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A Model For Empowerment: Lugenia Burns Hope's Community Vision Through the Neighborhood Union

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**A MODEL FOR EMPOWERMENT: LUGENIA BURNS HOPE'S COMMUNITY
VISION THROUGH THE NEIGHBORHOOD UNION**

by

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INTRODUCTION

I first encountered Lugenia Burns Hope in historian Tera Hunter's book, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War*. Hope stood out to me because she previously worked at the settlement house, Hull House, in Chicago. Progressive Era reformer Jane Addams founded Hull House in 1889 to offer basic and extracurricular services to the city's poor and working class immigrants, struggling to adjust as rapid industrialization and urbanization created strenuous work environments and decrepit living conditions. I was struck by Addams' vision for a democratic community in which the poor were provided the resources to live more fully and contribute as citizens. Inspired by a community that encouraged immigrants to maintain their cultures and forged connections between different social classes, I initially wanted to write my thesis on Jane Addams and the inclusive community she envisioned through Hull House.

After discovering Lugenia Hope in Tera Hunter's book, I looked into Hope's life and work. After leaving Hull House, Hope married educator John Hope, moved to Atlanta, and eventually started a settlement house organization called the Neighborhood Union. The Neighborhood Union was founded to build community, strengthen neighborhood infrastructure, and provide resources for the black poor and working classes in Atlanta. Whereas Hull House was run mainly by white, middle class women and distributed resources from a central location, Hope envisioned a structure that empowered members of the black poor and working classes to become leaders and supportive community members. Addams is considered one of the founders of the social

work profession and many non-profits today have gained practical guidance and inspiration from Hull House.¹ Some of the services Hope offered through the Neighborhood Union were partly inspired by Hull House, but Hope created an organization focused on knowing the community first before providing community members with resources they requested.

While Jane Addams' model for resource distribution maintained a framework of charitable giving, Hope created an organization driven by community solidarity. Hope stood out to me because from the early years of her organization, she viewed the black poor and working classes as capable community leaders, and created practical ways to give them leadership opportunities. The Neighborhood Union also capitalized on the talents of its poor and working class clients, which seemed uncommon to welfare organizations of the time that typically maintained a deficit-based approach. I wanted to know more about what enabled Hope to have a clearer, more egalitarian approach to engaging with the black poor and working classes.

The Neighborhood Union established settlement houses in various black neighborhoods throughout Atlanta, where community members could socialize and make use of the organization's various services and classes. In addition, the organization encouraged the black poor and working classes to help shape the projects of each community house, including by electing community members they felt were best fit to lead projects in their neighborhood house. The Neighborhood Union was proactive in ensuring members of the poor and working classes were kept informed about

¹Human Spirit Initiative. "Jane Addams: The Founding of Hull House." *Mobilizing the Human Spirit: The*

improvement plans for their neighborhoods, as community members canvassed each house asking for input and sharing information on the organization's latest projects.

The experiences of black clubwomen are largely overshadowed by the attention given to white Progressive Era reformers, who are often framed as the founders of the modern day social work profession. In her 1991 article "Black and White Visions of Welfare: Women's Welfare Activism, 1890-1945," historian Linda Gordon argues that black women's approaches to social work were generally more progressive and egalitarian in their treatment of the poor and working classes than white women's approaches. Gordon examines the biographies and community work of various black and white reformers. Gordon's approach is driven by the philosophy that the "personal is political;" that activists' political views and activities reflect macroeconomic and social conditions and the personal circumstances of their lives.² This philosophy is commonly applied to understand the work of Progressive Era reformers. Adherents to this philosophy contend one must more deeply examine the intentions and motivations of reformers, and the factors that shaped the way they viewed the world. What made some reformers so unrelenting? Why did they enact their activism in the particular ways they did?

Despite the remarkable community-driven and sustainable organization Hope created, the Neighborhood Union and Lugenia Burns Hope herself are largely absent from American historical memory. Historian Jacqueline Anne Rouse, Professor of African American History and American Studies at Georgia State University, wrote the

² Gordon, *Black and White Visions of Welfare: Women's Welfare Activism, 1890-1945*, (*The Journal of American History* 78, no. 2, 1991), 4.

only biography on Hope in 1989, *Lugenia Burns Hope: Black Southern Reformer*. Since Rouse's biography, only a few articles and encyclopedic entries have given glimpses into Hope's amazing life and organization. Her story and achievements stretch far beyond the scope of this thesis. For example, in addition to her work with the Neighborhood Union, Hope confronted racism in the southern branch of the YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association), and worked tirelessly to establish a black-led branch of the organization.³ The classes Hope started and taught with Morehouse professors developed into the Atlanta School of Social Work.⁴ Along with her formative work in Atlanta, Hope also maintained a national presence. She was a suffragist, and formed an alliance with Southern black Methodist women across the South to demand that the federal government outlaw lynching. In 1932, she was elected Vice President of Atlanta's branch of the NAACP, and spearheaded citizenship classes at Atlanta University that inspired other branches to do the same. Hope was a vibrant member of a scholar and activist network that included Dr. Adam Daniel Williams, the grandfather of Martin Luther King Jr., and W.E.B. Du Bois who inspired future generations of reformers. In 1924, the Neighborhood Union established the first African American high school in the country, and provided the country's first public housing for African Americans. In addition to all of these achievements, Hope kept the door of her home open to Morehouse students who grew to cherish her presence and guidance. She raised her children in a supportive home, in which they were educated on the reality of growing up as black children in America, and she created a household that encouraged personal exploration, camaraderie and good

³ Cardoza-Oquendo, "Lugenia Burns Hope (1871-1947)." *Black Women in America: 2nd Edition*, (Georgia Humanities Council and The University of Georgia Press, 2016.)

⁴ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope: Black Southern Reformer*, (The University of Georgia Press, 1989) 48.

humor.⁵ Hope's radical, unrelenting work, and genuinely inspiring character have the power to captivate a wider public audience. American historical memory should reflect the enduring inspiration offered by her life and work.

Given the little scholarly work on Hope, there seems to be an underdeveloped understanding of how Hope's personal values informed her vision for the Neighborhood Union. Scholars, particularly Rouse and Hunter, have made the claim that Hope was limited by her "Victorian" value system, and that she participated in respectability politics due to her specific views on fulfilling and detrimental behavior.⁶ In particular, Hunter refers to the work of the Neighborhood Union against the presence of public dance halls in poor neighborhoods. She interprets these actions as a sign that Hope, and other likeminded middle class black women, sought to impose judgment on a style of dancing enjoyed by some members of the black poor and working classes.⁷ These scholars situate Hope among black elites and make the overarching claim that black elite reformers created class division through their engagement in the politics of respectability. This analysis assumes that the values of the black poor and working classes were consistently in opposition to those of the middle and upper black classes. Such an analysis of Hope's work, and I suspect of other middle and upper class black reformers, is reductive. Making claims about Hope's intentions and work requires a deeper examination of her own background and worldview.

Some scholars claim that black clubwomen, among other black reformers, participated in respectability politics through their attitudes and work. In *Righteous*

⁵ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 33.

⁶ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 67, Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 173.

⁷ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 137.

Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920, historian Evelyn Higginbotham describes the politics of respectability as a “counter discourse to the politics of prejudice” by calling black people of all classes to improve, according to black elite’s standards. Higginbotham argues that respectability was expressed in the community work and writing of some black clubwomen. The legacy of slavery and the stereotypes placed on African Americans created particular values tied to respectability for African Americans. Higginbotham argues that some black clubwomen made disparaging characterizations of black poor and working class individuals who did not assimilate to particular middle and upper-class, black Christian values—including piety, thrift, sexual purity, and restraint.⁸ She holds that such values, maintained by some black and white Christian reformers, encouraged the black poor and working classes to assimilate to the values of white America. However, engagement in respectability politics also reflected resistance to harmful stereotypes, many of which were a legacy of slavery and persisted within racial ideology. Black elite women preemptively sought to combat degrading stereotypes often held by white women by attempting to prove their moral and social sophistication.⁹

The concept of respectability politics is fluid, changes with historical context, and should be used with caution. While respectability politics is often attributed to black upper class elites, the respectability discourse did not begin between white and black Americans. Historian Angela Hornsby-Gutting notes that respectability was first used among whites, and grounded in class-situated notions of morality. To evaluate worthy

⁸ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 193.

⁹ *Ibid.*

and dignified workers from the unsavory working class in the U.S. and Britain, special attention was paid to “hard work, thrift, piety, and sexual restraint.” In the 19th century, the discourse was broadened with the development of the middle class. Status was communicated through “appearance, manners, and institutional affiliation.”¹⁰ Since the Progressive Era, the scholarly understanding of respectability politics has continued to evolve, according to Victoria Wolcott, a historian who specializes in class tensions in Detroit during the interwar period. By the 1930s, the notion of respectability had shifted to one emphasizing black manhood and the ability to protect one’s home and family, rather than Victorian values emphasizing ideas of womanhood purportedly held by many black and white reformers during the Progressive Era.¹¹ Given changing standards in varying socio-cultural contexts, respectability politics too must be viewed as a changing concept that merits close examination before scholars can broadly apply the term. Black middle and upper class reformers, Lugenia Burns Hope included, are often categorized as participating in respectability politics in their efforts to uplift the poor and working classes. With this categorization, scholars characterize some black club clubwomen’s reform work as being in opposition to the needs of the black poor and working classes.

Values maintained by members of the black poor, working, and middle classes requires closer examination. Certain values interpreted as an expression of respectability politics were in some cases common across classes. Respectability politics should not be viewed merely as a device to control and manipulate the poor and working classes, but also, as historian Stephanie Shaw argues, as a tool used by the poor and working classes

¹⁰ Hornsby-Gutting, "Politics of Respectability," *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Vol. 13. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 239.

