, religiously inspired women often used clothing as a badge of honor and a source of protection, both in and out of the pulpit. On the bodies of African American women, however, the language of clothes was not always easily translated—though for white women clothing might separate the fallen woman from the respectable lady, for African American women clothing could rarely mask the color of skin in a social world defined by it. When African American women such as Hallie Q. Brown turned to dress as a communicative tool, they developed their own version of “material Christianity.” Through the material embodiment of religious and cultural ideals of feminine comportment, they fused theology, fashion, and political critique in their challenge to male and white dominance. Though not adopting the more notorious styles of dress reform favored by some white women, such as the highly contentious and ridiculed pantaloons advocated by socialist utopians, water curists, or, later, women’s rights activists, African American preachers and social reformers asserted equally radical agendas through dress. Namely, they declared themselves fully deserving of the status of virtuous Christian women with important messages to convey to American culture.

In what follows, I trace the uses of dress within one particular nineteenth-century African American community, that of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, in which Hallie Q. Brown was an active member. I argue that AME women, drawing from Wesleyan tradition, bourgeois norms of respectability, and a well-articulated African Methodist critique of racism, used clothes to help effect their own personal conversions, as well as to claim authenticity as public figures—as preachers, social commentators, journalists, and reformers. Over the course of the century, the needs and goals of AME women changed, as the self-taught women exhorters and preachers of the early- to mid-century were joined as public figures by the college-educated activists of the latter part of the century. These two groups of women embraced different approaches to dress and authenticity; Holiness preachers often opted for unfashionable forms of Quaker-like plain dress, while public speakers on the abolition, temperance, and women’s rights circuits adopted more refined versions of respectable yet chaste dress. Both groups of women developed their dress sensibilities within AME contexts, but the plain-dressing preachers centered their authority to speak on their inward conviction of sanctification, while their respectable sisters based their authority on their education and elocution, and on the moral virtues of womanhood.

In addition to demonstrating how religious concerns and identities are nurtured through the means of material culture such as
clothing, my analysis establishes an earlier context for religious interpretations of dress so important to twentieth-century discourses of respectability in African American communities, as illuminated by scholars such as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Victoria W. Wolcott. I find that both respectability and plainness are cultivated within discourses of authenticity that tried—perhaps in vain—to use dress as a marker of the true soul beneath the fabric. For the women I discuss here, authenticity could be both a burden and a resource, but either way it was a discourse that was often remarkably critical, both of self-motivation and of cultural markers of class, race, and gender. Though dress was not enough to make the woman in nineteenth-century contexts, these African American women consciously used dress in their work of fashioning religious, political, and public selves for an often suspicious, if not hostile, audience.

To explore the ways African American Methodist women worked with dress as a symbolic and material resource helping them gain a public voice and an albeit contested form of authenticity, I have turned to two main groups of sources. I draw on the writings of women in the AME tradition, including Jarena Lee, Amanda Berry Smith, Sojourner Truth, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Hallie Q. Brown. I have also collected references to dress within the Philadelphia-based AME newspaper, the Christian Recorder, in the issues published between 1854, the first year the paper is available, and 1894, the date of publication of Hallie Q. Brown's speech. These articles, written by both men and women, black and white, clerical and lay, illustrate a variety of perspectives on the religious and cultural significance of dress and provide a wider context for AME women's dress choices. The Christian Recorder is an especially useful source for the study of AME women, since, as Laurie Maffly-Kipp has shown, it was an important arena in which women both developed their skills of writing and persuasion and participated in constructing norms of women's behavior and religiosity. The newspaper itself acted as an important public sphere that allowed women writers to "stake a claim to a public voice in the church"—a claim that welcomed their readers, both as letter writers and as a reading public.

Given these sources, my main focus is on African American Methodists in the urban North, which is where the AME church organized as a denomination in early nineteenth-century Philadelphia, when it split off from the mainly white Methodist Episcopal denomination because of segregated worship and restrictions on black religious leadership and congregational autonomy. As well, the autobiographies I consider are those of northern women, or women who eventually settled in the North, and wrote while in the North. This
northern focus has tended to reveal a particular perspective on a larger class-influenced tension within African American Methodism between southern, popular "African" customs and those of northern, educated, working-class/middle-class reformers. Northern Holiness women claiming spirit-inspired (as opposed to formally educated) preaching vocations exacerbated these tensions, as did increasing southern migration to the North after the Civil War.

I begin by setting out the wider context for the cultures of dress within African American Methodism. I then discuss the explicitly religious interpretations of dress found in early- to mid-nineteenth-century preaching women's visionary experiences, in which dress performed an important symbolic role. These visionary experiences of symbolic dress are translated into this-worldly experiences of the symbolic value of dress, as I show in considering preaching women's habits of plain dress and, in a less vision-filled context, the turn of other AME women, including members of the younger generation such as Hallie Q. Brown, to respectable dress. Finally, I discuss the practical importance of plain dress for women preachers and of respectable dress for women activists and writers—all women who sought to legitimate their public roles in an unfriendly environment. Considering these two approaches to dress within nineteenth-century African American Methodism demonstrates the role of religion in diverse interpretations of the meaning of adornment and in the formation, by the end of the century, of an outspoken critique of white standards of refinement and respectability. In this context, therefore, the study of clothing is the study of religion.

Fashioning Authenticity: Religious Cultures of Dress

Like their colonial forebears, nineteenth-century Protestants of all kinds used clothing and appearance to express religious convictions, to delineate social hierarchies, and to define communities. At the same time, they knew that the malleability of adornment could be used to subvert social hierarchies and religious mores and to advance artifice, not authenticity. Historian T. J. Jackson Lears characterized a "tension between authenticity and artifice" as originally a Puritan concern that, by the late nineteenth century, was an evangelical Protestant belief that "the objective surface of things concealed rather than revealed meaning." Lears showed how Anglo-Saxon elites agonized over appearances in expressing their "strong need to distinguish themselves from primitives, exotics, and the 'lower races'—the whole lot of brute creation." That the presumed interiority of authenticity—the inwardness of the true soul—was itself necessarily expressed and
judged via external appearances was a quandary for both whites and blacks, but not always in parallel ways. The religious cultures of dress that African American Methodists lived within shared much with the standards of dress of many white Protestants: a biblically based concern for simplicity; a suspicion yet embrace of growing consumer culture, including an urban-centered move to ready-made clothing and awareness of fashion; and the understanding that dress had religious (and gendered) uses, whether in movements for Holiness or dress reform, or among groups such as the Quakers or the Mennonites. The difference for African American Protestants was the added burdens that came with clothing the black body both before and after the Civil War: working against the sexualized stereotypes of African Americans, especially those of women; internal strife over the value of African influences within African American worship styles; and already complicated norms of spiritual authenticity, embodied in plainness or respectability, that were even more difficult to achieve if one had black skin underneath one’s garments.

For African American women in the nineteenth century, appearances were especially fraught with volatile meanings, as the line between seeming overly sexual or appearing presumptuously dressed above one’s station was a fine one. Shadowed by stereotypes bred in slavery of wanton Jezebels and pious Mammies, free African American women knew that, even if they dressed the part of a lady, they would not necessarily receive the respect that was their due. For example, Amanda Berry Smith, one of the most successful of nineteenth-century evangelists, succinctly described the quandary of seeking food and accommodation while traveling: “I could pay the price—yes, that is all right; I know how to behave—yes, that is all right; I may have on my very best dress so that I look elegant—yes, that is all right; I am known as a Christian lady—yes, that is all right; I will occupy but one chair; I will touch no person’s plate or fork—yes that is all right; but you are black!” Smith’s keen awareness of the undependability of attire in the face of racism is echoed by historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s depiction of the late nineteenth century: “Ladies were not merely women; they represented a class, a differentiated status within the generic category of ‘women.’” Higginbotham noted that occupation and class could keep some white women from being considered ladies, “but no black woman, regardless of income, education, refinement, or character, enjoyed the status of a lady.”

