

Amerikastudien

American Studies

A Quarterly

Edited for
the German Association
for American Studies by

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Volume 59 · 4 (2014)

SONDERDRUCK

Universitätsverlag
WINTER
Heidelberg



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EDITORIAL OFFICE

Professor Dr. Oliver Scheiding,
Amerikanistik / American Studies,
Department of English and Linguistics,
Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz,
Jakob Welder Weg 18,
D-55128 Mainz
Telefon ++49-6131-39-22357
Telefax ++49-6131-39-20356
E-Mail: amst@uni-mainz.de
Website: <http://dgfa.de>

Subscriptions

Amerikastudien ★ *American Studies (Amst)* is published quarterly.
The subscription price is € 79,70 plus postage. The subscription is renewed automatically for the following year, if notice of cancellation is not received by December 1 of the current year.

Universitätsverlag WINTER GmbH, Heidelberg
Postfach 10 61 40, D-69051 Heidelberg

Typesetting:
OLD-Media, D-69126 Heidelberg
Printing and bookbinding:
Memminger MedienCentrum GmbH, D-87700 Memmingen

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The Daughters of Africa and Transatlantic Racial Kinship: Cecilia Lillian Tshabalala and the Women's Club Movement, 1912-1943

MEGHAN HEALY-CLANCY

ABSTRACT

This article explores how South African women drew upon African American models of public engagement to articulate a locally meaningful racial identity. Its focus is on the work of Cecilia Lillian Tshabalala, who was born in Natal and moved to the United States in 1912. After attending the Hampton Institute, New Britain State Normal School, and the Moody Bible Institute in the United States, she taught at an African Methodist Episcopal Church girls' school in Gold Coast (Ghana) and at black Congregationalist churches in Hartford and Brooklyn, before returning to South Africa in 1930. In 1932 Tshabalala launched a women's club movement, the Daughters of Africa (DOA), which was modeled on the African American women's club movement. Members of the DOA organized social welfare activities including small enterprise, public health, and educational initiatives, and wrote about these activities in African newspapers, articulating a model of women's public activism premised on their domestic authority. Focusing on Tshabalala's writing in the Johannesburg-based *Bantu World* as the DOA expanded its operations through Natal and into the Witwatersrand in the latter half of the 1930s and the early 1940s, this article highlights the gendered possibilities of transatlantic racial kinship during a foundational period in African nationalism.

1. Introduction

"Nearly all women of note or power in the STATES belong to some kind of CLUB or CLUBS," Cecilia Lillian Tshabalala informed a conference of South African women in 1937. African American women, she emphasized, "have all types of fraternal organizations to build and consolidate their race as a whole educationally, economically, socially and otherwise" ("Other Women" 11). Following their lead by transferring structural ideas across cultural and political borders, she had formed the Daughters of Africa (DOA) five years before, as a club movement by which women could "uplift the African race" through educational initiatives, agricultural projects, small-scale enterprises, savings schemes, and public meetings (Viyella 10). By the early 1940s, the DOA would boast branches across the province of Natal and in the gold mining center of the Witwatersrand, where its Johannesburg members took on state authority with growing assertion. They played leading roles in the successful 1943 boycott against rising bus fees in the black Johannesburg township of Alexandra, which emblemized the rising challenges of black urban life.

Between its founding in 1932 and 1943, when women were first admitted as full members of the African National Congress (ANC) and its new Women's League

(ANCWL), the DOA served as a small but influential forum for women's engagement in nationalist public culture. While scholars have generally characterized women as marginal to African nationalism during this period, women were in fact only marginal to the realm of male-dominated political groups, in which the ANC was prominent. Through participation in all-female social welfare organizations like the DOA, the National Council of African Women (NCAW), and the Zenzele Clubs, women enacted new forms of national allegiance that transcended regional and ethnic identities. These women's movements all bore African American imprints: thus, the founding president of the National Council was the American-educated Charlotte Maxeke (Campbell 249-94), and a leading force in the Zenzele movement was the African American social worker Susie Yergan (Higgs). The ANCWL, too, had American ties: its first president, Madie Hall Xuma, was the North Carolina-born wife of the ANC's president, Alfred Bitini Xuma (Berger).

Tshabalala's work in the DOA vividly exemplifies how South African women used diasporic models of club work to proudly fashion the identity they called *African*. Her biography reveals rich black Atlantic connections during the eighteen-year period in which she lived outside of South Africa. Born near Ladysmith, Natal, she studied at Virginia's Hampton Institute, New Britain State Normal School in Connecticut, and the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, from 1912 to 1919. She then worked at an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church girls' school in present-day Ghana. In 1922 she left to direct religious education at Congregationalist churches in Hartford, CT, and Brooklyn before returning to Natal in 1930. The details of these journeys may be less critical to the history of early African nationalism than the public representations that they generated. As the DOA expanded in the latter half of the 1930s and early 1940s, Tshabalala used the Johannesburg *Bantu World* to promote the idea of women's clubs and their connected political agendas to her countrywomen.