¹¹ Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

to gain social mobility.¹² Their values should not simply be depicted as contradictory to those of the black middle class. In her article on respectability politics, Hornsby-Gutting indicates that “at times, working class and middle class notions of respectability converged. Both stressed domesticity as central to race uplift, agreed that black women be protected from sexual assault, and worked to cultivate race pride.”¹³ Notions of respectability often provided a way to maintain a set of values that transcended class barriers. Dr. Sharon Harley indicates that “even among the poorest blacks, whose own standards of respectability were largely determined by the church and the community in which they lived, their domestic ideology was not always diametrically opposed to middle-class norms of behavior.”¹⁴ In studying Hope and the Neighborhood Union, this thesis will examine departing perspectives among the black middle class and the poor and working classes, and will also explore instances when certain values and ideologies spanned classes.

The term “respectability politics” invokes a number of meanings. It can reference a more degrading discourse that highlights the pressure placed on African Americans to appeal to whites for their rights. This meaning should not be conflated with the values maintained by some poor, working and middle class African Americans. Attempting to appear respectable in the face of apathetic or insidious white citizens is different from a personal set of values derived from individual experience, and, in many cases, religious convictions. Hope and some members of the black middle, working and poor classes

¹² Hornsby-Gutting, "Politics of Respectability," 241.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Hornsby-Gutting, "Politics of Respectability." 241, Sharon Harley “For the Good of Family and Race: Gender, Work, and Domestic Roles in the Black Community, 1880-1930,” *Signs*, Vol. 15, No. 2, (University of Chicago Pressfire, 1900), 336-349.

shared particular values that were their own, reflecting their authentic beliefs. In examining ways in which the Neighborhood Union both supported members of the poor and working classes, and at times created class tension through its approach, this thesis will examine to what extent the religious perspectives of Hope and members of black poor and working classes departed and resonated with each other.

By examining Hope's background, worldview, and organizational work with the Neighborhood Union, this thesis offers insights into the experiences and beliefs that shaped Hope's perspective. While other scholars have portrayed Hope as a reformer in some ways bound by her class and religious position, Hope's experiences and sources on her personal beliefs do not suggest that she maintained elitist judgments of the black poor and working classes. Nor do these sources suggest Hope sought to make the black poor and working classes more respectable, and appealing citizens to white America. Hope's background and worldview as a middle class, black Baptist woman shaped the democratic organization she established. Hope's worldview informed her conceptions of fulfilling endeavors that all African Americans should be free to experience.

Contrary to previous characterizations, a closer examination of Hope's background and personal notes provides a counterargument. Her perspective was deeply shaped by her religious beliefs and also grounded in the struggles she personally experienced, along with those she witnessed among the black poor and working classes. With respect to black women, Hope felt that all women had the capability to act as leaders and agents of change within their communities. She tirelessly created programs that secured women's right to protect and nurture their families amidst the terror of Jim Crow. Hope's personal experiences and values functioned in a number of ways, and in

many cases overlapped with values maintained by many poor and working class African Americans. In examining the collaborative leadership structure of the Neighborhood Union, characterizations of the organization shift from a narrative of class division created by black elite uplift strategies to an organization created through communal struggle, and community solidarity across classes.

The chapters of this thesis focus on aspects of Hope's perspective, and how her class and religious position informed the Neighborhood Union's treatment of the black poor and working classes. While Rouse's biography of Hope offers a detailed overview of her life, Rouse does not specifically address the various personal and sociopolitical factors that shaped Hope's views toward the poor and working classes. By categorizing Hope within a larger group of black elites, scholars have not offered a deeper explanation of Hope's unique circumstances growing up. Chapter One provides context on Hope's upbringing, with special attention to the motivations that shaped her engagement in social work, and views of the black poor and working classes. This chapter focuses particularly on the way in which Hope's black, Christian worldview was influenced by the different political, social, and religious contexts in which she lived. Chapter One also investigates Hope's exposure to members of the white and black poor and working classes, exploring how Hope's unique identity and circumstances made her more and less prone to possessing misconceptions of the black poor and working classes. This approach operates off of philosopher Charles Taylor's theory of the dialogical self, which posits that individuals' identities are shaped by both internal motivations and close personal

influences like family, and the broader societal context in which they live.¹⁵ Hope's identity was similarly influenced by internal and external forces. Understanding her background within its sociopolitical context, Hope's upbringing also pushes us to rethink common understandings of the Progressive Era and the Social Gospel movement through the lens of African American activism.

Chapter Two examines how Hope's worldview inspired her vision for the Neighborhood Union, its structure, and the work it accomplished. Chapter Two elucidates Hope's vision for a fulfilling and stimulating community for the black poor and working classes. This worldview was dependent on beliefs in Christianity, creating a more effective democracy, and affirming the capabilities and rights of the black poor and working classes. Her vision for the Neighborhood Union indicates that she sought a community that diminished class divisions. Her community vision necessitates that her work be more accurately named to reflect its character. The Neighborhood Union was not a symbol of the beneficence of the black elite toward the poorer classes. Instead, the Neighborhood Union may be more accurately described as an organization formed through collective struggle. In developing this analysis, this chapter provides context on Hope's perspective and the strengths of the Neighborhood Union in order to address critiques of the organization in Chapter Three.

Finally, Chapter Three, addresses claims made by previous scholars on the limitations of the Neighborhood Union. I challenge assumptions that Hope's class position and values were rigid parts of her identity that created class tension within some

¹⁵ Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

work of the Neighborhood Union. The previous chapter indicates that her beliefs were tested and developed through the community work of the Neighborhood Union, and guided by the leadership of members of the black poor and working classes. I assert that, amidst some of the organization's limitations, Hope's distaste for dance halls and brothels was informed as much by safety concerns among members of the black poor and working classes as it was by her own moral beliefs. Examining the perspectives of both Hope and members of the poor and working classes challenges the manner in which previous scholars have invoked the concept of respectability politics. Analyzing Hope's actions as an expression of respectability politics is reductive, and diminishes the integrity with which Hope maintained her values. Hope's religious values, which some have framed as producing class tension, actually challenged Hope to diminish class barriers, and served to connect members of various classes. Chapter Three seeks to more closely examine these criticisms against archival sources on the Neighborhood Union, and in doing so problematize the idea that the black middle class most often sought to impose their values onto members of the black poor and working classes. Examining this criticism from multiple perspectives, this chapter reframes the struggles of the Neighborhood Union from generating class tension, to grappling with the struggles African Americans faced as they were denied safety and equal citizenship.

CHAPTER ONE

ANSWERING A CALL: LUGENIA BURNS HOPE'S MOTIVATIONS TO PURSUE SOCIAL WORK

Hope's formative years reveal a life influenced by many different environments and perspectives. Raised in a family of mixed African American and European American ancestry, she observed and experienced white supremacy in both rural and urban environments, as a member of the majority and minority black population, and in cities influenced by both northern and southern perspectives. She also experienced race and class dynamics as a member of the middle then working class who faced personal economic insecurity.¹⁶ Hope witnessed the progress of Reconstruction followed by the retrenchment of such advancements, was exposed to the disparate perspectives of black and white reformers, about notions of race, morality and the most effective institutions to advance the interests of the poor.¹⁷ Within these various contexts, however, Hope's identity as a black, Christian woman consistently influenced her perspective on social work. She worked in various social work contexts that inspired her with their Christian vision of community, but was also exposed to the hypocrisy of white Christian progressivism. Examining Hope's early background, it is likely that her worldview was shaped by her religious beliefs and personal experiences. Hope's narrative complicates broader assumptions about the black elite. Her class positions growing up shifted, giving her knowledge from different class perspectives. In addition, her religious beliefs were not conducive to class division. Instead, they helped motivate her decision to pursue

¹⁶ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 11.

¹⁷ Chirhart, "Lugenia Burns Hope: Fulfilling a Sacred Purpose," *Georgia Women: Their Lives and Times*. Vol. 2. (Athens: University of Georgia, 2009), 22.

social work. Her worldview was grounded in a rejection of class division and encouraged action alongside members of the poor and working classes. Her beliefs were distinct from what she viewed as the hypocrisy of white Christians, and centered on the authenticity of black Christianity. Hope's black, Christian worldview motivated her to seek community organizing, eventually informing her work with the Neighborhood Union. Examined within its sociopolitical context, Hope's activism, and that of other black reformers offers valuable criticisms to common interpretations of the Progressive Era and the Social Gospel movement.

Hope's upbringing did not encourage her to attach her identity to class position. Instead, her upbringing gave her a better understanding that she could not place security in class status. Hope was born into as a stable, middle class family in St. Louis. However, after the death of her father, Mr. Ferdinand Burns, their financial status changed as they were precariously placed in the working class. Mrs. Louisa Burns moved her family to Chicago in search of more economic opportunities and to provide her daughter with a better education. Hope, the youngest child of seven, was about fifteen years old when the family moved to Chicago.¹⁸ Hope's siblings married and others found jobs in teaching, manual labor, bookbinding, bank work, and millinery. Their work paid for Hope's schooling and allowed Mrs. Burns remain at home and care for her daughter.¹⁹ In the 1890s, Hope attended high school and likely took classes through the King's Daughters Association, a white women's organization.²⁰ This would have been her first encounter

¹⁸Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 15.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Walker, "The Early History of the King's Daughters Home for Women, Springfield, Illinois", *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol. 23, No. 2, (University of Illinois Press, 1930), 316-324.

with the Christian social work organization where she would later work as its first black secretary. The social work of King's Daughters enabled Hope to seek elite educational opportunities. After high school, Hope studied at the Chicago School of Design, the Chicago Business College, and the Chicago Art Institute.²¹ She ultimately withdrew from school to support her family when her siblings lost their jobs.

From an early age, Hope became aware of the class stratification within the Chicago's African American community, as well as the strength of the African American social and political activism. Chicago's black community was highly stratified between the poor, working, middle, and upper classes. Chicago's black upper class was made up of individuals who were highly educated, and from financially successful families, often perceived socially as "dignified."²² Some of these upper class members labeled the poorest class of black Chicagoans as "unchurched and undisciplined."²³ Historians have placed Hope within the group of intellectual, middle and upper class black elites engaged in uplift efforts in order to explain her motivations to engage in social work.²⁴ This simplistic classification fails to recognize that her economic status as a young woman was more closely aligned with the working black classes. Her own economic insecurity may have allowed her to more closely identify with the needs of the black poor and working classes in her later work.