Though Amanda Smith’s self-identification as a “known” Christian lady might attenuate Higginbotham’s claim somewhat, the power of dress and appearance to convey authentic respectability on an African American woman and to grant her authority as a public
figure was always tenuous, as the many nineteenth-century cartoons depicting black women and men dressing above their station demonstrate (see Fig. 1). The burden of authenticity in this context of racism was that authenticity was measured against a stereotype of black femininity fashioned by a dominant culture. In dominant white stereotypes, authenticity, while potentially freeing a white person who appeared to be of good character, called for a black woman or man to live out stereotypes based in slavery of ill-educated, slovenly, kept-in-place Negroes. Under these conditions, authenticity could be a trap set up not to allow for the expression of the "true" self but to demand the living out of the dominant culture's fantasy.

Despite the limited capacities of dress to challenge fully the racist underpinnings of authenticity, the women I focus on here, all affiliated with the AME church, still found dress useful. They developed religious understandings of dress that helped them to shape their bodies and selves as they moved through a world developing newly "scientific" ways of categorizing them according to sexuality and race. At the same time, these religious practices of dress worked to underline class distinctions within African American communities, sometimes distinguishing upwardly mobile Christians from poorer folk identified with African religious customs.
The clash between exuberant and refined liturgical practices reverberated within the AME as some leaders, such as the influential bishop, Daniel Payne, advocated education, fine arts, and classical music in an attempt to eliminate African-based traditions of ecstatic worship. As Payne declared in an 1878 ultimatum: “The time is at hand when the ministry of the African Methodist Episcopal Church must drive out this heathenish mode of worship or drive out all the intelligent, refined, and practical Christians who may be in her bosom.”

Women preachers and public speakers were aware of this tension as they addressed their white and black audiences and knew that the fear of things African was also related to stereotypes of African American women’s sexuality as insatiable and loose—a stereotype that dress could abet or challenge. In response to such stereotypes, African American Methodist women meant for their clothes to reflect not only the state of their own souls but also the character of their communities.

In addition to concerns about African influences, another factor that roused nineteenth-century Christians’ suspicion about the dependability of dress as a measure of a woman’s authentic piety was the rise of Holiness, a doctrine drawn from John Wesley’s idea of perfection that infused many nineteenth-century Protestant denominations, including the AME. Holiness emphasized a two-fold process of conversion and sanctification, in which a Christian could achieve “spiritual perfection... evidenced by inward and outward righteousness.” Since anyone could be sanctified through faith in God’s love, Holiness became a powerful tool of legitimacy for women preachers, both African American and white, who, in response to male clerical opposition, claimed that God had called them to preach. Also characterized by an antagonism to worldliness, Holiness adherents developed what they considered to be biblically based social norms, such as dress standards. Such outward forms as simplicity in dress would testify to the sinless state of sanctification, at least within a Holiness context that accepted this intricate balance of inward conviction and outward display. When adapted by public figures like abolitionist and temperance activist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Holiness concerns such as dress standards and temperance also stated a woman’s virtue in a world suspicious of women who spoke in public.

Three African American women prominent in their communities (and far beyond in the cases of the latter two), Jarena Lee, Amanda Berry Smith, and Sojourner Truth, all chose to wear publicly a version of plain dress inspired both by Quakers and by Holiness. For them, this meant dress without unnecessary ornament, made from solid, drab fabric, usually in a uniform and figure-obscuring style, and
with a plain bonnet, usually white or black, worn close to the head (see Figs 2, 3, and 4) For all three women, Holiness doctrines shaped their decisions as they strove to distinguish themselves from worldliness of many kinds, which included drinking alcohol and dancing In the case of Lee and Smith, their early experiences with Quakers must also have influenced their choice for plain dress, since for many years
Quakers had been associated with distinctive, plain attire, even if many no longer wore it. Quakers also originated the "free produce" movement that boycotted slave-produced goods, including cloth. The movement gained popularity within the AME community in Philadelphia to the extent that, in mid-century, a free produce store was set up next to Mother Bethel, the mother church of the denomination.22

In making their sartorial choices, these African American Methodist women drew from a wider religious culture that acknowledged plain dress as a personal statement of piety, as a declaration of (at least) spiritual egalitarianism, as a marker of group identity, and as a consumer tool used against slavery. Plain dress was characteristic of
a variety of North American Protestant groups in addition to the Quakers, including the Amish, Mennonites, and certain strands of the Wesleyan movement. As such, the Methodist version of plain dress lay within a wider tradition in which dress of all kinds acted as a form of communication carrying religious messages. Specifically in the Methodist case, John Wesley’s critique of the social costs of ostentatious dress—namely, that money spent on fine clothes equaled food and clothing snatched from the poor—and his sense of the morally and religiously uplifting capacities of plain dress took particular shape in the American context. In the African-Methodist community, AME Books of Discipline and conference proceedings reiterated throughout the century a basic commitment to modesty in dress, both in the repeated refusal to allow the wearing of clerical robes by (male) ministers and in the common injunction “to wear no needless ornaments, such as rings, ear-rings, necklaces, lace, or ruffles.” At the AME general conference of 1856, a long-debated and narrowly passed amendment to the rules on dress required that “all our preachers shall put off all superfluous and costly apparel” under threat of suspension if they did not. Urging ministers
to set an example of modesty and uniformity for laymen and laywomen in keeping with their faith, Elder Moore argued in favor of the amendment: "When [a man] joins a plain society like the Methodists, let him submit to its rules!" Brother Morgan, however, rejected this argument in what were the harshest of terms for a free black man in 1856: "Every man has the right to wear whatsoever he pleases; to attempt to abridge this right is slavery."

Though AME men had racist stereotypes of “dandies” and profligate spenders to combat, if nineteenth-century narratives of conversion and sanctification are any measure, the burden of these theologies and rules of dress seemed to affect women more profoundly than men. As in other religious communities, women, as the predominant objects (and subjects) of fashion, were also the ones who most often and most clearly "renounced the world of fashion and ornament" in the process of conversion. As well, in adopting plain dress, African American Methodist preaching women were in much more marked difference from the norms of fashion of their day than their male colleagues, who usually wore plain black suit coats not that different from those of other men. When African American preaching women chose not to save up their money for dresses with large billowing sleeves and bonnets with pink ribbons, they addressed particular needs in addition to expressing theological convictions: they declared their purity by opting out of fashionable clothing, they both obscured and underlined class divisions, and they claimed legitimacy as preachers.

In these aims, however, they were not so different from some women who opted for more conventionally stylish, yet still respectable, clothing. Respectably dressed public figures like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911), Hallie Q. Brown, Fannie Jackson Coppin (1857–1913), and other writers in the *Christian Recorder* reconfigured the public image of African American women and were vaunted in the *AME Church Review* as “women of our race worthy of imitation” (see Figs. 5 and 6). Although to some nineteenth-century white feminists their reconfigurations seemed prudish and problematically imitative, Hazel V. Carby has demonstrated the subversive potential in African American women’s calls for respectability, as they employed so-called prudishness as a weapon in their fight against sexualized stereotypes that opposed them to virtuous white women. African American respectability could also cause whites great discomfort, as Richard Bushman argued: “Of all black people, aspiring blacks were the most threatening.”

Free African American women who opted for respectable clothing in the latter half of the nineteenth century chose elegant, sometimes patterned, fabrics sewn into fashionable designs that might
accentuate female curves but did not display flesh or include frivolous ruffles or gathers. Though they might accede to corsets, their respectable clothing lay between the drabness of plain dress and the hoops, bustles, and ruffles of the fashionable ladies of the day. African American women, whether advocates of respectability or plain dress, generally did not join the nineteenth-century dress reform movement led by middle-class white women and excoriated by critics as paths to licentiousness and political radicalism. They spurned bloomers in part because their hold on respectability was too tenuous, and in part because, for some, such as Sojourner Truth, the short skirts of the dress reform movement evoked memories of the inadequate and embarrassing clothing of slavery. The meager clothes allotted to slaves, made from either telltale homespun fabrics or out-of-fashion handme-downs from white masters and mistresses, marked them as slaves, constraining their freedom to venture far beyond their masters'
homes without being caught. The legacy of slavery for African American women's attitudes to appearance more generally was deep. In the context of the sexual violence perpetrated on African American women, even after the abolition of slavery, respectability seems not to have indicated prudery but survival and resistance.