Drawing on scholarship on black South African and American clubwomen's strategies, and through a close analysis of Tshabalala's writing, this article makes two arguments. First, in a historiographic and comparative approach, it reveals and counters a lack of scholarly attention to the (transnational) entanglements of personal and political aspects in clubwomen's history—intersections that African Americanists have otherwise explored so richly. Thus, in its second—historical and transnational—argument, this article contends that South African clubwomen's local concerns embody global ideals. Tshabalala's work exemplifies how transnational clubwomen's connections nurture a politics of racial kinship in which women's care for themselves, their homes, and their families contribute to a broader project of racial progress.

2. 'A Conservative Goal'?

Rethinking South African Women's Organizing in Transatlantic Perspective

Reassessing Scholarship on Black South African Women's Domestic Concerns

Scholars have examined how African nationalists reworked American ideas about racial unity to forge a mobilizing identity in segregationist South Africa. Yet the nationalists on whom they have focused have been overwhelmingly male (see, e.g., Vinson; Masilela; Couzens). Where South African women appear in scholarship of the black Atlantic political imagination, they do so as silent partners in male-led projects or as participants in welfare and Christian activities at the margins of formal politics (Hughes 89-119). Only Charlotte Maxeke is discussed as an influential female nationalist conduit of transatlantic connections. She founded a school in Transvaal with her husband on the model of Wilberforce, their Ohio alma mater, where W.E.B. Du Bois had been on the faculty, and she launched the AME Church in South Africa (Campbell 253-83). With her Wilberforce classmates, Maxeke shared an “unshaken conviction about her role as a ‘representative’ leader of the race” (Campbell 288). Maxeke parlayed these traditions into the Bantu Women's League (BWL), which she founded in 1918 as a female auxiliary to the ANC, and the NCAW, which she founded shortly before her death as an amalgamation of social welfare groups in 1937. In his comparative work on the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa, James Campbell suggests that Maxeke carried “the ideas about women's purity and ‘natural sphere’ that she had imbibed at Wilberforce” into these organizations, as she “subscribed to many of the assumptions that underlay women's marginalization” (288). However, Maxeke also pursued a political agenda: she argued against pass laws—aimed at stemming African settlement in urban areas—because they deprived women of “the respect to which they are entitled” from officials, complaining that they ignored “all that was meant by the words mother, wife and sister” (Maxeke, qtd. in Campbell 288).¹ Campbell maintains that her rhetoric “remained safely within the confines of domestic ideology” common to her black and white Christian audience (288). His dismissal of Maxeke as essentially conservative echoes that of pioneering South African feminist historians Cheryl Walker and Julia Wells. Walker stresses that Maxeke “did not question the assumption that women's primary function was a domestic one,” concluding that members of the BWL “were not seeking radical change in established patterns of relationships with men and their families” (39-40). Wells describes women's anti-pass protests as single-issue campaigns centering on “a conservative goal—to retain a known social order rather than create a new one” (139).

¹ In the Union of South Africa before apartheid (1910-1948), women were excluded from national legislation that required African men to carry passes legitimizing their work or residence in urban areas. Municipalities across the country, however, enforced their own versions of pass laws that pertained to African women as well as men in urban areas, against which women often protested. For more, see Wells.

Dismissals of Maxeke's gender politics as 'conservative' illustrate historians' broader neglect of women's contributions—contributions that were, at times, based on American models—to the intellectual foundations of African nationalism. When black women argued that pass laws deprived them of the 'respect' that they deserved from state officials and police officers on the basis of their central roles in their families, they were not shoring up an existing domestic order. Rather, in a time of radical transformations in African family life, they were demanding a new order. Prior to the late nineteenth-century mineral revolution, most southern Africans resided in polygynous, agricultural homesteads in which women were central to production and reproduction (Guy). The Union of South Africa was constructed upon a history of conquest that decimated the homestead system, with the Natives' Land Act of 1913 solidifying white control over 87 percent of the country. Over the next three decades, a political economy based on black male migrant labor left most women behind on faltering rural 'reserves' or white-owned farms. However, growing numbers of women were migrating to cities like Johannesburg and Durban, as well as to towns throughout the country, where they pursued such careers as beer brewers, food sellers, domestic servants, teachers, and nurses. While in 1921 about 7 percent of African women across South Africa lived in towns or cities, the percentage of women living in urban areas rose to 11 percent in 1936 and to 21 percent in 1951 (Walker 41, 128). While the African male to female ratio in urban areas averaged 3:1 in 1921, it fell to 2.2:1 by 1936, and 1.6:1 by 1951, although the major cities of Johannesburg and Durban remained more male-dominated (Hirson, *Yours* 55; Walker 128). Under the terms of the 1930 Urban Areas Act, African women without a husband or father in an urban area needed permission from municipal officials to reside there—a permission that was often difficult to secure. A 1937 amendment required women to receive permission from magistrates in their rural home districts before traveling to town, making mobility even more difficult (Walker 42). Men's migrancy strained rural family relations and ailed African bodies, e.g., through sexually transmitted infections and tuberculosis that men often brought from the mines (Packard). Urban and rural families regularly faced hunger, and childhood malnutrition was epidemic (Wylie). Women's travels to town engendered fierce conflicts not only between Africans and officials but also within families (Bozzoli). In this context, clubwomen's claims to 'respect' in urban areas on the basis of their familial authority emerge as more provocative than scholars of South African history have previously allowed.

