

“AGAINST ALL ODDS”: A BRIEF HISTORIOGRAPHY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE WEST IN PROFESSIONAL CAREERS FROM 1900 - 1940

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As Lawrence B. de Graaf, an influential historian of African Americans in the West, noted in his influential work, “Recognition, Racism, and Reflection on the Writing of Western Black History,” that African Americans in the West warrant greater study. De Graaf called for in-depth studies of African Americans in the early twentieth century, which had not been done at the time of his article’s publication in 1975. Although de Graaf did not specifically encourage scholarship on African American women in the West, various historians have stepped in to fill that void since the expansion of women’s history in the 1970s. Indeed, the 1980s proved to be a period of proliferation in studies of African American women. Despite this upsurge, there remains a dearth of scholarship focused on professional African American women in the West—especially prior to World War II.¹

Professional African American women in the early twentieth century merit study because their accomplishments were often made through overcoming the challenges of race, gender and class discrimination. Against all odds, these women accomplished great things, often gained an education, improved their standard of living and made contributions to the uplift of their communities. In addition, scholars have stated that these early women professionals (many who were involved with the African American women’s club movement) fueled the advancement and achievements of later

1. Lawrence B. de Graaf, “Recognition, Racism, and Reflection on the Writing of Western Black History,” *Pacific Historical Review* 44, no. 1 (Feb. 1975): 22-51.

“Professional African American women in the early twentieth century merit study because their accomplishments were often made through overcoming the challenges of race, gender and class discrimination.”

African American women.² If this is the case, one would hope that study and analysis of these trailblazers would be fairly standard. Unfortunately, a review of the historiography reveals that much remains to be done in the study of African American women professionals. The following essay is a discussion of the development of the historiography of African American women, and more specifically, of professional

women in the West between 1900 and 1940, as well as suggestions for its future direction.³

Prior to the women's movement in the 1970s, very little historical writing focused on women. De Graaf addresses this in his article, “Race, Sex, and Region: Black Women in the American West, 1850-1920,” which was published in 1980. De Graaf suggests that the “omission [of black women in history] is partly rooted in the oversight by historians of the role of women in general, but it may also reflect an uncertainty as to the perspective from which to treat the topic.”⁴ Essentially, de Graaf highlights the issue which Bell Hook, in her 1981 book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, and Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith analyzed in their classic 1982 work, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. After discussing how black women have been excluded from women's history due to racism and neglected in African American studies due to sexism, these scholars argue that a distinct approach to African American women is needed in order

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2. Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, “‘Your Life is Really Not Just Your Own’: African American Women in Twentieth-Century California,” in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California*, ed. Lawrence B. de Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001): 215-217.
 3. Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 19.
 4. Lawrence B. de Graaf, “Race, Sex, and Region: Black Women in the American West, 1850-1920,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 49, no. 2 (May, 1980): 285.

to recognize the uniqueness of their experiences: black women’s studies.⁵

The development of the field of black women’s studies resulted in a rapid increase in scholarship devoted to African American women. Many of the earlier works published in this period focus on the southern and northern regions of the United States and rarely discussed African American women in the West. Topics of interest from this period include slavery, emancipation, Reconstruction, family life, sexuality, racial uplift organizations and social movements.

One of the precursors to the explosion of scholarship on African American women is Herbert G. Gutman’s 1976 *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*, which focuses on the cultural and social characteristics of family life for African Americans. Gutman abolishes the misconception that African Americans did not have family ties during slavery and that family life was controlled by the slave owners. By focusing on family, Gutman was compelled to include women as at least half of the equation. As mentioned earlier, Gutman’s work is centered on the northern and southern regions of the United States.⁶

Darlene Clark Hine discusses the social work and progress of women in Indiana in her 1981 community study, *When the Truth is Told: A History of Black Women’s Culture and Community in Indiana, 1875-1970*. Hine’s unabashed emphasis on women is a reflection of the development of black women’s studies. Hine illuminates the social programs these women created, the facilities they built to improve women’s livelihood (such as daycare centers and hospitals) and their involvement in various community organizations like churches and racial uplift organizations. Hine’s work is pioneering, because she focuses on the mid-West rather than the South, and she also began her argument in the post-slavery period. Dorothy Salem wrote a book with a similar focus published in 1990, entitled *To Better Our World: Black Women in Organized Reform, 1890-1920*. Salem considers the work of these women throughout the United States in some prominent or-

5. Bell Hooks, *Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981); Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave, Black Women’s Studies* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1981); Beverly Guy-Sheftall, “Review of *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave, Black Women’s Studies* by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith,” (Autumn, 1982): 271-272.

6. Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

ganizations, such as the NAACP, NACW and the National Urban League.⁷

Paula Giddings, author of the 1984 book, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, reviews African American women from slavery to the present, citing various activists to demonstrate the agency women had and their influence on their worlds. The women activists Giddings includes are generally well-known (and often upper class), such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary McLeod Bethune and Rosa Parks; nevertheless, Giddings' work is a great introductory reader to the field of black women's history. Giddings relies on sources that have become common to the field of black women's history, like oral histories, speeches, personal papers and interviews. These sources are beneficial because they allow the women's own voices to be heard, whereas for much of history, when women were discussed at all, it was through the voice of the (often male) historian.⁸

The book "*We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible*": *A Reader in Black Women's History*, published in 1995 and edited by Darlene Clark Hine, Wilma King and Linda Reed, is a critical contribution to the field of women's history. With a wide range of topics, including articles devoted to theory, like Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's foundational article, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," one cannot study the historiography of black women's history and neglect this text.⁹

Historical scholarship devoted to black women's labor emerged in the latter half of the 1980s, although other fields, like sociology, economics and demography published studies on black women workers prior. Works outside the field of history often cited in historical scholarship are Theophilus Oyeyemi Fadayomi's *Black Women in the Labor Force: An Investigation of Factors Affecting the Labor Force Participation of Black Women in the United States*, published in 1977, and Phyllis A. Wallace's *Black Women in the Labor Force*, published in 1980. Both of these studies investigate the demography of women workers and provide statistical evidence demonstrating correla-

7. Darlene Clark Hine, *When the Truth is Told: A History of Black Women's Culture and Community in Indiana, 1875-1970* (Indianapolis: National Council of Negro Women, 1981); Dorothy Salem, *To Better Our World: Black Women in Organized Reform, 1890-1920* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1990).

8. Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1984).

9. Darlene Clark Hine, Wilma King and Linda Reed, ed., "*We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible*" *A Reader in Black Women's History* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1995).

tions between race, income, field of labor and family size. These works also analyze employment discrimination and make comparisons to the population at large. Many of the social sciences study recent phenomenon, so interdisciplinary work can be helpful to historians discussing labor in the twentieth century.¹⁰

One of the premier historical studies of African American female laborers is the 1985 book, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, by Jacqueline Jones. In this work, Jones studies the work and family life of African American women from slavery to 1984. By presenting both work and family, Jones underscores Gutman’s thesis that women had meaningful relationships with their families (even during slavery), and that family was a motivation to work as well as an outlet for overcoming the discrimination they experienced in the work force. Jones focuses on the South and North in her work, and her emphasis is on the agency women fostered despite their challenging circumstances within domestic labor, blue-collar work and clerical work. Although she discusses the greater variability in job opportunities, including professional work, for black women in the 1980s, Jones does not place this within the context of earlier women who shattered glass ceilings to enter professional employment in earlier decades, which is unfortunate.¹¹

One of the few works that emphasizes African American professional women is *Speak Truth to Power: Black Professional Class in United States History*, by Darlene Clark Hine. Published in 1996, *Speak Truth to Power* is a compilation of essays and lectures by Hine, primarily focused on twentieth-century male and female professionals like nurses, doctors and lawyers. Hine demonstrates how these professionals had to work extensively to overcome the prejudice of racial, gender and class stereotypes. Hine declares that black women are “the country’s greatest and most total victim,” and consequently, black women who rise to the level of professionals in employment particularly warrant study. Like other historians, Hine’s work is geographically centered in the North and South.¹²

10. Theophilus Oyeyemi Fadayomi, *Black Women in the Labor Force: An Investigation of Factors Affecting the Labor Force Participation of Black Women in the United States* (Ann Arbor, MI: Xerox University Microfilms, 1977); Phyllis A. Wallace, *Black Women in the Labor Force* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1980).

11. Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1985), 5.

12. Darlene Clark Hine, *Speak Truth to Power: Black Professional Class in United States History* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1996).

Perhaps due to the small, but certainly not inconsequential, population of black women in the West, scholarship devoted to African American women in the West did not proliferate until the late 1990s and twenty-first century. Perhaps scholars of the West finally took note of W.E.B. Du Bois's commentary on the expansive women's club movement in California, or Delilah Beasley's statement that some of the brainiest women come from the West. Regardless of the reason, in the midst of increasing scholarship on African American women, Western historians are beginning to catch up. Some of the key areas of interest in studies of African American women in the West include their political activism and race work, community involvement, the black women's club movement, employment opportunities generated by World War II, lower-class women, and the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the West.¹³

Shirley Ann Wilson Moore discusses employment opportunities black women garnered during World War II in her 1995 article, "Her Husband Didn't Have a Word to Say': Black Women and Blues Clubs in Richmond, California, during World War II." Moore discusses how black women were often relegated to work in domestic service industries prior to World War II and were burdened with "doing double duty, sometimes triple duty" through working both at home and in their outside jobs. Moore emphasizes that black women who migrated West in search of employment opportunities often gained independence and agency through private business ownership related to community building and cultural traditions, such as clubs and restaurants. Moore's work is an excellent contribution to scholarship on the employment opportunities of lower-class black women in urban environments in the West, and her analysis sheds light on how residence in the West itself often led these women to pursue their goals.¹⁴

Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo's *Abiding Courage: African American Migrant Women and the East Bay Community*, published in 1996, corresponds well with Moore's work. Like Moore, Lemke-Santangelo discusses the distinct roles lower-class female black migrants played in urban California communities—specifically Oakland, Berkeley and Richmond. Lemke-Santangelo primarily discusses the cultural and community organizations

13. Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, *African American Women Confront the West 1600-2000* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 22.

14. Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, "Her Husband Didn't Have a Word to Say': Black Women and Blues Clubs in Richmond, California, during World War II," in *American Labor in the Era of World War II*, ed. Sally M. Miller and Daniel A. Cornford (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995).

these women organized, as well as how their “Southern-ness” was beneficial and central in constructing their lives in the West. Lemke-Santangelo refutes the idea that the “culture of poverty,” often associated with black women, has historical precedence in the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁵

Quintard Taylor’s *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990*, published in 1998, is essentially the textbook of issues and individuals in the study of African Americans in the West. Throughout his work, Taylor inserts the unique experiences of African American women, but they are not the central focus. Although Taylor describes his work partly as gender history, the paucity of references to women is a testament to the novelty of African American women’s history, even in 1998, rather than a reflection of personal prejudice.¹⁶

Taylor devotes much of his chapter on the urban West from 1911-1940 to employment issues. Taylor shows sensitivity to the role of gender by providing statistical data on occupational categories divided by gender and emphasizing professions in which women were hired in significant numbers, such as the entertainment industry, real estate and journalism. Taylor also discusses interracial competition between Asian and Hispanic businesses, but an exploration of the challenges, competition and success amongst these various ethnicities’ women professionals would have been fascinating. Overall, Taylor provides some helpful introductory information about African American women professionals, but more is needed to fill in the narrative.¹⁷

Albert S. Broussard includes professional African American women in his 1998 work of family history on the Stewarts, an influential family of black activists entitled *African-American Odyssey: The Stewarts, 1853-1963*. Broussard expands the geographical boundaries of “the West” to incorporate places like Hawaii, Liberia and St. Thomas, where racism did not limit opportunities for African Americans as extensively as it might have elsewhere (potentially due to their smaller population sizes in such locales, which did not excite as much notice or outright responses of racism). Broussard’s work is included in this historiography because he discusses two female professionals from the twentieth century: Carlotta Stewart Lai and

15. Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, *Abiding Courage: African American Migrant Women and the East Bay Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

16. Taylor, *In Search*, 18-19.

17. *Ibid.*, 223-225, 227, 234, 244-246, 250.