In her work on black Baptist women at the turn of the twentieth century, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has situated this drive for respectable dress within a wider movement that she called the "politics of respectability." A seemingly conservative movement, but with subversive undertones, the politics of respectability rejected the stereotypes of scientific racism through insisting on a common ground of morals shared by blacks and whites. Meant to speak to both groups, the politics of respectability had the greatest impact on the behavior of African Americans, since "individual behavior, the black Baptist women contended, determined the collective fate of African Americans. It was particularly public behavior that they perceived to wield the power either to refute or confirm stereotypical representations and discriminatory practices." Calls for respectable conduct were
also current in African American Methodist circles in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In some cases, respectability could even blur the boundaries of denominations, as an 1885 article from the Christian Recorder showed, where the author argued for the appropriateness of sending AME girls and women to Spelman Seminary, a Baptist institution, in part because the students there “presented a fine appearance—orderly, respectful, and tastefully attired.”

Where women preachers based their public performances on God’s authority, the respectable women who took on public roles—and did so with increasing frequency in the charged air of the post-Civil War era—spoke from a sense of both gender-based and race-based authority. They challenged racist and sexist stereotypes by dressing like ladies, by daring to speak critically to both black and white audiences, and by gaining economic independence that allowed them to travel widely as public speakers. Many women who chose respectable dress were educated, middle-class journalists, essayists, and educators. Other less-educated women, including plain-dressing women preachers such as Amanda Smith, turned to clothing related employment such as dressmaking, millinery, and laundering to gain the economic independence that contributed to their ability to follow their religious vocations. For example, Shaker eldress Rebecca Cox Jackson was a skilled seamstress, and African Methodist evangelist Zilpha Elaw, devotedly antiworldly, apprenticed her daughter to a dressmaker.

As both the creators and wearers of fashion, African American women were acutely aware that how they looked could be read by others. Though they lived in relation to white middle-class norms of fashion, they maintained a critical perspective on the ways such norms were conditioned by class and race. As Karen Halttunen has demonstrated, white, middle-class fashion in the mid-nineteenth century was characterized by sentimentalism, an “ideal of dress [that] insisted that a woman’s clothing should serve not as a disguise but as a transparent reflection of her soul.” Furthermore, if dress was to reveal a woman’s soul, so also should her skin, “as she reddened or grew pale in the intensity of her sensibility.” Sentimentalism, as a class-specific and racialized style, would have befitted neither a slave nor a free black servant woman. Most African American women had neither the leisure nor the skin color to develop such sentimental ideals of fashion. Instead of trying to fit the dominant white, middle-class style, some African American women developed religiously based critiques of such beauty myths by claiming an alternate route to respectability. As Julia F. Early argued in an 1865 speech at Wilberforce University, an AME institution, “It is not dress nor beauty that constitutes the lady.” Instead, she stated, intelligence, “respect for herself
and others, truthfulness, noble-mindedness, and all other virtues sanctified by the Holy Ghost constitutes a perfect lady.” Seizing the title of lady and defining it with the help of a Holiness-inflected spiritual authority, Early downplayed the power of dress to determine standards of respectability or sincerity.38

The Holiness desire to exalt the Holy Ghost above fashion was even more out of step with the disguise-embracing theatricality that, according to Halttunen, replaced sentimentalism by the end of the 1850s. Theatricality, as practiced by the white middle-class, was less interested in the sincere soul and more concerned with staking out class identity and social distinction through material means like dress.39 African American Methodists (and some other black and white Christians) did not overtly follow the shift to theatricality in the service of social distinction. Instead, they continued to develop religiously informed critiques of fashion that cast it as a deceptive lure that could, if misused, have grievous spiritual and economic consequences at the level of both the individual and the community. Nevertheless, they continued to use dress, whether plain or respectable, as a communicative tool that helped them to move into particular social, public spaces. For Holiness women preachers, however, dress was not only a concern of the world but also held a prominent place in the important realm of the visionary life—a realm that their respectable sisters did not tend to portray in their writings.

Women Preachers and Visionary Uses of Dress

In her autobiography, Jarena Lee (1783–?), an itinerant but unlicensed preacher in the AME tradition, documented her reliance on heavenly visions as a path to achieve legitimacy as a preacher. Lee, an adherent of the Wesleyan notion of sanctification, described her youthful conversion, the first step in the process of sanctification, as a lengthy period of turmoil during which she was plagued by visions of the devil and by whispers of doubt. Eventually, while attending a sermon, she experienced conversion immediately upon hearing the biblical text, as she described the scene in her 1849 autobiography: “That instant, it appeared to me, as if a garment, which had entirely enveloped my whole person, even to my fingers ends, split at the crown of my head, and was stripped away from me, passing like a shadow, from my sight—when the glory of God seemed to cover me in its stead.”40 In a vision echoed by those of women from other African Methodist traditions, Jarena Lee passively experienced a disrobing in which a garment symbolizing her state of ignorance disappeared and was replaced by much purer raiment. Lee’s visionary garment
was much vaguer than the white robe in African Methodist Episcopal Zion preacher Julia A. J. Foote’s vision, in which Christ disrobed her, washed her, and clothed her anew in a pure white garment, telling her to go and preach. Nevertheless, Lee, like Foote, turned to the tactile sensibility of being disrobed and clothed by God at a critical moment in her spiritual life. Both in her visions and in her choice to dress plain, Lee expressed what she considered to be the authenticity of deep, inward conversion through the bodily metaphor of clothing—clothing that at once touched her most intimately while also protecting her from, and enabling her public presence in, the world around her.

Somewhat indirectly, Lee’s vision also set the stage for her preaching, since, immediately after her vision, Lee leapt to her feet and ecstatically proclaimed her salvation in the midst of the congregation: “For a few moments I had power to exhort sinners, and to tell of the wonders and of the goodness of Him who had clothed me with His salvation.” This first taste of exhorting eventually led to Lee’s career as a widely traveled itinerant preacher who openly struggled with male opposition to her preaching. Lee’s experience of a metaphorical change of clothing was rooted in a biblical context in which Hebrew Bible prophets wrote of holy garments of splendor and praise and of a displeased God who, when bringing righteousness, “put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloak.” Visionary dress, in the Bible and for women such as Lee, had the visceral power to both hide and transform the self. With such metaphorical, scriptural clothing, Lee had the symbolic means of transformation and authenticity, as she received divine attention to her body and divine sanction for her calling as an evangelist.

In her visions and in her adoption of plain dress, Lee turned to clothing as a vivid symbol that helped to declare her transformation at the hands of God; for Lee, clothing was a positive path to holiness and authentic religious conviction. The visionary role of clothing was more ambiguous for Lee’s heir to the mantle of female preacher, Amanda Berry Smith (1837–1915), one of the most prominent of all nineteenth-century preaching women in North America. Though in her visionary passages she, too, wrote of cloaks of, if not zeal, at least conviction, she also drew symbolically from the biblical tradition of rending and tearing clothes as a sign of acknowledging one’s sinfulness. Smith, who moved in and out of AME circles but was never licensed as a preacher, experienced clothing as a barrier to conversion, while also considering it a symbolic aid in her sanctification. As a young woman earning money as a servant for a Quaker family in Pennsylvania, and living in a world of increasing consumer possibilities, Smith keenly desired conversion, but Satan continually pestered
her with doubts about the authenticity of her desire. Eventually, Smith decided that giving up her spring suit was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for conversion. She had already picked out her outfit, as she recalled in her 1893 autobiography: “A white straw bonnet, with very pretty, broad pink tie-strings; pink or white muslin dress tucked to the waist; black silk mantilla; and light gaiter boots, with black tips; I had it all picked out in my mind, my nice spring and summer suit. I can see the little box now where I had put my money, saving up for this special purpose.” Even after she told God she would not buy the outfit, visions of it distracted her until one desperate prayer session: “O, I wanted relief from the burden and then all at once there came a quiet peace in my heart, and that suit never came before me again; but still there was darkness in my soul.”