As evidenced in her actions and later writing, Hope's faith also played a significant role in her life, and influenced her attraction to social work. Hope was raised

²¹ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 15, 16, 17, 15.

²² Ibid, 16, 17, 15.

²³ Ibid, 15.

²⁴ Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom*, 173, Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 45.

attending Chicago's Grace Presbyterian Church. Throughout her upbringing, Hope was exposed to black church environments that encouraged social and political activism.²⁵ The Presbyterian Committee of Missions for Freedmen, established in 1870, started seminaries, elementary and industrial schools. In general, Protestants felt education and a cultivated intellect were tools to connect to God by understanding the Bible more deeply.²⁶ As historian Evelyn Higginbotham reveals in her groundbreaking book, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880—1920*, many black churchwomen gained inspiration for their reform work from their churches and religious convictions. Missionary societies bonded Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist women to work together to address racial inequality through reform work in their communities. Churches served as centers of fundraising that allowed churchgoing activists to harness the power of their communities to support their reform efforts. The work of many black Protestants reflects the intersecting nature of their religious practices and their social and political activism. Hope's later actions were informed by black reform efforts within the churches she attended.²⁷ Few original source documents shed light on Hope's religious outlook during her early years. However, Hope's later work and writings do illuminate her views on Christian morality. The work of Hope and other black clubwomen implicitly critiques dominant, mainstream interpretations of Progressive Era work and the Social Gospel movement.

In her book, *Righteous Discontent*, Higginbotham details the work of black

²⁵ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 14.

²⁶ Maffly-Kipp, Laurie. "The Church in the Southern Black Community" *Documenting the American South*, (The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2004), 1.

²⁷ Adair, Hawkins, and Marsh. *Periscope: Black Presbyterianism Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow, 1807-1982*, (New York: PCUSA Office of Black Mission Development Program Agency, 1982), 20.

women within the Baptist church. The National Baptist Convention was a powerful symbol of the black community nationally; in 1916, the Convention was the third largest church association in the U.S., following both Roman Catholic and Methodist Episcopal black and white churches. Black Baptist women confronted racism in many ways; their movement within the church demonstrated on a national level the strong familial and communal ties of the black Baptist community, and they developed and maintained the church as a space of debate and critical resistance for the black community.²⁸ Through their involvement, black Baptist women created a space in which the black poor and working classes could assemble, express themselves, and build community.

As expressed in their reform efforts, many middle and upper class black Christian women used the church as an instrument of mobilization and community organizing. Many black, female-run clubs emerged from black church networks. Missionary societies, church clubs and organizations connected black Christian women looking to enact self-help efforts within their communities.²⁹ Efforts within the black women's club movement within the Baptist church were most often led by middle and upper class black women, whom Higginbotham names the "Female Talented Tenth." The Female Talented Tenth were college-educated women who formed a "race-conscious vanguard imbued with the class values of Victorian America."³⁰ Such women led community efforts through the church and believed that religion and education would enable African Americans to cope with and confront racism. With an emphasis on expanding opportunities for black higher education for men and women, the Female Talented Tenth

²⁸ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 7.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 17.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 19.

often saw expanding educational opportunity as part of their calling as black women and as Christians. Hope would later gain recognition as a member of the Female Talented Tenth, and her church environment similarly influenced her community organizing. Hope's later class status as First Lady of Morehouse College, however, in no way reflected her financial status growing up.

From 1893-1897, Hope served as the breadwinner for her family. She was twenty-two years old. After working as a bookkeeper and then a dressmaker, Hope became the first black secretary of King's Daughters. During this time, she gained self-sufficiency and a personal understanding of the plight of the poor and working classes.³¹ Throughout her early experiences with social work, Hope was inspired by the Christian, female-directed organizations with which she worked, and their dedication to diminishing class divisions. These approaches resonated with her religious beliefs and personal experiences. As the first black secretary of King's Daughters, she experienced the organization both as a recipient of its social work during her academic career, and as an employee. King's Daughters was first started in the U.S. by a small group of middle and upper class white Christian women in New York to answer to the needs of poor and working class women and girls.³² While the extent of the organization's inclusion of African American women is unclear, its early history indicates that the organization's "membership should include women and girls of all classes and conditions."³³ It is likely that the group's membership was based predominantly on church membership rather than race. Due to the segregation of most churches, however, and King's Daughter's white

³¹ Ibid, 15.

³² Walker, *The Early History of the King's Daughters Home for Women, Springfield, Illinois*, 316 – 324.

³³ Ibid, 317.

leadership, it is likely that the organization predominantly aided the white poor. The King's Daughters house was spearheaded in Springfield, Illinois in 1893 as a branch of the International Order of the King's Daughters. Its' established aim was to eradicate class barriers between wealthy and poor women by providing various services, ranging from practical occupational skills to educational classes. Hope worked at the organization early in its history, as it cared for the poor and sick, buried those who could not afford proper burials, and offered various services to working and teenaged girls.³⁴

Hope described the organization's efforts to accommodate the poor and working class teenaged girls who frequented King's Daughters. Looking back on her years with King's Daughters, Hope remembered,

We decided to keep the club open until 8 o'clock to give the girls some place to stay while waiting for their trains to go home. So [we were giving] them the opportunity to study. We supplied an instructor for any subject that was desired by at least five girls...I directed this work from 5-7 o'clock three nights per week³⁵

.King's Daughter's initially exposed Hope to settlement house work. After working for the Silver Cross Club, which provided free meals, Hope became manager of the meal service, as well as the organization's secretary.¹⁶ Mrs. Warne, the director of the Silver Cross Club eventually introduced Hope to Hull House founder Jane Addams. Hull House further familiarized Hope with the settlement house model, providing some practical inspiration for her own future settlement house organization, the Neighborhood Union.

The origins of settlement houses in the U.S. are often attributed to Addams and her friend Ellen Starr, the founders of Hull House. Addams was actually inspired by Toynbee Hall, a settlement house founded in 1844 in England's East End to foster a sense

³⁴ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 16.

³⁵ Neighborhood Union Collection, Speech, "Biographical Statement" n.d., box 13, Folder 46, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

of community between rich and poor English citizens.³⁶ Toynbee Hall and other settlement houses exceeded the services of traditional charitable organizations. These community houses provided poor and working class citizens and immigrant tenants with services ranging from low-cost or free housing to healthcare, education, and extracurricular activities. Addams started Hull House in Chicago to provide resources to the city's poor immigrant population, many of whom immigrated to the U.S. poor. The U.S. was experiencing a national economic downturn with exacerbated wealth inequality stemming from rapid industrialization and urbanization. Hull House provided a myriad of services to meet immigrants' basic needs including, classes on citizenship and democracy, English, and art, a library, cultural affinity groups, and basic healthcare.³⁷ Addams' philosophy stressed the mixing of class backgrounds and cultures to help immigrants acclimate to life in the U.S. One of Addams' overarching goals was that by providing such resources, immigrants would be able to more easily contribute their unique perspectives and their votes as citizens in a democracy.³⁸

In Chicago, Hope worked in white dominated social work settings. Her light-skinned appearance perhaps enabled her to work in such settings by affording her more legitimacy and value in the eyes of white reformers. African Americans of mixed ancestry more easily gained certain political and social achievements than African Americans with darker complexions.³⁹ Historian Kevin Gaines, author of *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture during the Twentieth Century*, indicates that there were

³⁶ "For a Future Without Poverty." *Our History: Toynbee Hall*, (Toynbee Hall, 2016).

³⁷ Wade, Carson, Mina, Allen Davis, and Judith Ann Trolander. "Settlement Houses," *The Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago*, (Chicago Historical Society, 2004).

³⁸ Addams, *Twenty Years At Hull House: Illustrated and Unabridged*. (United States: Feather Trail Press, 2009), 453.

³⁹ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture during the Twentieth Century*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 118.

tensions among a “small, exclusive, racially mixed aristocracy,” whose appearance rendered them certain “social and cultural advantages” and the black poor and working classes, who were often of darker complexion.⁴⁰ White people also often framed black leaders as “mulatto,” even when this characterization was completely inaccurate. These characterizations were shaped by the implicit assumption that whiteness was a ‘civilizing’ or bettering quality.⁴¹ Hope was likely aware that the Christian beliefs of some white Christian social workers did not protect their organizations from racism. Her exposure to the subordinate treatment of the black poor by many white Christian reformers perhaps contributed to her interest in black reform efforts, which answered to the Social Gospel movement’s Christian Democratic ethos more accurately in their treatment of the black poor and working classes.

Throughout her career in social work, Hope viewed her early experiences with Christian social work organizations as deeply formative. Hope described her club work in Chicago as not only providing practical inspiration for her later work—particularly in giving her tactics to fight crime and poverty—but for exposing her to the greatest feelings of fulfillment she had experienced. Remembering her Chicago years, Hope explained,

I have always felt it the privilege of my life to have had that rich experience—their [club patron’s] joys and sorrows poured into my ears and heart. They came for advice—as young as I was. We thought these problems through and they were helped⁴²

Hope felt a sense of satisfaction and utility in collaborating with other young women her age. She does not express this satisfaction in terms of wanting to civilize or administer patronizing aid, but rather as the sense of purpose and value experienced in sharing in

⁴⁰ Ibid, 118.

⁴¹ Ibid, 119.

⁴²Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 17.

another person's burdens by listening to them and crafting solutions. Her own precarious economic status, personal connections with members from the poor and working classes, and faith shaped her focus on community organizing later in life. Hope's son, Edward, reflected on the values she encouraged in her children and in Morehouse students; "Dignity and self respect were fundamental aspects of her character. Money, while not to be ignored, was less important than a life of service to one's own downtrodden people...the college students were taught that morality, dignity, and self-respect were more valuable than money or any earthly thing."⁴³ Hope's engagement in social work was not merely motivated out of economic necessity, but by her fundamental belief that supporting others was ultimately of greater value than money.