Nevertheless, the contributions of Tshabalala and other clubwomen to African nationalist public culture have so far garnered little scholarly consideration. The few scholars who have acknowledged the DOA have generally presented inaccurate depictions from limited sources. Deborah Mindry, for instance, draws uncritically upon a single oral historical interview to claim that John Dube's second wife, Angeline Dube, founded the group after traveling to the United States with her husband (1199). Generally, scholars have ignored the DOA and given only minimal consideration to other women's social welfare groups (Walker; Ginwala; Wells; Gasa). Important exceptions that have taken seriously women's attention to family and community issues have focused more on connections between black and white

women in religious groups than on the role of African women in nation-building projects (Gaitskell). Pamela Brooks's 2008 comparative history of black women's political activism in Johannesburg and Montgomery, AL, typifies this neglect. Brooks gives only glancing attention to South African women's clubs, including brief looks at *manyano* (prayer unions) and *stokvels* (savings clubs)—focusing instead on women's activism in overtly political groups, primarily the ANCWL, between 1943 and 1960 (Brooks 114-15, 170-74). She emphasizes the role of women's social groups only in regard to fostering "survival skills" and in cultivating "'bridge leaders,' linking their constituents on the ground to the male leadership of the national, parent, or larger groups" (242). Like earlier feminist scholars of South Africa, Brooks's lens remains trained on moments of organized political expression to the extent that she conceives her interviewees' family histories as their "prepolitical pasts" (10). Such approaches privilege questions of *how* women built gendered networks over *why* women saw these networks as useful; it emphasizes how they *resisted* state power over how they *envisioned* new possibilities.

Given the overriding focus on moments of political protest in the historiography of South African women, the most apparently politically active branch of the DOA—that in Alexandra, Johannesburg—has attracted the most attention. John Nauright underscores Tshabalala's active role in the successful bus boycott of 1943 and suggests that "her political life serves as a microcosm of the political experience of women in Alexandra, encapsulating the radicalization by events and the subsequent seizure of initiative to direct and maintain the larger protest movement" ("I Am" 276). While Nauright notes Tshabalala's time in the United States, he leaves unexamined how her roots in global networks may have shaped her response to local conditions. He ultimately presents her less as a global political thinker than an adroit local organizer. Dawne Curry takes Tshabalala more seriously as an important translator of African American clubwomen's concerns to a South African context (Nauright, "Black"; Curry, "Community"). Examining her 1938 *Bantu World* account of her participation in the 1927 Chautauqua conference (an international meeting of Christian women in upstate New York that included black and white American clubwomen), Curry draws attention to how "the women's club founder compared worldwide systems of segregation" ("An African American" 25; Tshabalala, "Other Women"). She points to Christianity as the intellectual framework through which Tshabalala connected transatlantic black struggles. Unfortunately however, Curry's published analysis stops there; she does not situate Tshabalala's words within her corpus of writing or more broadly within African nationalist public culture. Nor do Philip Bonner and Noor Nieftagodien: in their expansive history of Alexandra, Tshabalala appears as a shadowy presence, "the most conspicuous figure" representing the "sub-tenant, beer-brewing, churchgoing African women" who emerge as an influential mass in archival sources on local struggles, but who rarely appear as individuals rooted in broader political projects (7).

*The Historiography of Black South African
and American Clubwomen Compared*

Historians of black women's engagement in racial uplift organizations in Jim Crow America have given great weight to the significance of African American women's public claims to respect. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues that between 1900 and 1920, black Baptist women's assemblies provided spaces in which they formed a "national constituency of black women" who "contested racist discourses and rejected white America's depiction of black women as immoral, childlike, and unworthy of respect or protection" (186). She famously terms this a "politics of respectability." Lynn Thomas suggests that South African scholars need to appreciate more fully the stakes of "racial respectability," which "refers to people's desires and efforts to claim positive recognition in contexts powerfully structured by racism, contexts in which respectability was framed through racial categories and appearances were of the gravest importance" ("Modern Girl" 98). Yet Thomas's translation of Higginbotham's concept misses its most critical point: the politics of respectability was as much a public, collective project as a private, individual one; women's projects of respectable self-fashioning and social transformation were intertwined. Higginbotham emphasizes that by claiming their own dignity, black women believed that they could create a new society in which all marginalized people could expect respect, seeing themselves as "missionaries to America" (186).

While respectability could empower, projects of racial uplift also hinged on a double marginalization of black women and men who did not conform to respectable standards of comportment (Gaines 67-99). Because uplift was a project of social reform premised on technologies of the self, people who rejected temperance, chastity, and public propriety seemed also to reject the possibility of an anti-racist society. Those marginalized by uplift discourses were disproportionately poor and working class urban migrants in a time of rapid migration and growing class diversity within black communities in the U.S. north. Indeed, historians have stressed that the African American clubwomen's project that Tshabalala urged South Africans to emulate was profoundly class-based. "Poor, working-class, middle-class women all organized nationally but mostly within their own groups," Deborah Gray White points out (17). While poor and working-class women dominated church-based organizations, the middle-class women who led clubs devoted to "intellectual development and cultural refinement" looked down upon displays of religious fervor (White 72-73).