After struggling through more conversations with the Devil and praying to God with great resolve, Smith finally received “the witness of God’s spirit to [her] conversion,” and she felt her new conviction in an intensely bodily way. She was sure that “the flood of light and peace” that the Lord had given her affected her appearance:

The change was so real and so thorough that I have often said that if I had been as black as ink or as green as grass or as white as snow, I would not have been frightened. I went into the dining room; we had a large mirror that went from the floor to the ceiling, and I went and looked in it to see if anything had transpired in my color, because there was something wonderful had taken place inside of me, and it really seemed to me it was outside too, and as I looked in the glass I cried out, “Hallelujah, I have got religion; glory to God, I have got religion!”

Read in the context of a hymn tradition dominated by Charles Wesley, and his penchant for apocalyptic imagery such as “Now thy all-cleansing blood apply / And I am white as snow,” Smith’s black/green/white color wheel could be seen as a subtly critical toying with the arbitrariness of values assigned to skin color. Certainly, later in her text, she continued to mock the fetishizing of whiteness and reveled in her blackness. With the mirror as her witness, Smith experienced her spiritual transformation as an event that had the power to change her appearance but not necessarily in the conventional white as snow manner. For Smith, conversion had the power to challenge the deeply entrenched valuing of whiteness as the color of innocence, transformation, and spiritual purity. She did not tell her reader what color she saw in the mirror, but she did simultaneously critique the arbitrariness of skin color preferences while affirming that getting religion meant outward as well as inward change.
For Smith, plain dress, as one form of outward change, was theologically meaningful, but also practical: "Before I got the blessing I dressed Quaker style, because I liked it, and it was a matter of economy." After sanctification, she continued to dress plain, at one point finding herself deeply drawn by the plain simplicity of a white Free Methodist church. Just as she exercised skepticism over the arbitrary privileging of some skin colors, however, she also criticized herself and others for being in "bondage to . . . clothes" and for letting clothing of any kind get in the way of spiritual communion. The compassionate limits of her loyalty to plain dress were shown most clearly in her cutting analysis of a finely attired, white Free Methodist minister's "raking" and denouncing of a white sister who wore a bow and ribbon on her plain bonnet. Though an adherent of plain dress, Smith was concerned to avoid turning plainness itself into an idol—a concern that was informed by her deep awareness of the idolatry of whiteness.47

Throughout her autobiography, Smith commented on how, due to her skin color, she needed to be particularly cautious in expressing her religious exuberance in white people's company. With this awareness of how her skin color could cause whites to misread her religious enthusiasm as African excess came a conviction of the power of dress, both spiritual and material, to act as a shield as she pursued her religious duty.48 Describing her experience of sanctification several years after her conversion, when she was the only black woman attending a sermon in New York City by prominent Holiness minister John Inskip, Smith wrote of silencing her urges to cry out by clapping her hands over her mouth or gripping the edge of the pew. The persistent nagging of the Devil's voice and her fear of impropriety in a white church worked together to silence her: "Just as I went to say, 'Glory to Jesus!' the Devil said, 'Look, look at the white people, mind, they will put you out,' and I put my hands up to my mouth and held still, and again I felt the Spirit leave me and pass away." Eventually, by the end of the service Smith could no longer contain her voice, and she cried out, "Glory to Jesus!"

As with Lee, Smith described her experience of religious transformation—in this case, sanctification—with the use of visionary clothing. As she left the church, while still keeping herself from shouting with abandon, a white usher condescendingly asked Smith how she enjoyed the sermon, provoking this feeling in Smith: "Just as I put my foot on the top step I seemed to feel a hand, the touch of which I cannot describe. It seemed to press me gently on the top of my head, and I felt something part and roll down and cover me like a great cloak! I felt it distinctly; it was done in a moment, and O what a
mighty peace and power took possession of me!" With this, perhaps biblically inspired, cloak of peace and power, Smith then strode down the street with her fears of white people abated, and she searched, with some difficulty, for an African American friend or family member who would acknowledge her sanctification. Spiritual yet somehow perceptible garments helped to bring Amanda Smith a spiritual transformation authentic enough to allow her to confront disbelief in any shape or color.

Other prominent nineteenth-century African American women with AME and Holiness ties, such as Sojourner Truth, Rebecca Cox Jackson, and Harriet A. Baker, related similar stories of the ambivalent significance of dress to their visionary and conversion experiences, in that dress acted as a barrier to spiritual transformation. Though Truth's ties to African American Methodism were less conventional than those of someone like Baker, who was an AME minister, Truth maintained her Holiness roots and had ties to the AME church through her daughters. For Truth, attachment to worldly dress became a catalyst of visions calling for her to forgo fashion in order to embrace Jesus. However, dress also acted positively as a marker of piety and more, according to historian Nell Painter: "At the same time that plain clothing demonstrated her holiness, it offered her a means of distancing herself from the female lower classes, whose loud dresses announced their lowly status." Truth's ambivalence about the messages of dress was mirrored in more public debates within African American Methodism and beyond. As articles in the Christian Recorder show, the unresolved role of dress as a worldly barrier to spiritual transformation, but also a symbolic tool that could enable spiritual and social change, provoked passionate responses that included clear-voiced condemnations of the racism inherent in white norms of respectability.

Plain Dress in AME Discourse and Preaching Women's Narratives

For African American Methodist women preachers, the adoption of plain dress was not simply a step toward what T. J. Jackson Lears called evangelical Protestant virtues of "plain living" and "social transparency." Rousing castigations of ostentatious display rang out in the Christian Recorder from the mid-1850s to the end of the century not primarily as calls to return to an authentic past but as acknowledgments of the power of appearance to shape how African Americans were perceived in the world of white dominance. The AME rhetoric grew within a wider context of nineteenth-century (and earlier) Christian condemnations of fashion that historian Gayle Fischer
has called “antifashion,” but they also grew within a context of racism.\(^\text{52}\) As calls within and to a community, they were declarations of the importance of constraining one’s consumption for the betterment of one’s people in a racist society.

Plain-dressed women made their choices within a community of men and women concerned about the messages dress could convey and the harm fashion could bring. In 1856, around the same time that some white, middle-class Americans were coming to see the virtues of fashion as the way to define social classes, one writer in the *Christian Recorder* lambasted fashion as a “tyrannical mistress . . . a tormentor of conscience, despoiler of morality, an enemy of religion . . . She is a despot of the highest grade, full of intrigue and cunning; and yet husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, and servants, black and white, voluntarily have become her obedient servants and slaves, and vie with one another to see who shall be most obsequious.” Writing in the same year that Brother Morgan had condemned regulating (at least men’s) dress as slavery at an AME general conference, this anonymous author inverted Morgan’s use of the metaphor of slavery to advocate limits on fashionable dress. While white authors also wrote of metaphorical slaves to fashion, the metaphor must have been much more cutting when African American Methodist writers employed the term, knowing slavery was both a historical and (in 1856) present reality for their community.\(^\text{53}\)

Both before and after the Civil War, African American Methodist writers put their critique of fashion in terms of the community of freed people, rebuking those who were abusing their freedom by dressing above their means: “Are you justified in starving your dinner table in order to keep a carriage; to have such an expensive house that you can’t by any possibility help a poor relation; to array your daughters in costly milliners’ wares, because they live with girls whose parents are twice as rich? Sometimes it is hard to say where honest pride ends, and hypocrisy begins.” Keeping up appearances meant becoming a slave not only to fashion but also to white domination all over again, as one 1861 editorial stated: “[If] white people worship at the shrine of fashion, it does not, therefore cease to be idolatry.” The author continued: “We can’t afford to do the ten thousand things that white people do, be they right or wrong. We are too poor: and the few who have the ability should feel so keenly the common degradation of the whole, which they themselves must share, that they should be led to devote their surplus wealth to sustaining educational projects.” Instead of embracing theatricality or refinement and their social distinctions, these critiques laid bare the economic and social consequences of individual consumer decisions and called for an
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African American solidarity beyond class, rooted in a Wesleyan critique of worldliness.\