Hope's design for the Neighborhood Union was influenced by the ethos and services of the organizations with which she worked. She later adapted the tactics of the Chicago social work organizations to more closely fit the needs of the black poor and working classes. First, her exposure to female led, Social Gospel era reform-efforts shaped her own organization and tied her understanding of female reform efforts to her calling as a Christian. King's Daughters, the Silver Cross Club, and Hull House all expressed some element of Christian inspiration that shaped their mission and actions. King's Daughters felt its mission was to cultivate spiritual growth in cities across the U.S. The organization employed a Christian staff, and asserted the interconnected nature of Christianity and maternalism. Women were framed as moral leaders of their households and communities.⁴⁴ In practice, this meant that the organization focused on reforms that would ease the plights of overburdened women and mothers with education and health

⁴³ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 46.

⁴⁴ Chirhart, *Georgia Women*, 16.

care services. King's Daughters was committed to offering young women and girls engagement in the clubs many "circles," devoted to activities like Bible classes, temperance causes, and befriending strangers and the poor.⁴⁵ The organization divided women, both within the organization and those whom the organization aided, to address particular areas of need within the community—a structure later used by the Neighborhood Union. Resources provided by the organization varied based on the needs of different communities. Similarly, the Neighborhood Union developed a model of support tailored to the needs of each neighborhood.

King's Daughters also maintained practices that indicate the belief that women's character and behaviors were representative of their faithfulness as Christians. The organization had a group for students at a local school, "The Tongue Guard Circle" whose goal was to encourage young girls to speak intentionally and avoid unkind words. Other groups focused on action-based aid. The "According to Our Power" circle fundraised for a pastor at Grace Lutheran Church, and later helped run the affairs of the organization. As a result, Hope's involvement in the organization exposed her to an environment in which women contributed to their communities and churches, and aspired to uphold certain behavioral virtues considered Christian. Involvement with youth and church networks, as King's Daughters practiced, was also used by the Neighborhood Union.⁴⁶ The Silver Cross Club also reflected a belief in the expertise of women's work, starting in the home and extending out to the larger community. The Silver Cross Club was also female run, and sought well-educated Christian women to run its reform efforts, in this case the organization's meal service. As previously discussed, Hull House, while

⁴⁵ Walker, "The Early History of the King's Daughters Home for Women, Springfield, Illinois," 318.

⁴⁶ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 78.

less explicitly Christian, maintained roots in Addams' desire to create an institution that answered to Christ's mandates. The organization attracted many well-educated, Christian women to exercise their educations and aspirations to help others as social workers. During her time with the organizations, Hope more solidly connected her Christian calling to a reform environment that maintained a level of female independence, and accumulated practical guidance she used to structure the Neighborhood Union.

The King's Daughters, the Silver Cross Club, and Hull House, while having different aims, all possessed a Christian identity in some form, and advocated the elimination of class barriers as a vital goal of their work. The Social Gospel movement influenced Hope in its attention to Christianity as a force that should promote democracy and bring Christian principles to bear through social work. This is indicated in the literature she read during the early years of the Neighborhood Union, including Jane Addams' autobiography *Twenty Years at Hull House*, and Walter Rauschenbusch's *Christianizing the Social Order*. Her personal notes indicate she read such literature with the board of the Neighborhood Union.⁴⁷ Both of these books gained popularity among Christian reformers during the Social Gospel Movement. Despite the inspiration Hope gained from Hull House, its democratic vision was limited. The settlement house generally excluded African Americans, both in providing opportunities to administer aid and in recruiting African American social workers. During her time at Hull House, Hope was exposed to the discrepancy between the equitable social work philosophies of some reformers, and the little attention they gave to the needs of African Americans and the apparent hypocritical uses of Christian morality.

⁴⁷ Neighborhood Union Collection, Meeting Notes "Lesson III, Community Organization," 1919, box 1, folder 18, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

Hope's settlement house work was also influenced by the Social Gospel movement, which was most influential in the U.S. from 1870-1920.⁴⁸ The movement imbued Progressive Era efforts to address the conditions of the poor and working classes with religious significance. Social Gospel thought came partly out of the shift in the majority of Protestant churches from a Calvinist belief system, which stressed seeking the soul's salvation to enter the Kingdom of God in heaven, to the view that the Kingdom of God could be realized on earth by alleviating the suffering of humankind. As Williams and Maclean note, the Social Gospel movement

came against a backdrop of...the cumulative influences of the slavery controversy, Civil War, rebirth of the Christian socialist movement in England, the labor movement in the United States, and a renewed adherence to the ethical and social teachings of Jesus. It was the result of the convergence of multiple forces...⁴⁹

During this "convergence of multiple forces" black and white women, still unable to vote and excluded from the legislative process in varying degrees of severity, enacted their participation in grassroots political activism, with increased involvement in the clubwomen's movement. Fighting the complacency of many American elites toward the harmful living conditions of the middle and poorer classes, many black and white reformers, while maintaining different reform goals, felt that their work answered to the teachings of Christianity. Jane Addams expressed this sentiment in her belief that Christianity should not be "a thing to be proclaimed and instituted apart from the social

⁴⁸ Williams, Maclean. "In Search Of The Kingdom: The Social Gospel, Settlement Sociology, And The Science Of Reform In America's Progressive Era." *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, (Wiley Periodicals, 2012), 334.

⁴⁹ Williams, Maclean, "In Search of The Kingdom," 34.

life of the community.”⁵⁰ This concept, however, of instituting Christianity within the community, meant different things to black and white reformers. From her experiences living in St. Louis, Chicago, and later Atlanta, Hope was exposed to the reality of racial injustice and violence. In the social work environments in which she worked, Hope served more white than black members of the poor and working classes.⁵¹ This discrepancy was maintained by cultural essentialism, the notion that blackness could be associated with an inherently inferior culture, a belief maintained by some white Christian reformers.⁵²

Some white progressive reformers maintained conceptions of morality and whiteness that characterized black women as morally feeble, and less worthy of aid. The writings of white Progressive Era reformers particularly indicate the reasoning that led some white reformers to bestow less aid to the black poor than the white and immigrant poor. Such views had real consequences on creating race-based approaches to social work administration. In an editorial for a NAACP publication, Addams indicated her belief in differences between the children of humble Italian immigrants, who were more docile because their parents passed on Italian familial traditions and etiquette, and those of black women, whose children “yield[ed] more easily to the temptations of a city than any other girls.” The traditions of Italian parents, Addams believed, expressed “centuries of civilization” that allowed for their assimilation, but some black women and children were

⁵⁰ Addams, *Twenty Years At Hull House*, 124.

⁵¹ Chirhart, *Georgia Women*, 20, Walker, “The Early History of the King's Daughters Home for Women, Springfield, Illinois,” 316 – 324.

⁵² Muhammad, Khalil, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 120.

part of the “colony of colored people” who needed to be “brought under social control.”⁵³

Such cultural essentialist notions of race led some white reformers to attribute a less developed sense of morality to black women. As Khalil Muhammad asserts in his book *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*, progressive white reformers merely replaced the color line with the culture line to categorize many black women as less civilized due to the legacy of slavery.⁵⁴ Some white reformers’ work thus served to reinforce notions of unacceptable and acceptable expressions of black female morality partly grounded in white conceptions of proper Christian self-image. Paired with covert appeals to cultural essentialism, white reformers often erected barriers between themselves, black reformers, and the black poor and working classes.

Given the essentialist sentiments of some Progressive Era white reformers, it is necessary to acknowledge the way in which some reformers were limited in their progressivism. The work of African American activists challenges the actions of some white reformers labeled progressive. Progressive Era history should be more precise in clarifying what made some white reformers progressive, and those aspects of their work that perpetuated and ignored certain injustices. The Progressive Era was not a string of linear, groundbreaking achievements for all groups. Rather, the era experienced huge changes for white women, immigrants, and the white poor. These changes, however, were alongside dominant societal resistance to black struggles for basic rights. The segregated nature of black and white social work has eschewed a full understanding of the

⁵³ Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 123.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 120.

limitations and weaknesses of white Progressive Era reformers. Certain progressive actions—like the services Addams offered to Chicago’s immigrant poor—came at the expense of the equality of certain groups. In Hull House’s case, this meant neglecting the black poor based on cultural essentialism. The term “progressive” should be used more critically when applied in history. While the era experienced many important reforms, most of these were for white Americans. Black activism conveys constant friction and ambiguity between progress achieved as basic rights were recognized, and the retrenchment of such rights by the dominant American society.

Given Hope’s work at Hull House years before founding the Neighborhood Union, it is tempting to understand her organization merely as an adapted version of Jane Addams’ Hull House. Accepting traditional narratives of settlement history, however, and understanding Hope’s actions merely as a Hull House for Atlanta’s black poor and working classes ignores a longer history of black institution building. It is more likely that Hope was equally if not more influenced by the legacy of black institutions across the country, many of which provided the services many settlement houses offered long before the Progressive Era. The classes, healthcare, and social stimulation offered by settlement houses appeared previously in black institutions established after the Civil War. Immediately following emancipation, African Americans rapidly established their own schools for education and vocational purposes.⁵⁵ While many schools were bought and built through the resourcefulness of freedmen, funding also came from benevolent societies. The American Missionary Association helped establish Virginia’s Hampton Institute, which taught classes to equip freedmen with skills to obtain employment. Other

⁵⁵ "America's Reconstruction: People and Politics After the Civil War." *The Meaning of Freedom: Black and White Responses to the End of Slavery*. (University of Houston, 2003), Web.

Universities established after the war, including Fisk University and Howard University provided educational courses, as a normal school and a seminary respectively.