The National Association of Colored Women (NACW) provided the organizational structure that Tshabalala would emulate in the DOA, with shared strengths and weaknesses. Founded in 1896 as a consortium of women's clubs, the NACW's immediate motivation was defensive: to provide an institutional retort to a white journalist's attack on clubwoman Ida B. Wells and to challenges of the moral integrity of black women. It was rooted in generations of black women's organization around the country—on a model of women's moral authority and public service that white clubwomen also espoused with force between Reconstruction and World War I (Cash; Giddings 95-118; Scott 111-83; Blair). As Darlene Clark Hine

argues, black clubwomen built upon traditions of “making community”—upon the agenda to “creat[e] religious, educational, health-care, philanthropic, political, and familial institutions and professional organizations that enabled our people to survive” (Hine xxii). While the various clubs had diverse memberships and programs, White emphasizes that they were all premised on “racial uplift through self-help. Black clubwomen believed they could help solve the race’s problems through intensive social service focused on improving home life and educating mothers” (28)—beginning in their own homes and extending to their communities and throughout the nation.

Similar to South African women’s confrontation with conquest and segregation, African American women struggled for domestic sovereignty as a first step in the making of their ‘race.’ In the defense of domestic sovereignty, their zeal for public organization was staggering: from a network of two hundred clubs in 1896, by 1916 the NACW boasted fifteen hundred affiliates (White 33). By 1914 some 50,000 women claimed membership. In size and influence, the group surpassed male-dominated groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League (Hine 44). Activities ranged from operating kindergartens, orphanages, and clinics in their communities, to providing housing, employment training, and job referrals to young women in cities, to offering courses in domestic science and nursing to mothers, to coordinating literary circles and musical groups, to organizing networks of businesswomen. As ‘racial diplomats’ between white officials and black communities, women secured resources that black men could not, particularly in the South (Gilmore). With the NACW’s motto, ‘Lifting as We Climb,’ clubwomen suggested that “they were their own best argument against discrimination” as “a race could rise no higher than its women” (White 53, 55). However, this was a dangerous argument: “What would happen if the race did not rise? [...] This ideology could justify black female activism and equal educational opportunities, but it also left black women vulnerable to blame for the condition of the race” (White 55). Adding to their burdens, many club leaders may have sacrificed their family life: 43 percent—including the 34 percent who were married—were childless (White 88-89). The internal and external pressures on black clubwomen could be crushing, particularly because to be “their own best argument” meant that they could not publicly show the strains that they faced as working women (Hine 44-47). In the NACW, Hine argues, “the culture of dissemblance assumed its most institutionalized form” (44).

At first glance, the reasons for the quantitative and qualitative differences in the scholarship on black American and South African clubwomen seem obvious. Foremost is the matter of sources. The source base with which African American historians work is enviable; it includes not only accessible reams of club archives but also books and pamphlets that prominent women published during their lifetimes. Tshabalala’s group may have even derived its name from Maria Stewart’s 1831 pamphlet, *O, Ye Daughters of Africa, Awake!* Its exhortations were published in an 1879 collection of her writings: “No longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties” (Stewart 25). In contrast, archives for South African women’s groups are limited and diffuse. African women did not begin publishing tomes

on the level of Stewart's 1879 work until nearly a century later. Indeed, in the mid-1930s, only 12 percent of the African population in South Africa was literate, while more than 80 percent of African Americans could read (Thomas, "Modern Girl" 97; Brandt 106). Thus African American clubwomen not only left historians a larger corpus of texts and documents than their South African counterparts, they were also able to mobilize broader constituencies through print (Waters and Conaway; Maffly-Kipp and Lofton). While the NACW had about 50,000 members when Tshabalala first encountered the group, a leading member of the DOA in Natal estimated that the group had some 5,000 members at its height (Dube). Even if this figure is exaggerated and the DOA had a membership only half that size, it would still have compared favorably to the ANC, which had an average of some 4,000 paid-up members in the 1930s (Limb 361).

The effective absence of a black middle class in segregationist South Africa explains both the relative paucity of sources and the small membership of organized groups. Yet, the low degree of class differentiation amongst Africans in the 1930s also meant that these small groups were more influential than membership numbers suggest. As Peter Limb has shown for early ANC leaders, literate leaders commanded a following from a larger constituency of illiterate Africans with whom they shared communities and often also homes. "With some African primary teachers earning less than factory workers, the mere accretion of literacy does not guarantee membership of a privileged elite," Limb insists, reminding us that the educated Africans that scholars call the 'elite' all lacked meaningful access to capital, land, and the franchise in the 1930s (12-13). The lack of a black elite with any substantive power in South Africa meant that the ranks of black leaders were smaller than in the U.S. American context—but it also meant that in general these leaders were closer to 'the masses.' The differentiation of clubs along class lines thus seems to have been less pronounced in South Africa. However, the impoverished state of South Africanist scholarship on clubwomen is not simply a function of extant or non-extant sources. It is also a function of our inadequate theoretical framework on gender and early African nationalism, which cannot explain the ideological and practical significance of domestic concerns to politics. One source in which both male and female leaders of 'the race' did represent themselves in print is newspapers. While Limb has revealed the richness of newspapers for understanding the largely male world of the early ANC, the following analysis suggests that they can yield similar insights into early women's movements.