The idealized classlessness revealed in these antifashion critiques is not as apparent in the narratives of plain-dressed women preachers. For Amanda Smith, plain dress helped to bring about her increased holiness but did not necessarily lead to a classless solidarity. Despite its Wesleyan pedigree, her sartorial choice was at odds with some AME women who had adopted more middle-class sensibilities of refinement. While attending the 1872 AME general conference in Nashville, Smith felt alienated and rejected by men because she was a woman preacher assumed to be lobbying for ordination, and spurned by women because of her dress: “Then those of the ladies whom I knew, wives of ministers or bishops, were dressed to the height of their ability; I could not rank with them; so I was all alone.” Smith continued: “I had my outfit; a pretty tan dress, with a drab shawl and bonnet to match. I thought I was fine; but bless you, I found I did not shine in that land, worth a nickel; for my people, as a rule, like fine show.” Earlier in her autobiography, she recalled a vision with a similar theme in which “three very stylishly dressed colored ladies and several finely dressed colored gentlemen... looked at me with a scowl of contempt on their faces as they eyed my dress from head to foot.” Tying this vision to the trials she faced over her advocacy of Holiness, Smith asserted: “Human nature is the same in black and white folks. They oppose the doctrine of personal holiness, so do white people.” Smith’s recollections show the complexity of messages dress could carry: while plain dress might distinguish a woman from the poor and the worldly, it could also distance her in painful ways from the respectably middle class so active in African American Methodism. As AME minister Nelson Turpin described Smith and her Holiness sisters: “They put on a plain bonnet and shawl and wear a long face, but they are sanctified devils.”

Amanda Smith’s determined adherence to plain dress was matched, and perhaps surpassed by, women preachers in other African Methodist churches, such as her African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) precursor Zilpha Elaw (b. ca. 1790), a zealous campaigner against worldliness. Elaw, who once itinerated with her AME compatriot Jarena Lee, urged the readers of her memoirs to “abhor the pride of respectability” as a thing of the world. Elaw asserted that respectability was a white proclivity, not necessary to Christianity, and a standard by which black people should not be judged: “A more perfect exemplification of Christian morals than that which characterized the apostolic era has never been attained by any later age; but its simplicity and want of polish would have presented a very rude and
vulgar exhibition in contrast with the whited exterior, the artificial delicacy and current respectability or pride of life of much of the present-day Christianity." The manners and morals of "high-toned" civilization even stood in the way of the Holy Ghost, said Elaw, commenting on high-church versions of worship: "The life and power of religion is not identified with, nor in proportion to, the polish of the minister, the respectability of the congregation, or the regularity and method of its services."57

Elaw's denunciation of respectability and worldliness challenged white standards of piety and worship and resisted a trend toward more "rational" styles of worship among some African American Methodists uneasy with the spirit-inspired Holiness movement. Elaw elaborated this discourse against respectability in the early part of the century (her memoirs end in 1845), but the later memoirs of Jarena Lee and AMEZ preacher Julia Foote echoed her convictions.58 In undermining norms of respectability, these women preachers also came to find a distinct spirituality in dress, as their visions show. Holiness women may also have turned to the class-obscuring qualities of plain dress as a way to downplay the feared "African" excesses of their spirit-inspired religious exuberance. Plain dress, in its chaste, drab, style was the opposite of a slave aesthetic that, according to historians Shane White and Graham White, included bright colors that "in Euro-American terms, clashed violently ... [and] combined ... various items of clothing within one ensemble in what were seen as odd, even bizarre ways."59 Plain dress distanced the spirit-filled preaching woman from her African past in a way that could relieve both African Methodists uncomfortable with Holiness and white audiences interested in Holiness but uncomfortable with Africanness.

In this-worldly terms, the loyalty of women like Jarena Lee and Amanda Smith to plain dress provided a way for them to spurn fashionable dress and remain virtuous women. The "order" of plain dress, freely chosen, could at once commit a woman to God, act as a critique of white standards of fashion, provide a measure of security when traveling, reduce the expense of clothing, and serve as a tool to protest slavery. Plain dress may also have eased the minds of male ministers unsure of female preachers, or at least robbed them of the argument that such women were unfit to preach due to inappropriate dress or finery. In the tense and ambiguous circumstances African American women preachers inhabited, it was no wonder that some opted for the desexualizing garb of plain dress. In this way, a woman's dress could say clearly what someone may not hear were she to say it with her voice—namely, that she was a pious woman, not moved by lust or worldly pleasures. However, the ways plain dress obscured the
boundaries of gender and sexuality for a woman preacher could also be dangerous, as Jarena Lee showed in her account of the response she received after preaching one evening: “Here I found some ever ill-behaved persons, who talked roughly, and said among other things, ‘I was not a woman, but a man dressed in female clothes.’” Maintaining a balance between femininity and persuasive preaching was a difficult task that clothes could assist only to a limited degree.  

The instability of dress as a tool for women’s public legitimacy is evident in the *Christian Recorder* as well. As the century progressed, the positive spiritual potential of plain dress dropped from its pages, save for a few mentions of Holiness revivals, where the newly sanctified pledged to forswear “needless ornaments such as... bustles.” Negative attacks on dress in the *Christian Recorder* became more often directed explicitly to women. Although men were occasionally censured for dressing like “dandies or fops,” or for catching the girls’ eyes with the (false) “manhood of clothes,” women’s fashions were more roundly and regularly condemned. Even when writers decried the moral lapses of “fatal extravagance” found in some men, they blamed women, as did one recounting of a sermon: “A bad woman is the devil personified on earth. . . . She appears all right as long as you can gratify her with money and dress, even though you murder to get it.” Another writer doubted that the fashionable woman had a soul and accused her of having “all on her back and little in her head.” Underscoring the theme, reprinted writings from white women like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lydia Maria Child, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps showed the contempt such well-known and successful women had for the frivolity of women’s fashion.

In these growing attacks, African American Methodist women, though they raised and donated a great deal of money for the church, were accused of withholding money due to their “needless finery.” The Reverend A. W. Talbert asserted in 1881:

> Let the reader visit some fashionable chapel on the Sabbath and there he will find a great display of finery, such as gold, silver, silk, satins, &c. And after services are over you will hear some stylish sister say to another, “Oh, didn’t Sister A. have on a sweet dress today! I shall get me one just like it.” Now just go to her and ask her the minister’s text and she will say, “I can’t remember it.” Yet she can remember the dress Sister A. had on. . . . How much of the Lord’s money is wasted by indulging in this extravagance. And churches are sold for non-payment of debts, for which purpose this (the Lord’s money) might have been used.
Despite airing views like Talbert's, the editors were not above selling space to the purveyors of fashion; for example, Wanamaker's department store was a regular advertiser, as was *Ladies' Home Journal* in later years. As these advertisements hint, plain dress was not the dominant sartorial statement expressed by African American Methodist women in the nineteenth century. With time, many women became increasingly convinced that "respectable" dress was critical to race uplift. Respectable dress entailed modest, yet tasteful, clothing—elegance and beauty were not anathema to the pious woman in this view. Peppered with a strong disdain for costly finery, advocates felt respectable dress clothed a woman in garments that publicly attested to her virtue and self-respect. Women adopting plain dress were not entirely opposed to this meaning of respectability. As women of various intersecting identities—Holiness, bourgeois, working class—tried to carve out public space to speak within, they needed to distinguish themselves from public women of supposedly questionable virtue, such as actresses and prostitutes.64 The advocates of respectable dress did not step out of fashion as definitively as did plain-dressers, yet they remained critical of white beauty standards in their advocacy of respectable dress as a statement of religiosity, virtuous womanhood, and racial pride.