Settlement houses most closely resembled black institutional churches, which holistically tended to the many needs of the black poor.⁵⁶ The Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church provided an employment bureau, while Wheat Street Baptist Church started a home for elderly women and night classes so that laborers could attend school.⁵⁷ Friendship Baptist Church, where Hope eventually worshipped, had a house for the poor and elderly.⁵⁸ The services of these institutions likely inspired Hope in her own work with the Neighborhood Union. When the settlement house movement is placed within the larger context of African American institution building, it becomes clear that such services were not new a phenomenon to the U.S. Rather, the settlement house movement as it is typically referenced can be more accurately be understood as the shorter history of predominantly white-led social service organizations following a longer tradition of black institution building by schools and churches. Hope attended churches, like the Presbyterian Church, with an emphasis on education, and Friendship Baptist, with its social services. The social and political activism alive in these churches likely motivated and appealed to Hope as she pursued social work. Hope did gain practical inspiration from the white organizations with which she worked. Examined more closely, however, Hope's eventual decision to start a settlement model was not an adaptation of a white organizational structure, but was a continuation of a strong tradition of African American institution building.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 143.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Hope's work in Chicago and the broader context of black church activism provides an alternative perspective on the Social Gospel movement. Many white Christian reformers were attracted to the Social Gospel movement because the activism of the period affirmed that Christian religious values necessitated social and political action. Christian values, they maintained, were of little use if they did not have real social and political implications.⁵⁹ Black churches, on the other hand, have always been grounded in social and political struggles for equality. As theologian James Cone asserts in his book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, black and white Christianity are separate and have at times been conflicting ideologies. In fact, the black church

was the creation of a black people whose daily existence was an encounter with the overwhelming and brutalizing reality of white power... The black churchman did not accept white interpretations of Christianity, which suggested the gospel was concerned with freedom of the soul and not the body⁶⁰

Black churches were the spiritual, communal embodiment of daily resistance. From the beginning, the black church affirmed that social and political resistance was supported and sustained by God. Many of the activities of the black church were considered, as Higginbotham indicates, embracing a "politically subversive character within southern society."⁶¹ The most basic activities like fundraising, teaching Sunday school, and caring for the sick were considered political threats to white supremacy.⁶² Efforts for black individuals to live in safety were political and social acts that were, for many black Christians, bound up with their faith. The "most profound challenge" to white supremacy in all its societal forms "rested in the silent, everyday struggle of black people to build

⁵⁹ Williams, Maclean, "In Search of The Kingdom," 34.

⁶⁰ Cone, James H. *Black Theology and Black Power*. (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 42, 43.

⁶¹ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 17.

⁶² Ibid.

stable families, get an education, [and] worship together in their churches...⁶³ While the Social Gospel movement was lauded by many white Christians for its renewed emphasis on social and political activism, for the black church social and political activism was an inherent part of black Christian identity. The black church was born preaching a social and political gospel.

Hope's time in Atlanta within black, Christian clubwomen's networks provided a personal outlet in which she could combine her faith with a social work environment that honored her identity as a black woman. These years partly joined Hope's social work experiences in white contexts with her experiential and intellectual knowledge of racial inequity. This allowed her to later create an organization that intentionally circumvented paternalism in its approach to more effectively meet the needs of the black poor and working classes. Hope became further involved in the club movement through her time with the Gate City Free Kindergarten, an organization that established free kindergartens for Atlanta's black poor and working class families.⁶⁴ As a professor at Morehouse, Hope's husband became friends with a young professor of economics and history, W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois learned of Hope's community organizing in Chicago and invited her to a conference in 1900 on "The Social work of the Negro Child."⁶⁵ In addition to the physically degrading environment in which they lived, the black poor and working classes struggled to maintain consistent incomes. Men were temporarily hired in construction and other menial labor jobs, while their wives supported their families by

⁶³ Ibid, 17-18.

⁶⁴ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 60.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 28.

working as domestics or washerwomen.⁶⁶ Depending on the demands of their white employers, some mothers were forced to leave their children and spend long hours away from their homes. The women established the Gate City Free Kindergarten Association, and Hope eventually accepted a position as financial chair, collecting funds to start multiple kindergartens across Atlanta's poor black neighborhoods. Hope's involvement in social work was no longer solely based out of economic necessity; Mr. Hope repeatedly indicated that he alone could provide the income for their family.⁶⁷ Instead, her involvement grew out of her awareness through the intellectuals she and Mr. Hope knew, and her compassion after witnessing the decrepit living conditions harming poor and working class families.

Hope's church environment in Atlanta also encouraged her involvement in community work. During their early years in Atlanta, the Hopes joined Friendship Baptist Church, the city's first independent black Baptist Church.⁶⁸ Friendship Baptist was an institution deeply rooted in providing a space for political and religious discussion and growth, community organizing, and educational opportunities.⁶⁹ The church housed Morehouse College's first classes, and Spelman College began in its basement. The black Baptist church did not encourage "an escapist and other-worldly orientation." It was, according to Higginbotham, "the only visible bastion of a community under assault... Those who sought to make the church a flagship of black dignity espoused strong race-conscious views concerning the preservation of the black community... they

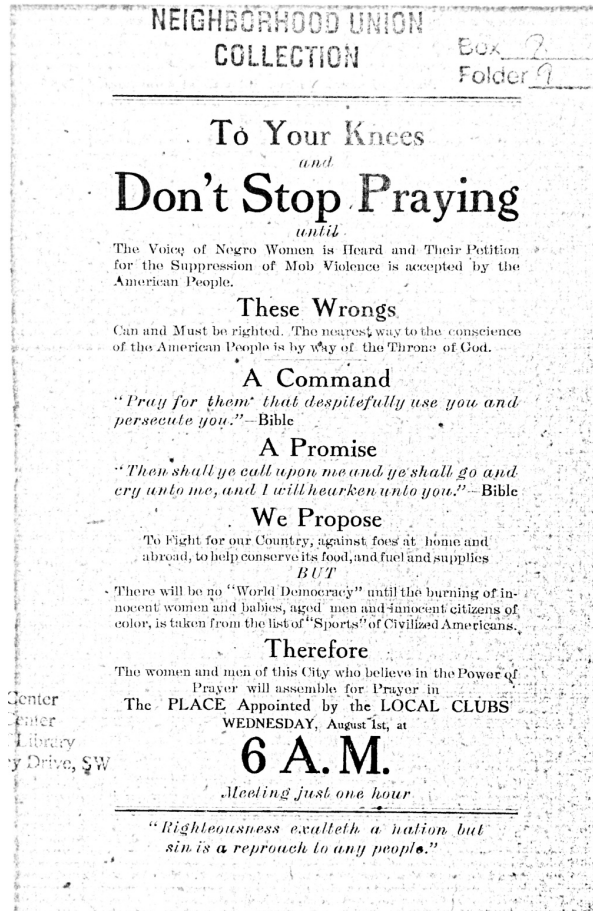
⁶⁶ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 74.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 31.

⁶⁸ Chirhart, *Georgia Women*, 19.

⁶⁹ "Our History." *Friendship Baptist Church*. (Friendship Baptist Church, 2016), Web.

sought to shape the community so that preservation could become progress.”⁷⁰ From her time in Chicago, Hope understood that collaboration with white Christians could be helpful in addressing social and economic inequities, but she now more clearly recognized the need for black-centered community work that focused on racial equality.⁷¹



Atlanta Clubwomen’s Prayer Meeting Poster

“To Your Knees and Don’t Stop Praying until the voice of Negro Women is heard and their petition for the suppression of mob violence is accepted by the American people.”⁷²

As a result of housing segregation, moving to Atlanta placed Hope in close

⁷⁰ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 5,6.

⁷¹ Chirhart, *Georgia Women*, 17.

⁷² Neighborhood Union Collection, Poster, “To Your Knees, Don’t Stop Praying,” n.d., box 8, folder 9, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

physical proximity to the black poor and working classes, exposing her to the degrading living conditions they faced. By 1900, Atlanta's 63,000 black residents lived in 6 major wards spread along the fringes of the city, away from its central financial district.⁷³

Unlike Atlanta's white population, whose housing patterns and quality of infrastructure were determined by class, Atlanta's black poor, working, middle and upper classes were all subject to slum-like conditions: deplorable sanitation that exacerbated the tuberculosis epidemic, violence, weak law enforcement, dilapidated schools, bars, and fires.⁷⁴ Hope would later address the decrepit living conditions of Atlanta's black population as a main motivation to form the Neighborhood Union.

Hope's perspective on social work shifted when confronted with the brutal reality of southern white supremacy veiled by claims to progressivism. While advocates of the "New South" claimed Atlanta as a center of industrial and social progress, it was clear that Georgia was dependent on the subordination of its black population.⁷⁵ Georgia Progressivism blatantly rendered social reform a white-only affair, and even sought to use the state's black population as a means to secure better standards of living for whites. The work of many southern reformers reflected a desire to return to the Antebellum South and a controlled black labor force. Among other measures, Georgia 'progressives' promoted disenfranchisement to 'purify' the government of black influence, reforms for white education only, and promoted the black chain gang as a resolution to free white Georgians from the convict-lease system.⁷⁶ While in the North, some white progressive reformers claimed to have a consciousness toward the needs of black Americans, many

⁷³ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 58.

⁷⁴ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 62.

⁷⁵ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 95.

⁷⁶ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 59.

Southern social work reforms were unapologetically white-centered.⁷⁷ Georgia's white 'progressivism' clarified Hope's understanding that only black-led social work strategies could meet the needs of the black poor and working classes.

Hope's social work with the Gate City Free Kindergarten Association opened up avenues to provide services for the children of Atlanta's black poor and working class families. Hope learned about the needs of Atlanta's black poor and working classes both from living in close proximity with them, and from exposure to middle and upper class circles involved in community organizing. She did not use her position as an upper class woman as an opportunity to distance herself from direct contact with lower classes. Instead, she sought face-to-face contact with them. After learning about the violence, decrepit infrastructure, and poor sanitation in the West Fair area of Atlanta, Hope travelled to the neighborhood, and asked the mothers what services they wanted for their neighborhood and children. After speaking with the women of West Fair, Hope envisioned a larger project for community centers based on their input. Her envisioned community model would provide kindergartens and other services which the poor and working class families requested. She presented this vision to the women of the Gate City Kindergarten, and the committee down her proposal, deciding to focus instead on day nurseries.⁷⁸ Despite this initial rejection, her personal approach to understanding the needs of the poor and working classes would later inspire her tailored strategies with the Neighborhood Union.

The haunting reality of white on black violence elevated Hope's desire to start a

⁷⁷ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920*. (New York: Free Press, 2003), 148.