3. Other Africans and Other Women: Tshabalala's Visions of Racial Kinship in the *Bantu World*

The Women's Pages as National Project

As South African women's mobility and official constraints on that mobility increased simultaneously, concerns about sustaining strong families came to the fore in public culture. Africans voiced these concerns with force in the pages of the *Bantu World*, a Johannesburg newspaper launched by an enterprising white

businessman in 1932. Its audience was far from affluent. Although writers and readers aspired to “middle-class status” (Thomas, “Modern Girl” 97), they came from a wide range of backgrounds, from servants with a few years of schooling to teachers with college degrees. Datelines on articles and letters reveal that contributors were both rural and urban as well as from around South Africa. They were not only conversant in English, the language of mission high schools and the language in which over half of the newspaper’s articles appeared but also fluent in several African languages, in which original and translated contributions appeared. Above all, the writers and readership of the *Bantu World* saw themselves as contributing to a national conversation, articulating an agenda for what they termed ‘racial uplift.’ The readership of the newspaper was far smaller than that of its African American counterparts: the paper sold just 6,000 copies weekly in 1934 and 24,000 copies weekly a decade later, though staff claimed that at least five people read each issue and related its contents to illiterate kin (Switzer 190). Yet, under the editorship of ANC activist R. V. Selope Thema, *Bantu World* was comparable to the *Chicago Defender* in its upwardly mobile ambition, national scope, and cosmopolitan style. All of these elements were evident in the women’s pages where male and female writers emphasized women’s domestic responsibilities as matters of deep concern for ‘the race.’

In the only published analyses of the women’s pages, Lynn Thomas has highlighted the prolific work of their “Editress,” a male journalist in his early thirties named Rolfes Robert Reginald Dhlomo who took on a female *nom de plume* in 1932. Thomas stresses that under Dhlomo’s guidance “the women’s pages devoted considerable space to highlighting black women’s educational and professional achievements and advising women on how to foster healthy families” (“Love” 42). She characterizes this project principally as an expression of male status anxiety and their concerns to “defend their womenfolk” amidst rising female urban migration: “Dhlomo and other male contributors to the pages sought to define and promote a respectable urban femininity that would distinguish their daughters and wives from the disreputable female figures of the prostitute and beer brewer that black leaders had long associated with town life” (“Love” 42). The defense of respectable women and their differentiation from those who behaved less respectably were certainly goals of some contributors. However, the women’s pages expressed more than elite black men’s efforts to protect their class.

By the 1930s, even the most highly educated and affluent African men could not reasonably expect to insulate their female kin from the casual violence of a racialized society. All African urbanites were inexorably defined by white rule. The contributors to the women’s pages believed that by building strong African urban families they could create an African urban culture so unimpeachable—so ‘civilized,’ in the parlance of the times—that white supremacy would stand no chance. The promotion of not only a new form of ‘respectable urban femininity,’ but also of a new society in which urban women could claim respect, was the core project over which the Editress presided. While Dhlomo saw disreputable women as the source of national decay, he believed that women who lived virtuous lives would encourage their peers and ultimately transform the collective reputation of African women. After renaming the women’s section ‘Marching Forward’ in late

1935, the Editress urged women to submit news of their activities that linked the personal and the political on behalf of ‘the race’: “Somewhere, in this big country, there is another woman, placed as you are, who would find comfort in your life sketch. If you neglect this opportunity of proving yourself, remember that those who look down on women will never neglect an opportunity of blaming all women for the weaknesses of others” (“Women’s Critics” 7).

Lillian Tshabalala’s Career and the Transnational Scale of Uplift

Following this call to submit stories that link the personal and the political, Tshabalala was one of the first to offer a ‘life sketch’ that demonstrates the transfer of her biographical transatlantic experience into a larger, transnational political agenda. A brief reference to her work in the DOA had been published in the *Bantu World*, in an address on the “Emancipation of Women” at Inanda Seminary for Girls in Natal, and she had also been mentioned multiple times in *Ilanga Lase Natal*, the isiZulu-English newspaper of her home province. Few of the *Bantu World*’s readers may have recognized her when the women’s pages published a March 1936 profile, “Interesting Career of Miss Tshabalala,” next to the photograph of a polished woman, hair coiffed, wearing a smart frock and gleaming necklace. She was introduced in reference to her “outstanding work in the Driefontein area, Natal.” The profile immediately rooted this local work in a transatlantic framework when the article mentioned that she left for the United States after her early schooling at the Tuskegee-inspired Ohlange Institute and the American Zulu Mission school at Umzumbe: “In America, after completing her studies, she was offered a teaching post; not only that, she was also a Sunday school teacher, teaching Negroes. Miss Tshabalala was not only interested in her teaching but also in social work. She stayed in America for eighteen (18) years” (Viyella). Upon her return, the article continued, she was feted in Durban in a “grand reception” with Sibusisiwe Makhanya, who had recently returned from her own social work training at Columbia University. Although Tshabalala received a prestigious job offer at the American Zulu Mission’s Adams College, she “did not accept it, as she wished to serve her own people—the Africans. So she left Durban for her place, ‘Kwa Zamowake’ (Kleinfontein), just three miles from Driefontein.” There she served as the administrator of eight schools while launching four branches of the DOA in Kleinfontein, Driefontein, the neighboring town of Ladysmith, and Durban, nearly two hundred miles southeast. “African women since this movement was started show great improvement. They now have fine vegetable gardens, and flower gardens. They now begin to realize what business means. They sell their eggs, fowls, vegetables in town,” the profile noted, eventually concluding, “[t]hese are the type of women we want who will uplift the African race” (10).