The Burdens of Respectability amid the Fetish of Whiteness

In contrast to the antifashion stream in the *Christian Recorder* that criticized the economic and religious effects of consuming resources by following fashion, supporters of respectability argued for the virtues of dressing with refinement as an act of community development and piety. Replying to a letter decrying the effects of extravagant dress on private and church finances, "Ruth G." offered a biblical sanction for dress in 1865: "One of the earliest acts of Divine charity was to clothe man, to institute dress, to present to newly fallen humanity a vast idea, which in its development and expansion should take rank as an art, and ever retain its primal character as a positive blessing to humanity, thus giving the sanction and seal of Divinity to what many of the ministers of the present day seem to regard as a nuisance, or an ingenious device, worthy of the skill of the arch-enemy."65 Not only was dress divinely sanctioned, according to Ruth G., but it also stood as "one of the impassible barriers that separate barbarism and civilization." In claiming for the art of dressing a civilizing purpose, Ruth G. took what was feared by many as the sign of primitive excess—the color and drape of fabrics—and turned it into a refined virtue, asking, "Could love of virtue or excellence in any form resist
long where the love of beauty was a stranger, and where the cultivation of taste was considered an interdicted thing?” She inverted the strand of African Methodism that bound beauty with an African backwardness, while choosing the dangerously racialized categories of barbarity and civilization.

Not all clergy would have disagreed with Ruth G. In an 1875 article remarkably different from most in the Christian Recorder, the Reverend J. T. Jenifer took a strong stand for the compatibility of “piety and pleasure.” True Christians need not dress in dull garb for piety did not “destroy or forbid loving knowledge, intelligence, refinement, music, or any innocent social enjoyment . . . it sanctifies them.” Jenifer compared the plain-dressed Quakeress to the well-dressed Christian woman, arguing that the latter was more in keeping with the God-given beauty of nature found in “the rich plumage of birds gay attire, of various beasts, gorgeous colors of flowers, the beautiful landscape, and the enrapturing sunsets as his departing rays throw back upon the canopian walls of the universe.” While assuring his readers that he did not espouse materialism or conformity to the world, Jenifer—a strong proponent of Wesleyan tradition—insisted that beauty was part of God’s creation.

The powerful combination of women and beauty, however, was also used to further overtly repressive ends. The Reverend R. Seymour, arguing against women’s suffrage in the church, suggested an approach to glorifying women far superior to the “defilement” of womanhood that voting would entail: “Let us gather all flowers of all climes and weaving them into fantastic garlands deck her, not that we may adorn for armament of earth has no occupation in her native loveliness, but that by the most beautiful things we may symbolize the glory of that beauty by which we are enthralled.” This construction of beauty as a tool of objectification and suppression was quite at odds with the messages of self-respect and moral leadership that the supporters of respectability voiced, although they also objectified some people to benefit others. For example, “Finis,” writing under a pen-name as a woman in 1877, declared that “the nation, the race is calling” women to careers in medicine, missions, and motherhood, while aligning herself with a restrained beauty: “I do not link myself with the class who say that grace and elegance in dress and indulgence and taste in our houses are foolish and wicked; such pleasures are virtuous, commendable and a duty. What I am condemning is that extravagant, that excessive pursuit of these pleasures that robs the soul of all its beauty and grandeur.” While the fashion-loving woman was robbed of soul, so also was the fallen woman, “that vile creature lying in the gutter, with only a few filthy rags to cover her miserable
body.” Anti-Catholic articles and pro-women's suffrage articles also used the dress of the other—seductive Catholics and thick-veiled “Mohammedans”—as foils to define virtuous women. Respectable dress was to differentiate a woman from the promiscuous, the vain, and the heathen, while instilling in her a sense of pride and duty commensurate to the important work of reform and activism.  

Respectable dress was advocated for all, but as the century progressed, the slowly growing African Methodist middle classes were especially responsible for bringing it to the less fortunate. In 1874, an article reprinted in the Christian Recorder advised middle-class mothers not to “come down to breakfast in . . . dishabille,” since “the first hour of the morning decides whether our children shall be gentlemen and ladies, or boors or slovans.” Initiating the unchurched into the virtues of dress was an act of Christian love, according to “Christine,” who wrote in 1883 in outraged response to a minister who felt like “taking a bullwhip” to some “filthy, backwoods” women and children he saw on his travels. Instead of such cruelty, argued Christine, the “beautifying and adorning of these earthly temples” required the loving instruction of Christian teachers.  

Much as Higginbotham suggested of the politics of respectability among black Baptists, many of the writers concerned with respectable dress articulated their views in relation to what white people would think. For example, according to one unnamed author writing in 1880, ministers in the AME church had a problem with respectable dress, although due to no fault of their own. Church members did not pay their ministers—who had to interact with white men—enough to eat or dress properly: “This world, and we are part of it, acts very largely on appearance. The shabbily dressed cannot command respect, and if these be leaders, the people who have it so cannot command respect. And without respect no people can rise.” That same year, G. T. Strickland suggested that mothers “watch those who claim to be our superiors—the white” and train their daughters into refinement at home. Emulating white people was not uncritical imitation but a strategic move for the future of the race, which depended on the “virtue and morals of our females.” Strickland directed his advice to middle-class (or at least reliably working-class) African Americans, in keeping with the overall tenor of the politics of respectability.  

At the same time, however, writers in the Christian Recorder increasingly questioned the burden of respectability and “affectation” for African Americans. Some writers adamantly rejected white designations of respectability, as it became clear that Reconstruction was not going to solve the problems of white racism. In 1877, the Reverend T. G. Steward denounced the “charges of indolence, slovenliness,
and *immorality*, so arrogantly made by our white foes, and so tacitly admitted by our white friends." Following white standards was no help in a racist, class-based, and hypocritical society:

The rough remark, "The negro stinks," sometimes escapes the lips of the refined darting itself into the world of expression like a tongue of flame. Now is the American colored man so filthy? Ask the thousands who are shaved daily by colored barbers, or who are waited on at table by colored waiters. Colored cooks, chambermaids, and nurses are sufficiently cleanly, and colored washerwomen are always in demand.\(^71\)

Respectability was hard to reach under conditions of white dominance, as this anonymous author stated in 1894: "With its first mother's milk almost, the Caucasian infant is taught to take in lessons on the predominance and sovereignty of its kind. By pictures in books, on the walls, in clay, marble or alabaster, from doll babies to celestial beings, the conception of white universality is rigidly maintained."\(^72\) In contrast, this author argued for a "beauty standard" capable of being "true to [the] nature" of African Americans. Such a revisioning of beauty would have very real consequences, according to former *Christian Recorder* editor B. T. Tanner, who, writing in 1887, condemned the "crime of caste" for setting up whiteness as a "fetish" to be adored. The worship of whiteness, Tanner averred, was the crime of refined society.\(^73\)

Catharine Casey, the editor of "Our Woman's Column" in the 1880s, gave a particularly cutting analysis of the ironies and burdens of respectability:

Never a speaker gets up to address us that he doesn't spread himself on our great need of self-respect and race pride. Great Scott! do these people think of how often we are called "nigger" along the streets? . . . Can they not see how many of the social and religious customs of this country are daily operating to diminish and destroy the very qualities that they exhort us to cultivate? It is one of the wonders of the age, and a proof that God gave us a very noble nature, that we have not lost faith in American Christianity and all respect for ourselves.\(^74\)

By white standards, these African Methodist writers asserted, black skin could never become clean, and black bodies could never be respectably clothed. According to such standards, respectability—and, by extension, American Christianity—remained trapped in dominant illusions of authentic blackness that consigned African Americans to slavery-bred, racist stereotypes. Acknowledging the elusiveness of respectability due the fetishizing of whiteness, however, did not keep
African American Methodist women from carrying respectability as both a burden and promise.