⁷⁸ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 30.

community organization. Shortly after Professor Hope was elected the first black president of Morehouse, the 1906 Atlanta Race Riots erupted. After purported attacks of black men on white women were printed in the news, white mobs brutally beat and burned the homes of many of Atlanta's black residents.⁷⁹ Prior to the riots, city officials denied Atlanta's black population legal access to firearms, leaving them unable to protect themselves from the terrorism that engulfed the city.⁸⁰ When Atlanta's black population sought firearms, the mayor sent officials to search black homes and seize any weapons.⁸¹ This event manifested the social reality of Georgia's codification of white supremacy; in 1908 the state adopted disenfranchisement laws, created white-only primaries, and further embraced segregation. Such violence prompted the mass migration of many African Americans to the North. All black colleges were plagued with white rioters' threats to burn down schools and murder students.⁸² President Hope patrolled campus with a firearm he was given to protect the students of Morehouse. Black poor and working class fathers gathered at Morehouse and formed militias to protect their families.

Such experiences further exposed Hope to a need for black solidarity and the vulnerability of all black people in Atlanta to white violence. Hope lost her faith in white Christians, whose inability to collectively act against the riots reeked more of self-interest than Christian morals. As Hope later wrote in letters, white Christians "feared retribution" and only opened the doors of their churches when black people were in desperation. Black men went home, sat with their guns and "prepared to die protecting

⁷⁹Ibid, 43.

⁸⁰ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 42.

⁸¹ Ibid, 43.

⁸² Ibid, 43.

[their] homes and families.”⁸³ While in Chicago Hope was exposed to the different treatment of the black versus the white poor by white Christian reformers, the Atlanta Riots awakened Hope to the real consequences of selective aid when many white Christians excused themselves from the riots in order to protect their own interests. Hope maintained connections with white reformers during her years with the Neighborhood Union. However, she did so strategically and with extra caution to maintain the integrity of her work with the black poor and working classes. Her religious beliefs also supported her scrutiny of white Christians whom she viewed as hypocritical. Hope and many other Christian black female reformers viewed themselves as practicing true Christianity, a belief that rattled white Christians and undermined the psychological impact of white supremacy.⁸⁴ Hope’s identity as a black community organizer and intellectual was deeply impacted by exposure to racial violence. This experience combined with her faith motivated her to form the Neighborhood Union.

Hope’s personal background undermines Higginbotham’s assertion that the “Female Talented Tenth,” of which Hope would have been a member, carried “class values of Victorian America.”⁸⁵ While Hope was born into a comfortable home and achieved financial stability later in life, during her adolescence she was forced to provide for her family as they faced economic insecurity. It is likely that she had an understanding of the precariousness of one’s financial standing, and empathized with the poor given her own past circumstances. Hope was also raised primarily by her mother, and maintained a strong belief in women’s right to work independently of their

⁸³ Ibid, 44.

⁸⁴ Chirhart, *Georgia Women*, 15.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 19.

husbands.⁸⁶ These do not sound like the qualities of a woman confined by Victorian values. Indeed, she was initially reluctant to marry John Hope because she did not want to sacrifice her independence and considered leaving him for a career in missionary work. After their marriage, she continued her social work outside the home, despite Professor Hope's pleas that she cut back on her community work. Given the variety of her later reform work outside the home, her community organizing extended beyond her roles as mother and wife. Her community organizing, however, was tied to her identity as a black woman. As Paula Giddings indicates, black women's reform efforts were tied to self-preservation. Mary Church Terrell expressed the ties between self-preservation and reform work, indicating, "self-preservation demands that [black women] go among the lowly, illiterate, and even the vicious to whom they are bound by ties of race and sex."⁸⁷ Thus, reformer's black womanhood gave them impetus to focus on race inequity in their reform efforts in ways that helped them diminish class barriers.

Hope would later become a prominent advocate for black women's suffrage, as she rallied support from the American Missionary Association to do so.⁸⁸ Her actions fell within the larger context of black churchwomen's reform work. Some black women used their religious positions to resist patriarchal, racialized attacks on black womanhood within and outside the church. The emphasis on the moral strength black women brought to the public sphere aligned with Hope's religious beliefs; During the early years of the Neighborhood Union, Hope implored members of the State House of Representatives to live up to the Christian mandate to "Go," and provide equal schooling conditions for

⁸⁶ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 24.

⁸⁷ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, (New York: W. Morrow, 1984), 97.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 129.

Atlanta's black children. Hope's 1915 speech is a testament to the religious motivations behind her community work. In it, she understands the Christian religion as "essentially a missionary propaganda. "Go" is the condensed logic of the gospel." To defend equal education, Hope declared,

The Master laid no restriction on whom the [disciples] should teach. In the universality of His golden rule his command to do to others...spanned the color line... This measure, if passed, would put Georgia in direct contradiction to the Bible. The law of Georgia would say to white men, "Teach white men only," while the word of God would say, "Teach all men." Ought we not to obey God rather than men? ⁸⁹

In tying appeals to the Christian religion to her reform efforts, Hope held white policymakers and reformers accountable for their racism. Hope's value system should be examined more closely, not as a rigid set of precepts linked with societal expectations, but as a mandate for equality. She used her religious beliefs to hold white men accountable, and affirm the blackness of men and women through Christian language.

Hope also broadened views of black women's place in the church and reform work. As Higginbotham indicates, the reforms of some black Christian women sought to enact a "new social order" that combined "a progressive gendered and racialized representation of orthodoxy."⁹⁰ In doing so, many black churchwomen assumed what theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether refers to as a "stance of radical obedience."⁹¹ This stance allowed women to maintain their loyalty to Christian orthodoxy and broaden their power to enact social reforms. In the various church environments to which she was exposed, Hope's community work answered the Christian mandate "Go." Church

⁸⁹ Neighborhood Union Collection, Speech, "Address to the Committee of the House of Representatives of Georgia" 1915, box 1, Folder 24, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

⁹⁰ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 123.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 122.

networks would also provide an invaluable social network from which she would gather support for the Neighborhood Union.

Hope's identity as an African American, a breadwinner, and Christian woman shaped her engagement in social work. Her African American identity and educated upbringing likely gave her a deeper awareness of the national and local climate surrounding racial injustice, while her changing class status instilled in her a more personal understanding of what it felt like to worry about poverty. Hope's exposure to the failures and racism within white Christian reform movements and later to the violence and complacency of white Christians in Atlanta further influenced her desire to work with the black poor and working classes. Her religiosity made social work an avenue for personal fulfillment that simultaneously addressed urgent, violent racial injustice. Leaving Chicago, Hope was motivated by an amalgamation of Social Gospel theory, maternalist justifications for women's reform activism, and black Christian theology. Her attention to the needs of the black poor and working classes gained momentum in Atlanta, as she was confronted with both opportunities for intellectual growth, and a climate of racial violence, which necessitated her social reform efforts.

Hope's background and community work also pushes for broadened conceptions of the history of social work. Black activism within and outside churches challenges labels like the "Progressive Era," and the Social Gospel movement. These labels are less suited to describe the experiences of black Christian activists, and "progressive" is sometimes an inappropriate label for some of the work of white reformers. Hope's early interactions with reform work also offer new insights on secular and religious reforms in the time frame commonly delineated the Progressive Era. Hope's activism offers a

caution against strictly delineating religious and secular work during the era. As Higginbotham suggests, it is more telling to understand such activism by acknowledging the blurred nature of religious and secular activism. The black Baptist women's convention exemplifies both religious and secular work achieved through the black church. Higginbotham notes that the convention, "thrust itself into the mainstream of Progressive Era reform... This complexity precludes attempts to bifurcate black women's activities neatly into dichotomous categories such as religious versus secular, private versus public, or accommodation versus resistance."⁹² As Higginbotham observes, the church served as a tool of community organizing on local and national levels with other black Christians and with the broader population, be it secular or from other faith traditions. Hope's experiences with various social work agencies echo Higginbotham's sentiment. The social service organizations and churches with which Hope worked possessed a Christian background but also blurred lines between the religious and secular. They were not explicitly focused on evangelization and performed services for individuals of various belief backgrounds. Her community network through Friendship Baptist also provided valuable community organizing work with congregants of Friendship Baptist and the broader black population.

Higginbotham offers important insights on the dangers of dividing religious and secular activism to the exclusion of the other. If the work of black institutional churches was reinterpreted through the lens of the settlement house movement, many of the volunteers and congregants who ran church community services would be properly honored as some of the country's first social workers. Given the fact that Jane Addams is

⁹² Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 17.

considered one of the founders of the social work profession, it is also necessary to question the extent to which such efforts were not honored as social work because they were within the black community.⁹³ In the black community there was less “distance between helper and helped.”⁹⁴ This fact may have functioned to neglect acknowledging black community efforts in broader social work history. Higginbotham’s insights raise questions on the extent to which the different racial, economic, cultural backgrounds, and religious beliefs of social workers and their clients have shaped the extent to which they are acknowledged in broader social work history. Just as black activism has been largely omitted from the settlement house movement and broader social work history, black Christian efforts through churches are omitted if there is a strict, exclusive divide between religious and secular history. Hope’s Christian worldview was flexible and changed by her experiences working in religious and secular contexts. This allowed her to more closely meet the needs of the poor and working classes, eventually enabling Hope to develop a relevant vision for community organizing grounded in racial and economic equality. Given the multi-dimensional nature of her upbringing, simple assumptions cannot be made about Hope’s motivations and views as a member of the black elite. In the following chapters, elements of Hope’s identity, including her religiosity and class position, will be examined to understand the extent to which they both broke down and erected barriers between the black poor and working classes within the structure and work of the Neighborhood Union.

⁹³ Human Spirit Initiative, “Jane Addams: The Founding of Hull House, Telling the Story and Showing the Way” 19.

⁹⁴ Gordon, *Black and White Visions of Welfare*, 23.