Notably missing from this depiction are Tshabalala’s efforts to uplift other Africans in her term of nearly three years at a girls’ school in the Gold Coast. According to *Ilanga Lase Natal*, she was appointed an AME Church missionary during her travels and lectures “before great crowds” across New England, the mid-Atlantic, and some of the Midwest and South in 1917. She had just completed

her studies at the New Britain State Normal School in Connecticut and was off to the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago to prepare for her new career:

It was her desire to return to South Africa after the completion of her course of study in America, but the religious, educational and industrial needs of the people of West Africa have diverted her mind to that field the profile had explained. "Miss Tshabalala is a well educated woman. Her good home training together with her education which she has acquired from the schools of North America will enable her to render a good service to the Native people of West Africa." ("Miss Tshabalala Becomes")

She set out in October 1919 to serve as mistress in the girls' department of the AME Zion school at Kwitta and served through half of 1922.² In Tshabalala's own contributions to the *Bantu World*, there are no references to this experience, which may reflect her difficult encounters with both other Africans and black American missionaries: an American Zulu Mission colleague later suggested that she had a "very trying time on account of the mismanagement and dishonesty she encountered" (C. H. P.).

Tshabalala's elision of her experiences in West Africa also resonates with the broader context of the *Bantu World* in which contributors looked more often to black America to fashion a 'modern' racial self-image than anywhere on the continent (Masilela). While a September 1939 profile by "An Admirer" briefly alluded to Tshabalala's time in West Africa, the Editress's accompanying commentary emphasized her American accomplishments, quoting from "the overseas press" ("Personal"; "Distinguished"). The report on which he drew ran on the front page of the *New York Amsterdam News* in October 1927 upon Tshabalala's appointment as director of religious education at the Greater Nazarene Congregational Church in Brooklyn, where she also worked with the Young Women's Christian Association ("Native African"; "Brooklyn Y. W. C. A."). Accompanied by a full-body version of her aforementioned elegant headshot, the profile praised her "notable character" and as "a descendent of tribal kings, one of her ancestors having renounced his throne to embrace Christianity" ("Native African"). While Tshabalala's portraits in the South African press suggested her modern cosmopolitanism, her depiction in the black American press had stressed her links to 'tribal' tradition. Indeed, the *Pittsburgh Courier* described her as "a native African of the Zulu tribe, who in a pleasing manner related the tribal customs and exhibited specimens of handiwork wrought in gold by the natives," which she ostensibly brought to a meeting of the Frances E. W. Harper League, a NACW affiliate in Pittsburgh ("Additional Clubs"). The descriptions and attributions mark the coordinates of the transnational and transcultural trajectory of perceptions and reflections in which Tshabalala moved and worked. Fusing her U.S. American experience with South African local and national politics, Tshabalala herself stressed that South African women could unite across ethnic lines by joining her American-style club movement. In a series of educational columns—written in English, and intentionally displaying her education—she suggested how women might "make your race one hundred percent African" by organizing into clubs ("Club Woman"). In her

² For further information see "Izindatshana" 1 June 1917; "Izindatshana" 24 October 1919; "General News" 29 January 1920; "General News" 22 July 1922; Walls 239.

first column, dated April 1936, she demanded that women recognize their homes as inextricably linked to the country and the world beyond:

The typical club woman is a home woman who has found that she cannot isolate her home from her community, government and social [life], and that health conditions also invade its sanctuary, and that in order to protect her brood she must go out from its walls for part of her time and do her best to make government and social order and physical conditions as fine as possible, that they may upbuild and not destroy. ("Club Woman")

At first glance, this seems to be a conservative call for women to build upon their duties as guardians of their homes rather than venture out as guardians of the nation. In the South African context, however, there was nothing traditional about women's domestic seclusion. Precolonial women had been agriculturalists, spending little of their time within the walls of a home. When Tshabalala wrote her articles, women were, among other pursuits, still struggling to farm, working away from their families as domestic servants, itinerant teachers, or health workers, and turning their homes into businesses where they sold home-brewed beer or foodstuffs. Their homes had never been sanctuaries from politics; rather, control over domestic institutions lay at the heart of both precolonial and colonial state power.

The Possibilities and Perils of Uplift in South Africa and in the United States

In this light, Tshabalala's domestic vision seems more constructive than conservative. Women were not defending their domestic sanctuaries, but fighting for domestic sovereignty—for gendered space to build a nation. The clubwoman's "motive power is to keep African ideals in Home, in School, in Government, in Human Relations," she underscored: "Working for health, happiness, righteousness and humanity in these provinces of ours and in all other nations with which we should and shall have international relation in the future." Clubwomen would maintain "communications that are extensive of the home, where we shall be friends with each other, with people of all races and creeds, where good schools, high standard of living and public health, recreation, beauty and the moral atmosphere shall tempt the finest type. We cannot get these things unless we work together: we must put them into daily intercourse and into politics" ("Club Woman"). As Tshabalala emphasized in a subsequent piece, women's discussions of their social and political ideals were as important as their actual practical work: "A baby race we are, therefore of necessity our clubs are getting together meetings where we learn how to get acquainted [...]. Let us get started and continue to crawl until we can walk like other women" ("Arise").