Middle-class women writers and activists continued to view respectability as a strategic move, though they would not have advocated imitation of whites. They tried to blend the political dimensions of women's respectability with a refined, genteel, and class-informed femininity that, in keeping with wider nineteenth-century notions of virtuous womanhood and, as Frances Harper phrased it, "enlightened motherhood," saw wives and mothers at the heart of racial uplift. Reframing authenticity within a maternalist discourse claimed by both white and African American women made space for respectability while also critiquing overweening consumption. For Lora L. Lawson, adopting respectability could mean leaving off the distractions of fashion and would open women to great responsibility, if only as supports to men: "Let us spend less time at the toilet-stand; take one gaze less at the mirror, and act, as this is the time for action. How few young ladies realize that the responsibility of the future of your young men rests on them!" In 1878, Virginia A. Hatcher's construction of the lady was less concerned with action, as she advised young ladies to study hard, to learn to read well, and to "never speak aloud in the street; it is not ladylike." Not all advocates of respectability developed a politicized consciousness.

The clearest embodiment of the politics of respectability for women affiliated with African American Methodism was Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, though, given her impressive career as a public lecturer, she most likely would not have assented to Virginia Hatcher's advice to keep quiet. Middle class and with a classical education superior to that of most nineteenth-century Americans, Harper was a poet, essayist, novelist, and activist who wrote frequently for AME publications. She was a contemporary of Amanda Berry Smith and Sojourner Truth but took a very different path to public prominence as an eloquent writer and lecturer much in demand.

Although by the end of her life she was a Unitarian, at times, her writing sounds more like that of a Holiness plain dresser, as in her 1887 call for mothers to meet together to act as "enlightened thinkers" discussing what is best for their children: "One afternoon might be given to the discussion of hereditary influences; another to the influences of flirtation, immodest apparel and promiscuous dancing upon moral and social life." Though she dressed with refinement and spoke with a "soft musical voice" while conveying her messages of abolition, temperance, and suffrage, in mid-century Harper also supported the free produce movement, choosing to wear "free labor dress, [even] if it is coarser." Her choice for plain fabrics tied her respectable
deportment into a continuum with plain-dressed women. In her last essay published in the AME Church Review in 1898, Harper continued this blend of middle-class refinement and resistance: "False politeness can cast a glamour over fashionable follies and popular vices and shrink from uttering unpalatable truths, when truth is needed more than flattery. . . . True politeness has no scornful epithets for classes or races, who, if not organically inferior, have been born under, or environed by inferior conditions. Humanity is God’s child, and to fail in true kindness and respect to the least of His ‘little ones’ is to fail in allegiance to Him." Class, race, religion, and respect combined in her doctrine of radical politeness, as she asserted that the burden of respectability called the privileged and enlightened woman to bring the "little ones" along with her to Christian virtue. Perhaps based on her experience of the transformative force of education, Harper was convinced of the power of education and socialization to transform African American women—schooling, mothering, and clothing were all arenas in which women could train themselves, with the help of others, into social, intellectual, and spiritual enlightenment.

Although not exactly mirroring the visionary role of dress in the writings of women preachers, Harper also utilized metaphors of dress as symbolic tools evocative of degradation and transformation. In an 1892 address to the Brooklyn Literary Society on the subject of "Enlightened Motherhood," Harper called for women to give up their girlish devotion to fashion and become "grandly constructive" mothers who would build their children’s "character" and "whose homes will be uplifting power in the race." Enlightened mothers, however, should not only focus on their daughters: "Are there not women, respectable women, who feel that it would wring their hearts with untold anguish, and bring their gray hairs in sorrow to the grave, if their daughters should trail the robes of their womanhood in the dust, yet who would say of their sons, if they were trampling their manhood down and fettering their souls with cords of vice, 'O, well, boys will be boys, and young men will sow their wild oats.'" The suggestive image of robes of womanhood trailing in the dust would have resonated not only with concerns about sexual purity but also with late-nineteenth-century fears about hygiene and women’s fashion, in which women’s long skirts were thought to be carriers of various contagions. As Harper pushed her allusive image of the potential moral corruption of fashion past its usual connection with women to point out double standards regarding men’s and women’s sexuality, she showed yet again the potent symbolism of dress and the fearlessly political and critical side of her version of respectability.

Hallie Q. Brown, though less resolutely critical, especially in
her mediation between vocational and academic schooling, also insisted on the constructive nature of dress both for the maker and the wearer. The "gospel of honorable manual labor" sunk into the minds of the young seamstresses at Tuskegee was a mix of Christian virtue and capitalist elbow grease. Though they had different perspectives on the role of education in the lives of African Americans, Brown and Harper were both aware that, for African American women especially, the politics of clothing were about both production and consumption. Harper, when clothed in free labor dress, articulated her criticisms of slavery in both word and image. Brown, while clothed in the fruits of the Tuskegee girls' labors, displayed elocution and respectability at the World's Fair, insisting on the right of African American women to address the nation and the world.

Formidable intellectuals and activists associated with African American Methodism, such as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Hallie Q. Brown, and anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett, espoused and embodied a kind of respectability in dress and demeanor in ways quite different from the respectable pastors' wives who Amanda Berry Smith described as ridiculing her. Harper's respectability was also quite different from the charismatic, spirit-inspired presence of women like Sojourner Truth and Amanda Smith—though, by all reports, she was an equally effective speaker. There is a distressing irony here: where Truth and Smith were embraced by white supporters and audiences both religious and political, the respectable women who based their authenticity and authority to speak on education, and perhaps class, were more uncomfortable presences for whites. Historian Nell Painter, comparing Harper and Truth, argued that Harper "was too educated, too polished, and too respectable to be taken for an exotic or a foreign work of art. . . . Truth was more of an entertainer, whose humor and biblical imagery softened her message. As an uneducated, dark-skinned, ex-slave, Truth embodied a black female authenticity that white audiences could not find in Harper." Authenticity, like appearance, is changeable, and judgments of both are intimately tied to perspectives rooted in power, ignorance, and social location.

Becoming middle class and dressing the part in post-Civil War society brought dangers for African American women and men that were felt both personally and collectively, as women were thrown from streetcars or trains for refusing to cede their rightful places and as many white Americans concentrated on organizing politically to stop the social and economic advancement of free African Americans. The plain dress of Amanda Berry Smith and Sojourner Truth and the respectable dress of Frances Harper and Ida B. Wells may have conveyed different religious messages, but their insistence on entering public,
white-dominated space as ladies led to at least one similar ordeal—they were all driven from trains, streetcars, or churches because they were black, regardless of what they were wearing.\footnote{84}

**Dress, Religion, and the Makings of a Good Woman**

The variety of African American Methodist understandings of the meaning of dress complicates analyses of the unquestioned dominance of white tastes and standards of refinement and beauty.\footnote{85} While Richard Bushman's assessment that “in every respect the black elite bought into the culture of refinement” is largely accurate, it does not go far enough to show how this buying into the accoutrements of culture, including dress, was accompanied by a religiously based critique of the racism that formed standards of respectability—as well as by parallel antifashion traditions valuing plain living.\footnote{86} What emerges from my analysis is an African American Methodist discourse on dress that understood the significance of adornment both in the tangible relations of power in this world and in the metaphorical visions of a heavenly realm. Within that discourse, however, was a diversity of perspectives on how best to harness the power of appearances for the good of all.

As Amanda Berry Smith's autobiography attested, women who chose plain dress and those who attired themselves with an eye to respectability did not always get along. The tensions between women choosing such different sartorial options may have stemmed from class differences as well as competing ideals of femininity. For women entering into the male-dominated calling of preaching, there were no fixed feminine dress codes. Women like Jarena Lee and Amanda Smith, who were not required to adopt plain dress, knew that, in choosing such apparel, they were committing to God, they were making their piety conspicuous, and they were following an interpretation of the scriptures. Perhaps they were also motivated by a long tradition of clerical attire in many religions. In adopting a religious "uniform," they turned the spiritual garments they had felt in their visions into tangible garments of religious power, whether or not their denominations saw fit to give them such power in official ways. In so choosing, they were also rejecting middle-class standards of womanly propriety demanding bustles and hoops—a risky thing for an African American woman in the public eye to do when African American women were already marginal women with suspect feminine virtue in the eyes of many.