CHAPTER TWO

“THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL”: THE IMPACT OF HOPE’S PERSONAL BELIEFS ON HER VISION FOR THE NEIGHBORHOOD UNION

Previous scholarship has not explored Hope’s vision for the Neighborhood Union as shaped by her personal background. Examining her organization’s strengths and weaknesses in its treatment of members of the black poor and working classes requires a deeper understanding of Hope’s own positionality. More specifically, how her middle class, black Baptist background influenced her vision for the Neighborhood Union. Contextual factors predicating the founding of the Neighborhood Union, namely the 1906 Atlanta Riots, indicate that the organization developed to assist African Americans of all classes experiencing institutional and social violence.

Hope’s personal beliefs regarding Christian morality and behavior are further elucidated in her actions during her early life and her personal notes when founding the Neighborhood Union. When examined closely, these documents indicate that the Neighborhood Union was grounded in a vision for a strong community shaped by middle class black Baptist morals. The Christian religious beliefs of Hope and many of the women of the Neighborhood Union provided a shared purpose behind their efforts that enabled them to assert their legitimacy as leaders. The Baptist morals and black community solidarity behind the Neighborhood Union motivated its original founders to recognize the talents of the black poor and working classes, and to enlist them as leaders in the organization. In *Lugenia Burns Hope: Black Southern Reformer*, Rouse characterizes Hope as a woman confined by Victorian moral values.⁹⁵ She claims that

⁹⁵ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 132.

Hope accepted these values because of the era in which she lived, and felt a sense of “conscious superiority” when she joined the black clubwomen’s movement because it allowed her to help “less fortunate” poor and working class African American women.⁹⁶ Hope’s community vision complicates Rouse’s characterization. Hope’s belief in creating stronger, more democratic communities and the Neighborhood Union’s approach toward the poor and working classes, indicates that the organization was forged through a community effort, rather than driven by paternalistic action among black elites to uplift the poor and working classes.

Hope’s vision was, in fact, built upon her belief in African American women’s expertise on issues of morality, which enabled them to be strong community-builders. She did not, however, believe that a privileged few maintained a monopoly over moral wisdom. The founding of the Neighborhood Union was the product of multiple forces. The 1906 Riots provided Hope with further impetus to create an organization that would stand for the self-preservation of Atlanta’s African American community, and promote solidarity across class lines. Her knowledge of racial injustice and community organizing also contributed to her motivations to form the Union. It was the death of a young black woman in a house near Hope’s home, however, that prompted Hope to form the organization. In the West End, a young mother of three was slowly debilitated by a chronic illness. Her father and husband worked to provide for the household, but could not look after the young mother, nor provide her with adequate medical help. While the exact illness remains unknown, it is apparent that the woman died alone of a preventable ailment, without assistance or information on how to receive medical help. The death not

⁹⁶ Ibid.

only testified to the rampant poverty and disease throughout the West End, but also to the isolation and suffering within the neighborhood. In 1908, after learning of the young woman's death, Hope convened a group of her friends, the wives of prominent black activists and intellectuals and some working class neighborhood women. Deeply saddened by the woman's preventable death, Hope felt that she and other middle class women had an opportunity. As a group they could exercise their financial resources and beliefs as mothers and Christians to investigate their neighbor's needs and address the decrepit conditions families faced in the West End. This sense of moral expertise motivating Hope and the other women of the Neighborhood Union appears repeatedly throughout the organization's initial founding documents.

From the first gathering of the founders of the Neighborhood Union, many members expressed a sense of religious significance to their work. The women chose "Thy Neighbor as Thyself," as the Neighborhood Union's motto, a widely cited verse from Leviticus 19:18. Using this motto, the women proclaimed their own religious convictions. They boldly asserted their identity as Christian women, and used a widely known Bible verse to catch the attention of southern white Christians.⁹⁷ In doing so, the women of the Neighborhood Union presented white Christians with a responsibility, as Christians, to examine their own faith in light of racial injustice. The primary goal of the Neighborhood Union was to "elevate the moral, social, and intellectual standards in each neighborhood."⁹⁸ In fulfilling this goal, the founding women did not feel that they alone were the gatekeepers of such standards. Rather, the Neighborhood Union supported community members by encouraging black leadership among all classes. A secondary

⁹⁷ Chirhart, *Georgia Women*, 22.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

goal that emerged from elevating neighborhood standards for black communities was that the Neighborhood Union would challenge the discrimination of Atlanta's white citizens by representing the integrity and community solidarity of the city's African American population.

This secondary goal emerged from Hope's experiences with various manifestations of white supremacy. Her past social work with the white organizations King's Daughters, the Silver Cross Club, and Hull House likely alerted her to the disparity between the organization's Christian teachings of equality and the reality that the white-led organizations failed to direct adequate attention to Chicago's African American population.⁹⁹ After the 1906 Riots, Hope became increasingly attuned to what she viewed as abuses of Christian teaching among white moderates and some reformers. Her church environment allowed her to embrace what she felt was a more authentic Christianity that honestly answered the teachings of Jesus.¹⁰⁰ Friendship Baptist Church maintained a focus on devout faith and community solidarity. The church also saw educational opportunity as a tool to diminish class divisions.¹⁰¹ It is unclear why exactly Hope started attending Baptist churches after growing up Presbyterian. One reason may have been that a majority of black Christians in the South were Baptist, and that the black Baptist church attracted people across various classes more than the Presbyterian denomination in the South. Another attractive element of the National Baptist convention was its strong national presence and commitment to activism.¹⁰² Amidst these various

⁹⁹ Chirhart, *Georgia Women* 22.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 23.

¹⁰¹ "Our History." Friendship Baptist Church, Web.

¹⁰² Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 7.

explanations, the environment at Friendship Baptist affirmed Hope's belief that authentic Christianity was community-centered.

Hope's reform work pursued a more authentic democratic community. Envisioning a true democracy was relevant to Hope as an African American woman who did not have equal citizenship. Her previous work with the King's Daughters, the Silver Cross Club and Hull House, also supported this effort; all of the organizations maintained a Christian identity, and Hull House in particular placed great emphasis on equipping immigrants and the poor to become contributing members of a democracy.¹⁰³ Starting with the Neighborhood Union, Hope's community vision emerged out of the moral, intellectual, and political strength of Atlanta's African American population. Hope consistently cultivated a community-mindset. Her mindset was impacted by the "Black Baptist Sisterhood" of which she was a part. Black Baptist clubwomen engaged in local and national projects.¹⁰⁴ Members of the Sisterhood viewed a collective mindset as a crucial component in seeking equal citizenship and combatting white supremacy. Hope ridiculed individualism, demanding a community-centered approach. In a 1908 speech delivered at the Neighborhood Union, Hope implored middle class African American mothers to think beyond their own needs and those of their families. Reacting against the forces that disconnected members of the middle class from the black poor and working classes, Hope remarked,

The question arises, "Am I my brother's keeper?" What does it matter to me what is going on in the next house on the street to my neighbor? That is not my business. I am to look after my own home, pay my debts, and carefully rear my own children, and that is all the time I have. I certainly have no time to look after those street and ally children, further more I don't want my children to mix with

¹⁰³ Addams, *Twenty Years At Hull House*, 453, Chirhart, *Georgia Women*, 24.

¹⁰⁴ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 152.

them either. But woe mother—how can you be so thoughtless, so narrow, so self-centered¹⁰⁵

Hope criticized a pattern of thought she felt was maintained by some middle class black women who did not actively engage with struggling neighbors. She ridiculed such a mindset for being “thoughtless” and “self-centered.” In doing so, Hope challenged the apathy and busyness that strengthened barriers between the poor and working classes, and called middle class women to join her struggle to create a community driven by collective support for one another. The purpose of the organization, as she expressed in her meeting notes on “Community Organization and Leadership,” was “cooperation, group consciousness and mass movements.”¹⁰⁶ This movement would gain refinement in a single neighborhood, and spread as a “universal plan that may be directed through and by all classes of our people.”¹⁰⁷ Hope’s vision for the Neighborhood Union refutes the criticism of Hope as possessing “conscious superiority” over members of the poor and working classes.¹⁰⁸

Hope expressed her beliefs in community solidarity by creating a uniquely democratic organization. Within the structure of the Neighborhood Union were checks and balances to regulate the power of elected leaders and the board of the Neighborhood Union.¹⁰⁹ Hunter acknowledges the way in which the Neighborhood Union “spread the responsibilities of leadership broadly, allowing for autonomy and connectedness for a

¹⁰⁵ Neighborhood Union Collection, Speech “We have but to look about us...” 1908, box 1, Folder 24, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

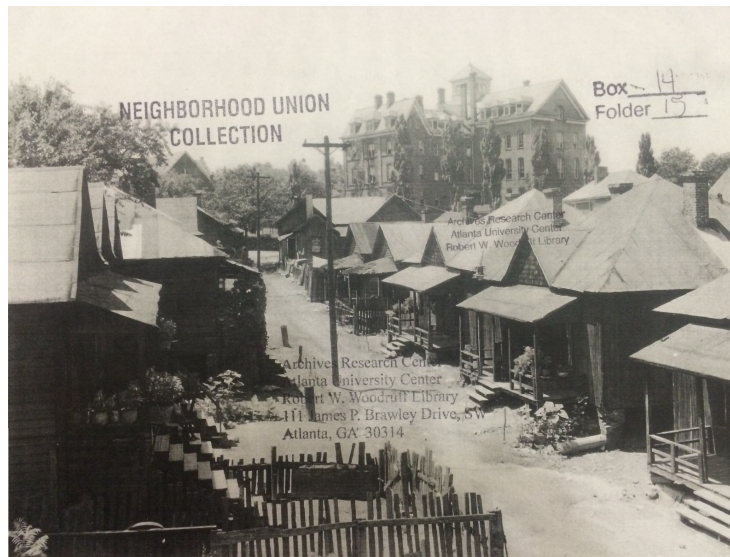
¹⁰⁶ Neighborhood Union Collection, Lesson Notes “Community Organization and Leadership,” 1922, box 1, Folder 25, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 132.