In her January 1938 column, "Other Women," Tshabalala made it clear which women were "walking." Recalling her visit a decade earlier to a conference of international Christian women's organizations at Chautauqua, New York, she emphasized the sense of gendered "unity" she had found there for the first time. Yet she rapidly undermined this sense of unity by stressing the climate of American racial violence that structured their exchanges:

Present were women who had been driven out of INDIA and JAPAN because of the prejudices exhibited to all races of colour in the Christian home whence come mission-

aries such as [those from] AMERICA; where those Indians and Japanese students are barred from entering aristocratic boarding houses and hotels—but remember among those students some come from the best families of the East and NEGROES excluded from [P]ullman cars south of the DIXIELINE. The Orient could not very well understand Christian workers coming from a country where human beings like NEGROES are still lynched and burnt at the stake; where human cuts and joints are kept as souvenirs and could not help wondering as to whether the West has Christianity worth while to be really exported. At these heart rendering [sic] reports from the East, the brave but earnest women of the STATES resolved more emphatically to help and emancipate the NEGRO in their midst, to befriend foreigners in their country and to suppress their natural Nordic pride and also to master their superiority complex. (“Other Women”)

In her breathless evocation of white women’s rising awareness of the damage that American racism threatened for the global progress of Christian civilization, Tshabalala insisted that organized women’s dialogues about injustice could work to combat that injustice. In this vein, she found it thrilling how “CLUB life in AMERICA has really become a tremendous business because it has been proved it is a tremendous force.” Through white clubwomen’s influence, she reported, “cities [are] attacking questions of FEDERAL LEGISLATION,” while black clubwomen “build and consolidate their race as a whole educationally, socially and otherwise.” Black women faced entrenched global imperialism:

Abyssinia the only independent Ethiopian State has been instantly wiped off the map of the world; and no angel nor missionary has told us why in spite of our prayer; but we all know we are ascending the steep hill harder and higher and becoming more prejudiced against European races in spite of our good nature characteristic to the African peoples. (“Other Women”)

South African women felt “stung and bitten because we are at this late [stage] entering the dark doors of segregation and color line opened as well as created by the new legislature in the land of our birth.” The DOA suggested a way out of this bleak context by focusing on intertwined bodily, local, national, and global reform projects:

Are you prepared? How must you equip yourself for the march? Do like other women. Learn as much as you can about it. Avoid all the foods that will stunt your growth physically, mentally, morally, intellectually and spiritually. If you feed your body on stale food you stunt it. If you feed your mind on cheap, trashy conversation and what not you develop low ideals and standards. If you nurse your eye on degraded people or pictures you have the decayed and vile life. (“Other Women”)

It was not only, as Dawne Curry characterizes Tshabalala’s message in “Other Women,” that Tshabalala’s global framework “solidified in her mind the role that women would play in ameliorating these inhumane conditions; she believed that the South African struggle was a human rights issue that only God could resolve through the voice of women” (“An African American” 26). Tshabalala also proposed an *intimate* project of racial self-fashioning, rooted within a global project of racial progress. As it had for African American clubwomen, Tshabalala believed that care of the self enabled racial uplift for her countrywomen. She reiterated this point in her September 1938 column, ““Our Great Women’: Where Are They?” Greatness, she explained, did not only entail public prominence, “being

able to speak in conferences and women's mass meetings, or to write long articles for the press." A great "leader," she argued, "will always remember that taking good care of herself is also fulfilling her duties to the rest of her kind in becoming capable of rendering greater service to her people, a better providing mother and a more intelligent and useful citizen." Yet her call for self-care was inextricably wrapped up with one for complete racial service:

Many a club or society leader choose the ideal of self-seeking, she lives within the walls of [her] own body when the starting point to serve is outside of that individual instead of within. We all know that a true born leader is ever active, her heart is bigger than her own body [...]. This big hearted woman becomes active in the family, in the community, in the province, in the nation, even in humanity at large. Her life is lived in these others: her associates' welfare being part of her own welfare. ("Great Women")

The model clubwoman, then, would build a sovereign home and a stronger self—but she would not bound her personal projects from a broader racial politics.

As in the African American case, South African women's commitment to racial uplift could be perilous. First, the pressures on women who fell short of these ideals—be it by fault or by choice—could be crushing. In one extreme but not atypical column in the late 1930s, Dhlomo urged that a "woman must be chaste, for by her chastity she insures well for the future of her progeny, and hence for the social and moral uplift and advance of her nation. If a woman fails to do this, then she spells ruination for her people, and hence she's a murderer and a traitor." While unsanctioned sexuality was the most egregious affront on respectability, Dhlomo also contended that "a woman who indulges in foul talk or foul language is NOT shouldering her responsibility in life, indeed she is slaying her race, and has no business to be alive." Even sartorial violations—cigarettes and make-up—earned his condemnation: "Smoking and being 'too modern' by some of our too clever-for-words young women is an intolerable eye-sore which must be put down or stamped out ruthlessly. For any woman to do this is but to ruin her race" (X. Y. Z., "Failure"). Second, by conforming to respectable standards, women believed that they might impact official policies. They repeatedly failed to do this as African urbanites faced a raft of new restrictions that would reach their pinnacle in early apartheid legislation. For instance, when Bertha Mkhize, a leading member of the DOA, led a delegation of some three hundred African women to the Native Commissioner's office in Durban to protest pass raids in 1937, she insisted that "we have not come here to say that wrong-doers should not be punished" but that "the majority have not come here to do that which is wrong" ("Deputation"). The Native Commissioner replied that he was pleased that they had disavowed African women doing "unpleasant" things like "living with Indians" and engaging in the "illicit brewing of beer." He emphasized that "the Police, so long as a house is respectable, do not interfere with it at all, but as soon as a house comes under the eyes of the Police as a house of evil repute, they are going to attack it" ("Deputation"). In fact, 'respectable' families found no such protection. Third, as in the African American case, prominent social welfare leaders like Tshabalala, Bertha Mkhize, and Sibusisiwe Makhanya never married or carried out romantic relationships publically. In a society where marriage and motherhood were even more compulsory than in the United States, they cast unusual figures. They may