Katherine Stewart Flippin.¹⁸

In his chapter devoted to Carlotta Stewart Lai, Broussard demonstrates that for some African American women (including Lai), a professional career and the independence it could provide were worth sacrificing family and the familiarity of community. Broussard attributes her ability to work as a teacher and principal as an extension of her residence in the West; in other words, he argues that such job opportunities would probably not have been available on the mainland during the early twentieth century. This argument raises the question: What specifically about the West made such opportunities available? It is hard to track down the answer, but the evidence clearly supports the notion. Considering that the thread that weaves Broussard's work together is the family patriarch, it is commendable that Broussard's treatment of Carlotta centers around her work and the connections she made within her community as a leading professional, rather than simply her role as a daughter of a race man.¹⁹

Broussard's chapter on Katherine Stewart Flippin is not as well-researched or focused; Broussard meanders around Katherine and instead discusses her mother, Mary, and husband, Robert. After writing that "Katherine acknowledged that Robert's career took precedence over her own," it seems Broussard felt justified in dismissing Katherine's achievements in the education field and thus gave little attention to her efforts. This is unfortunate, since there is an excellent source of information in the oral history Katherine gave as part of the Black Women Oral History Project. Overall, Broussard's analysis is lacking in this chapter, but his work shows progress in the overall historiography of women's history because he devoted space to Mary and Katherine's professional careers.²⁰

Among the strongest analyses of African American women professionals and their contributions to their communities is the 2001 article, "Your Life is Really Not Just Your Own': African American Women in Twentieth Century California," by Shirley Ann Wilson Moore. Moore frames her discussion of women's involvement in society and the labor force as a triumph over racial, gender and class discrimination. Moore utilizes census data to demonstrate population size and to distinguish the percent-

18. Albert S. Broussard, *African American Odyssey: The Stewarts, 1853-1963* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 150-183.

19. *Ibid.*, 150-183.

20. *Ibid.*, 164-183.

ages of women engaged in various professions. She supplements her numerical evidence with newspaper articles, early histories, biographies and oral histories. Moore discusses careers ranging from those within the entertainment industry, clerical and industrial work, to professional positions like doctors, lawyers, librarians, teachers and lobbyists. Using such a broad base of source material lends credence to her work, and her discussion of professions adds both interest and breadth.²¹

Throughout her work, Moore provides human faces to accompany her data by citing specific women who shattered glass ceilings in their work worlds. Moore demonstrates the significance of professional women by reviewing their contributions to political and social causes. She also details some of the individual and common battles African American women faced relating to discrimination in the workplace, housing segregation and educational roadblocks. By providing these details, Moore reveals the extent to which courage, perseverance and boldness were necessary qualities in individual women and in the communities and families from which they emerged.²²

Moore discusses the centrality of the African American church, women’s club movement and sororities and how these organizations paved the way for even larger numbers of later professionals. By addressing the educational outlet of the women’s club movement, Moore demonstrates that these groups provided resources for other women, which gave them the necessary skill sets to be attractive candidates in the labor force. Moore also focuses on how some groups created or lobbied for childcare resources, which allowed more African American women to enter the workforce. By framing her discussion of women this way, Moore complicates the vision of African American women as “mammies” and domestics; in reality, they did so much more for themselves and for the racial, social and gender uplift of their communities. Moore covers both the middle and lower classes in her work; this is significant because it shows that women across classes were interested in their communities and committed to improving their lives.²³

One praiseworthy quality of Moore’s work is her temporal framing

21. Moore, “Your Life is Really Not Just Your Own:” African American Women in Twentieth-Century California,” in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California*, ed. Lawrence B. de Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 210-216, 226-228, 232-237.