African American Methodist women, while they did trouble themselves over the role of clothing in their lives and communities,
did not agonize over whether clothing and appearance was a dependable or capricious reflection of the authentic soul. They knew from their experiences of racism that judgments of authenticity were profoundly tied to structures of authority and that, in a culture of "white universality," their blackness would always obscure whatever was true about their souls. If they did worry about authenticity, their concerns were more likely to center on the authenticity of voice rather than appearance. Especially for preaching women, who based their legitimacy on their direct conversations with God, questions about the authenticity of voice were predominant: was that really God's voice speaking to them, or was it Satan, once again trying to lead them astray?

In their autobiographies, preaching women portrayed their experiences of conversion, sanctification, and receiving a call to preach as grueling processes in which they needed to settle the question of the authenticity of spiritual voices if they were to assert their right to preach with legitimacy. That they were successful, and some of them, like Amanda Berry Smith, spectacularly so, demonstrated their talent and charisma. Their success was also rooted in sources of African-based religious authority that Cheryl Townsend Gilkes called "dual-sex politics" that accorded religious legitimacy to women's spiritual leadership and were not bounded by male-dominated, European models of ecclesial authority. In so doing, they struggled to achieve a balance between honoring their individual convictions of vocation and piety and committing themselves to the good of their community. Stepping into public garbed in plain clothing and spiritual garments, these women cleared space for their more-educated heirs, who cultivated different approaches to embodying piety and purpose as African American women.

Women who dressed according to the politics of respectability also made choices about the best way to represent themselves through the necessary medium of clothing, but their decisions were more consonant with middle-class, dominant ideals of femininity. While not fully embracing fashion and costly display, these women dressed tastefully in their endeavour to establish themselves as virtuous, self-respecting women. But respectability had its risks as well, as African American women could suffer for asserting themselves as ladies. Bolstered by religious and political convictions, respectably dressed and plain-dressed women claimed public authority that other African American women would build upon in later battles over segregation and civil rights. In the nineteenth century, however, these women were keenly aware that the privileges afforded by dress were never entirely within their reach. Skin color trumped clothing, regardless of the richness of the fabric or the simplicity of the pattern.
Though plain-dressed and respectfully dressed women both knew that, due to the fetish of whiteness, clothing could not guarantee them social betterment or safety, they appreciated its strategic purposes, for both religious and political reasons. Dress was a symbolic and practical tool in both visionary and mundane worlds that allowed African American Methodist women to challenge oppressive hierarchies while living within them. Ultimately, however, both women preachers and social reformers in the AME would have agreed with Frances Harper that, in the next world, they would “leave aside our environments garments we have outworn and outgrown.” The robes of womanhood that were of this world were fickle yet indispensable tools in the battle for racial uplift, but mere trifles compared to the garments of glory that some women glimpsed or felt in visions, and others looked forward to in “the holy companionship of heaven.”

Dress played multiple roles in nineteenth-century America, acting as conveyor and arbiter of social standing and religious identity, as symbolic tool and barrier in spiritual visions and worldly arena, as social critique, as passport to public speech, and as grounds for negotiating and challenging constructions of race and gender. Exploring the multivalent nature of religiously inspired dress in American culture demonstrates how religious identity is embedded in a material world in which identities of all kinds are profoundly shaped by what we can see of each other, and how we fit such visions into our own assumptions and categories. More recent examples of the symbolic power of religious dress, such as North American or European Muslim women who choose to wear hijab, have demonstrated the continued power of clothing to unsettle and contest deeply held assumptions about gender, race, and religion. Just as North American Muslim women who adopt hijab challenge some cultural and social norms by trying to live according to religious tenets, the nineteenth-century African American women I have discussed here challenged the limits that norms of race and sex would place on them by turning to particular religious and cultural codes of dress, namely plain dress and respectability.

Religiously rooted codes and critiques of dress offered a path of legitimacy for women to claim public voices and to assert themselves as virtuous women in a culture that was deeply suspicious of the possibility that public women could also be virtuous. While the female virtue conveyed by dress was a class-informed means to separate the virtuous from the fallen of whatever color, in the hands and on the bodies of AME women it was also a religiously rooted critique of racism. Blending Christian interpretations of dress with the material resources and semiotics of fashion in their surrounding culture,
AME women lived out a material Christianity that contested the rules of this world and that they hoped would help to take them to the next. The possibilities of clothing as a reliable expression of the authentic soul were limited, however, since the combination of fashion and skin color was set in a semiotic system shaped by assumptions of race, class, and gender. Clothing, while a useful tool of communication of self to others, also evoked often unbridgeable differences—both between white and African American women and among African American women—in terms of class, religious preferences, and "civilization."

Notes

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3. Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 188. For a similar sentiment within the AME, see James H. A. Johnson, "Woman's Exalted Station," AME Church Review 8 (1891): 404.


Church, 1854–1902 (Jefferson: McFarland, 1996). I also used the AME Church Review, but it was not as rich a resource as its more populist cousin, the Christian Recorder.


32. Slaves, however, were also keenly aware of the possibilities of clothing for public performances, even in some cases using cross-dressing to escape to the North, as in the case of Ellen Craft. See Marjorie B. Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 282–85.


42. Lee, Religious Experiences and Journal, 5.

43. Isaiah 59:17 (KJV); see also Isaiah 52:1; 61:3; Ezekiel 42:14.

44. Smith, An Autobiography, 44.

45. Ibid., 47.


48. For a parallel example of dress as “shield” in the lives of American Mormons, see McDannell, Material Christianity, 198–221.


52. Fischer, Pantaloons and Power, 23.


56. Ibid., 145–46, 110.


60. Lee, Religious Experience, 23. Frances Harper had similar accusations directed to her. See Hazel V. Carby quoted in Garber, Vested Interests, 267.


63. A. W. Talbert, "Dress," Christian Recorder, June 30, 1881. On women's financial contributions to the church, see Jualynne E. Dodson, Engendering Church: Women, Power, and the AME Church (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); Sharon Harley, "For the Good of Family and Race: Gender,


67. R. Seymour, "Ought Women to be Admitted to Membership in the Legislative Bodies of the Church," *Christian Recorder*, November 20, 1890.


**ABSTRACT** Scholars of American religion are increasingly attentive to material culture as a rich source for the analysis of religious identity and practice that is especially revealing of the relationships among doctrine, bodily comportment, social structures, and innovation. In line with this focus, this article analyses the ways nineteenth-century African American Methodist women turned to dress as a tool to communicate religious and political messages. Though other nineteenth-century Protestants also made use of the communicative powers of dress, African American women did so with a keen awareness of the ways race trumped clothing in the semiotic system of nineteenth-century America. Especially for women entering into public fora as preachers and public speakers, dress could act as a passport to legitimacy in an often hostile setting, but it was not always enough to establish oneself as a Christian lady. Considering the related traditions of plain dress and respectability within the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church,
this essay finds that AME women cultivated respectability and plainness within discourses of authenticity that tried—with some ambivalence—to use dress as a marker of the true soul beneath the fabric. Based primarily on the autobiographical and journalistic writings of women such as Jarena Lee, Amanda Berry Smith, Hallie Q. Brown, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, as well as accounts from AME publications such as the Christian Recorder and the Church Review, and other church documents, the essay also draws on the work of historians of African American women and historians of dress and material culture. For nineteenth-century AME women, discourses of authenticity could be both a burden and a resource, but either way they were discourses that were often remarkably critical, both of self-motivation and of cultural markers of class, race, and gender in a world that made a fetish of whiteness.
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