well have preferred their single status; however, as Darlene Clark Hine has pointed out in the American context, they also made a “sacrifice of sexual expression” in exchange for “respect and recognition.” They were effectively married to their work for “the race” (46).

4. The Possibilities of ‘Making Community’ in Segregationist South Africa

Nonetheless, as in the African American case, women’s organizations enabled their members to ‘make community’ against perilous odds. As if to prove this point, Tshabalala moved to Alexandra township in late 1939 to launch new branches around Johannesburg and Pretoria. The contrast with her previous home in the country village of Kleinfontein was stark. She arrived amidst a population explosion as those displaced from vigorous ‘slum clearance’ projects elsewhere in Johannesburg flocked to the compact freehold township located north of the city center. No more than 15,000 people lived there in 1936, while some 35,000 resided there in 1939, and as many as 45,000 had settled there by the early 1940s (Bonner and Nieftagodien 41, 60). Alexandra’s established residents characterized these newcomers as “the poorest class of native” who brought with them “drunkenness and disorderly conduct” (Bonner and Nieftagodien 60). Tshabalala formally initiated the Alexandra branch at a “solemn and impressive” meeting in May 1940, which featured the recitation of a litany that she arranged for the “sisterhood household of the African race” (“Litany”).

Over the next year, branches formed around the Rand, and in 1941 the group linked to Florence Jabavu’s Zenzele Club in the Cape and to a similar women’s club movement in Basutoland (“Daughters” 31 Jan. 1942). Its members represented a wide range of ideological, regional, and ethnic backgrounds. Thus, in the early 1940s, for example, its Alexandra-based secretary was “live wire” Josie Palmer, a mixed-race activist and the first black woman to join the Communist Party of South Africa (“Alexandra News”). As the DOA continued local educational, small business, and public health activities, they also began to issue policy recommendations. Some of these were unrealistically ambitious, such as the DOA’s resolution for compulsory schooling for children between six and eighteen, and the demand for a rise in teachers’ salaries put forward at a conference at Crown Mines in early 1942 which was attended by one hundred delegates from the Transvaal, Natal, and Cape provinces, as well as prominent African nationalist men including ANC President Alfred Xuma (“Daughters” 7 Feb. 1942). Tshabalala was able to mobilize her organization to protest a 1943 increase in bus fares in a dramatic public campaign that featured a march of 10,000 women, children, and men, including young Nelson Mandela (Bonner and Nieftagodien 71). That boycott prompted an official inquiry into crises in black transportation and, by extension, crises in black workers’ capacity to sustain themselves and their families. Officials concluded that Africans “cannot afford to pay anything” for transportation to work, “except by reducing still further their hunger diet” (Bonner and Nieftagodien 73). Draconian apartheid policies would soon negate the gains of this campaign: women would face new restrictions on their urban mobility through a

national extension of pass laws to African women under the Native Laws Amendment Act of 1952. But this campaign had given clubwomen an opportunity to put their ideals “into daily intercourse and into politics” thereby building connections with advocates of diverse political projects (Tshabalala, “Club Woman”).

The comrades who memorialized Tshabalala’s participation in the boycott, however, did not recognize the global rooting of her organization of committed local activists. “There was Lillian Tshabalala who lived in a filthy yard, in a room she scrubbed clean with the same ferocity as she attacked anyone daring to cross a picket-line,” recalls her white communist ally Hyman Basner. And more:

Small with a plain, squashed little face that could at any moment burst into laughter or loud command, she seemed to have sprung from nowhere, born young-middle-aged, minimally educated and firmly topped by a tight-fitting black beret. It was she who created and led the Alexandra Women’s Brigade during the 1943 boycott. The Brigade consisted of formidable church women and beer brewers who made themselves responsible for the township’s solidarity and good order especially among faint-hearted or riotously disposed men. (*Am I an African* 153)

Socialist Baruch Hirson similarly recalled that Tshabalala was “an activist, probably with little schooling, and was not overly interested in theoretical issues. We were content to carry her photograph in *Socialist Action* and use her prestige to advance our work. We used her extensive contacts to visit other black townships” (*Revolutions* 169). Although Tshabalala continued to live and organize in Alexandra until her death in the early 1960s, scholars tend to see her as a single-issue activist, if they have seen her at all (Curry, “An African American” 26). The preceding reconstruction of Tshabalala’s ideas and activism challenges scholars to recognize women as participants in the intertwined global and local project of racial self-fashioning that was early African nationalism in South Africa.

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