22. *Ibid.*, 219- 223, 228-229.

23. *Ibid.*, 215-219, 228.

of the issue of women in the work force. Moore provides the foundation for modern women's involvement in the work force by providing references to nineteenth-century women, such as "Biddy" Mason and Mary Ellen Pleasant, well-known for their ingenuity and professional positions within society. As mentioned earlier, Moore extends her analysis into the African American women's club movement and argues that it was responsible for many gains by later professional women. From this foundation, Moore continues her analysis of individual women and their progress through the late 1990s. Consequently, Moore is able to trace the development over time of professions, such as those in the arts and humanities, political offices and athletics, and issues like the feminization of poverty, health problems and welfare. Moore's work is an excellent summary of the many issues and accomplishments of African American women in the workforce, but a book-length study on these issues and individuals is needed. Each of the women Moore mentions is worthy of a full-book analysis, or at least a chapter in an anthology. Moore's mention of Hettie Tilghman, who was cited as "operating a thriving family printing business," calls for additional research on the less-explored arena of small businesses.²⁴

African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000 is a compilation of articles and vignettes edited by Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore and published in 2003. Organized chronologically, the book is a treasure trove of black women who actively pursued economic, social and political justice and is one of the leading texts on Western black women. By gathering various articles into one location, Moore and Taylor provide readers with diversity of experience as well as continuity. Three articles are particularly germane to the historiography of professional women and they will be discussed in the following paragraphs.²⁵

Quintard Taylor's article, "Susie Revels Cayton, Beatrice Morrow Cannady, and the Campaign for Social Justice in the Pacific Northwest," is significant because it focuses the professional and political achievements of two lesser-known women. Taylor touches on the unique professions of these women and how these jobs often allowed them a platform from which to effect change and influence others. Despite the availability of sources, Taylor does not discuss the specific details of their personal and

24. Ibid., 210, 217, 228-240.

25. Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, *African American Women Confront the West 1600-2000* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 11-13, 17.

educational backgrounds, the pathway to their jobs or their experiences therein. Taylor’s analysis of Cannady’s professional contributions is more detailed than Cayton’s, but, like other historians, Taylor briefly acknowledges some of these issues and then quickly moves on to their family, social, religious or political work. Articles devoted to the employment and actual work of women would emphasize the importance of their professional contributions, the challenges they overcame in the workforce and perhaps provide precedent for later professional black women.²⁶

Moya B. Hansen’s article, “‘Try Being a Black Woman!’: Jobs in Denver, 1900-1970” is refreshing in its approach to the economic challenges African American women faced in terms of job opportunities in the West. By placing her discussion of women in the context of such theories of the day as evolutionary and Victorian mores, Hansen provides meaning to job discrimination stemming from gender and race. Additionally, Hansen’s regional approach allows her to discuss the peculiarities of Colorado laws and traditions, while also making comparisons to other regions, like the South, where job opportunities for African American women outside the service industries were even more scarce. Hansen discusses the impact of World War II on job opportunities, but she does not overlook the more subtle changes related to regional trends, past employment practices and political activism. Hansen’s innovative approach should be imitated in forthcoming regional studies of professional job opportunities for African American women. Although Hansen provides a balanced perspective throughout her long time range (1900-1970), other historians could advance historiography by focusing on the pre-war period apart from World War II, as the war can too easily monopolize the narrative.²⁷

The final article taken from *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000* is “From Peola to Carmen: Fredi Washington, Dorothy Dandridge, and Hollywood’s Portrayal of the Tragic Mulatto,” by Alicia I. Rodriguez-Estrada. Rodriguez-Estrada employs cultural and literary analysis in discussing the challenges black actresses faced in their historically-limited movie roles. Rodriguez-Estrada argues that the skin color of actresses dictated the type of roles they would be able to play (e.g. the “mammy,” Jezebel or “tragic mulatto”). Although Rodriguez-Estrada provides many interesting details and comments from newspapers and actress interviews, an analysis

26. Ibid., 189-202.

27. Ibid., 207-223.

of the positive aspects of the entertainment industry would have made it more significant. For example, the fact that these women were able to work in the restricted environment of Hollywood demonstrates their agency, skill and determination to break open new professions for all races, but the author tends to focus on the negative aspects of their work instead.²⁸

Also in 2003, Kathleen A. Cairns wrote *Front-Page Women Journalists, 1920-1950*. In many ways, Cairns' work accomplishes what is being called for in the field of professional black women's history in the West. By focusing on three particular female journalists, Ruth Finney, Charlotta Bass and Agness Underwood, Cairns provides a detailed approach to the specific challenges they faced in obtaining their professional positions, as well as the impact of their voices on reforming law and local attitudes. Cairns argues that the presence of these women in the workforce altered gender stereotypes and provided a precedent for later black female professionals.²⁹

Another work discussing Charlotta Bass is Regina Freer's 2004 article, "L.A. Race Woman: Charlotta Bass and the Complexities of Black Political Development in Los Angeles." Freer frames her work as a city history and contributes scholarship devoted to the black community in Los Angeles prior to the Watts riots of 1965. In short, Freer utilizes Bass's writing to understand the issues facing the larger black community within Los Angeles. Although Freer mainly analyzes Bass as a "race woman" with a great platform via her newspaper, this work is a meaningful contribution to the growing field of scholarship on black professional women in the West because it demonstrates the agency and voice Bass was able to maintain through her professional work.³⁰

Betti Vanepps-Taylor's community study, *Forgotten Lives: African Americans in South Dakota*, published in 2008, includes a chapter on "Strong Sisters," or black women who displayed strength of character and purpose in their contributions to the South Dakota community. Vanepps-Taylor discusses female business owners and managers, as well as professional singers and teachers, who often worked with both white and black clientele. Vanepps-Taylor describes their pathways to success, their club and church involvement and the legacy they left for other women. Vanepps-

28. Ibid., 230-243.

29. Kathleen A. Cairns, *Front-Page Women Journalists, 1920-1950* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).

30. Regina Freer, "L.A. Race Woman: Charlotta Bass and the Complexities of Black Political Development in Los Angeles," *American Quarterly*, 56, no. 3 (Sep., 2004): 607-632.

Taylor’s contribution to this historiography is mainly in her illumination of women professionals in small, rural settings.³¹

The historiography reviewed in this essay demonstrates that exclusively male subjects, definitions, sentiments and trends in historical writing are no longer as prevalent within recent scholarship. Historians are increasingly recognizing the need for studies of women—indeed, African American women and other minority groups—in order to construct a more accurate understanding of the past, yet much remains to be done in the field of western African American women’s history. Book-length research devoted to the experiences of African American women professionals in the twentieth century prior to World War II could provide historical precedent and context for topics such as later professional work by African American women, economic trends and class mobility, cultural and gender ideologies of work. Regional and community studies emphasizing the experiences of professional women would provide a rich context for analyzing how these women were able to enter the work force, what constituted their daily experiences and the accomplishments they achieved. Comparisons of black women professionals in urban versus rural areas could shed light on the possibilities and opportunities in both settings due to variables like population size, infrastructure and necessity. Interracial comparisons between various female minorities would also provide interesting analysis. Fortunately, there are sources ripe with information available for these studies, such as issues of the NAACP’s *Crisis Magazine* and other black publications and the extensive Black Women Oral History Project.

Based on the research conducted for this essay and the study of African American Western history in general, the historiography of African American women in the West is moving in these directions, and this is commendable. African American women who succeeded in professional positions against all odds deserve recognition for their resourcefulness, hard work and persistence; their contributions to political organizations, community life and racial activism; and above all, their agency. After all, as Skip Reynolds Crownhart said, “If you think it’s tough being a woman, you ought to try being a black woman,” and a professionally employed woman at that!³²

31. Betti Vanepps-Taylor, *Forgotten Lives: African Americans in South Dakota* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society, 2008), 129-142.

32. Taylor and Moore, 223.