¹⁰⁹ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 6.

diverse group of women and families.”¹¹⁰ Block leaders and volunteer captains spanned all classes, disrupting traditional class power dynamics in white social work organizations and even some black organizations.¹¹¹ The effect of the organization’s efforts, as historian Gerda Lerner indicates, was that the Neighborhood Union “turned into an instrument for self-help and a training ground for grass-roots leadership.”¹¹² The Neighborhood Union’s focus on grassroots leadership refutes characterizations of black middle and upper class reformers as engaged in patronizing efforts to uplift the poor and working classes.



Neighborhood Surrounding Atlanta University, n.d.¹¹³

Along with her vision of a more democratic community, Hope’s community vision was motivated by deeper beliefs on humans’ God-given needs, and the ability of

¹¹⁰ Ibid,140.

¹¹¹ Gordon, *Black and White Visions of Welfare*, 23., Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, (Vintage Press: 2005), 498.

¹¹² Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 498.

¹¹³ Neighborhood Union Collection, Photo, “Neighborhood Surrounding Atlanta University” n.d., box 14, folder 15, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

institutions to meet them. Hope felt that “the highest development of civilization” was dependent on healthy communities that allowed individuals the “healthful expression” of their needs.¹¹⁴ The absence of institutions to meet such needs resulted in, “social evils,” including poverty.¹¹⁵ Hope’s focus on diminishing class barriers was strengthened by her view that poverty was a harmful environmental factor rather than the cause of moral wrongdoing. This belief shaped her view that the poor and working classes were victimized by poverty. Hope maintained a belief that community organizations were to answer to human’s God-given yearnings, and diminish “social evils.”¹¹⁶ In notes from a Neighborhood Union meeting in 1919, Hope communicated her belief in the necessity of organized communities to meet individual’s needs. The first need humans experienced was as infants who yearned for the care and attention of their parents. This yearning, Hope asserted, was met in the institution of the family. Following the family, Hope describes religion, industry, government, school and community as crucial institutions in a healthy society. Living through the 1906 Riots and the constancy of Jim Crow, Hope encountered the poverty, racism, and violence that prevented African American’s from living freely in healthy communities.¹¹⁷ As indicated in the Neighborhood Union’s efforts to fight for equal schooling conditions and to provide leadership opportunities that spanned classes, Hope saw promise in combatting social and institutional racism. She also wanted her institution to minimize class divisions.¹¹⁸ She felt these efforts answered

¹¹⁴ Neighborhood Union Collection, Meeting Notes “The highest development...” 1919, box 1, folder 18, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Neighborhood Union Collection, Speech “We have but to look about us...” 1908, box 1, Folder 24, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

¹¹⁸ Neighborhood Union Collection, Speech “Survey of Colored Public Schools (1913-1914)” 1914, box 7, Folder 1, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

a greater calling. In a 1919 Lesson plan, Hope shared her belief that community organizations were meant to be centers of moral advancement. Asserting the purpose of the Neighborhood Union, as the “heart, head, and hands” of Christ, Hope impelled the women to have “faith in Christ and humanity” and engage in “Christ directed service.”¹¹⁹ Hope’s devout faith and belief in the power and efficacy of well-designed organizations to meet human’s needs shaped the focus of the Neighborhood Union. Hope’s faith was not in Christ alone, but, as she indicates, also in humanity. She felt African Americans of all class positions could support one another.

The activism of black Baptist clubwomen who surrounded Hope also inspired her community model. Many black Baptist clubwomen sought similar goals, including “ending racial discrimination and violence, [working for] women’s suffrage, mothers’ training, equality of education and employment opportunities, better working conditions and wages, [and] child care for working mothers” among other reforms.¹²⁰ The Neighborhood Union addressed similar goals in its campaigns for police protection in black neighborhoods, its resources for mothers, and its vocational classes.¹²¹ The strength of black Baptist women’s racial, social, and political consciousness provided an opportunity for Hope to learn about issues facing all classes of African Americans nationally and in Atlanta. These issues were all addressed by the work of the Neighborhood Union or by Hope later in her life. Within the socially and politically attuned church and educational environments she worked, Hope gained exposure to a

¹¹⁹ Neighborhood Union Collection, Meeting Notes “Lesson III, Community Organization,” 1919, box 1, folder 18, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

¹²⁰ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 152.

¹²¹ Neighborhood Union Collection, Meeting Notes “Meeting Called by Neighborhood Union, Atlanta Colored Women’s Committee,” 1918, box 2, folder 32, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

variety of perspectives on reform work and community organizing that informed the Neighborhood Union's approach. In addition to practical inspiration from black Baptist reform circles, she cultivated her own sense of Christian morality. This worldview dictated her views on women's expertise in reform work and the purpose of institutions. Her black, Baptist worldview would also deeply shape the organization's treatment of the black poor and working classes.

Hope's community vision included harnessing the leadership of Atlanta's poor and working class African American women. During her early years in Atlanta, Hope worked with other mothers to establish free kindergartens throughout the city. Talking to poor and working class mothers, she became more aware of the common struggles they faced. The poverty that many of them experienced degraded an institution she felt was deeply formative in maintaining a strong community, the home. Throughout her writings, Hope maintained the belief that healthy communities started within the home, a crucial sight of moral, intellectual, and social development. In a 1908 speech to the women of the Neighborhood Union, shortly after the organization's founding, Hope communicated her belief that the home was the space in which a child learned to stay attuned to their "God-given conscience," a "safeguard against evil."¹²² Mothers had a special role in cultivating obedience to one's conscience, through "home training since infancy."¹²³ For Hope, an important role of the mother was not merely to teach children a set of static moral codes, but to facilitate their connection to God. Listening to one's conscience was a dynamic tool to determine what behavior was morally justified by God; "Be loyal to your

¹²²Neighborhood Union Collection, Speech "When God put us here..." 1908, box 1, folder 24, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

¹²³ Ibid.

conscience and you will be to your friends. Be kind to everybody—think pure thoughts.”¹²⁴ Listening to one’s conscience, Hope believed, also meant restricting certain behaviors. If one “practices disobedience” to this inner stirring, Hope warned, “you are lost.” The speech reflects Hope’s devout faith in the home as a space of moral development in which a child learns to obey God’s will. This belief implicitly affirmed the work of African American women of all classes in cultivating morals in their homes and communities.



Junior Neighborhood Union Class, n.d.¹²⁵

Hope’s perspective on women’s work in their homes and broader communities pushed her to honor the daily efforts of African American women in sustaining their communities. In this way, Hope’s outlook echoes some of the beliefs of black theologian

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Neighborhood Union Collection, Photo, “Junior Neighborhood Union Class,” n.d., box 14, folder 32, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

Dolores Williams. In her book *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Williams outlines her womanist theology, which seeks to interpret the Christian religion as an empowering tool for African American women and their marginalized allies. Williams' womanist theology honors the efforts of African American women to survive for themselves and their families, and reframes these actions as sacred offerings to God. Williams offers insights that resonate with Hope's belief in the everyday achievements of African American women. These beliefs are evident in the Neighborhood Union's ability to empower African American women in leadership positions, and in Hope's belief in the dignity of all classes. Williams' theology focuses on God's relevance to the situations of African American women. In her book, Williams conveys her belief that classic expressions of black liberation theology were formed from black male perspectives that largely overlooked the experiences of African American women. Williams reexamines the story of the slave woman Hagar from Genesis 16, who is used as a concubine by Abram after his wife Sarai becomes too old to bear children. Traditional analyses of the text convey Hagar as a powerless, one-dimensional victim of her master's anguish.¹²⁶ Williams examines the cultural and social contexts that inform Hagar's perspective. She helps the reader understand the exploitation of Hagar's virginity, motherhood, and agency. To Williams, Hagar is a miraculous woman who embodies powerful, spiritual African American women "who resist and rise above the forces seeking to destroy their lives and spirits."¹²⁷ By providing a new, context-based analysis of Hagar's story, Williams emphasizes God's presence in the lives of black

¹²⁶ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-talk*, (NY: Orbis, 1993), 2.

¹²⁷ Ibid, xi.

women, helping them “make a way out of no way.”¹²⁸ The daily struggles of African American women to maintain fortitude, call on God, and survive for themselves and their families are holy offerings that deserve recognition. Focusing on the strength and agency African American women exert within circumstances beyond their control, Williams offers a new way to interpret Hope’s empowering work through the Neighborhood Union. From personally interacting with the black poor and working classes, Hope gained an understanding of their circumstances, and a respect for their fortitude and daily work. As a result, the services provided by the Neighborhood Union supported the black poor and working classes, and offered services particularly helpful to working women and mothers.

The Neighborhood Union provided classes to cultivate the talents of the black poor and working classes. Hope did not indict the poor for the poverty and circumstances in which they lived, but instead recognized the poverty as a systemic injustice. Her belief that poverty was not a function of individual responsibility but of systemic injustice also refutes claims that Hope was a woman who felt a sense of superiority toward other classes. In the same 1908 speech she gave rallying middle class women to act against poverty in their neighborhoods, Hope implored middle class women to have compassion for poor and working class women. She lamented that the children out in the city streets of Atlanta, had few recreational outlets, and were “half fed, half clad.”¹²⁹ In the speech, Hope then explained that “the parents of these children are hard working people. [They] stand over the washtub all day and ironing board. Most of the night all they can hope for

¹²⁸ Ibid, xii.

¹²⁹ Neighborhood Union Collection, Speech “We have but to look about us...” 1908, box 1, Folder 24, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

is to keep [their] head above the water in the struggle for life.”¹³⁰ By honoring the dignity and daily struggles of poor and working class men and women, Hope fostered respect for the poor and working classes among the middle class women of the Neighborhood Union. She shifted attention to the harm that poverty inflicts, rather than judgment toward the poor. Hope’s worldview validated the worthiness of African Americans of all classes. Her projects with the Gate City Free Kindergarten and time with the Neighborhood Union gave her opportunities to better understand the work of the black poor and working classes to survive and provide for their families. Hope combined her belief that individuals are their “brother’s keepers” with compassion for the situations of the black poor and working classes.¹³¹ Her religiously informed objections to classism, and desire to honor the daily work of African American women is echoed in Williams’ womanist theology. Hope did not affirm an approach to community engagement that sought to showcase the talents of the upper classes. Instead, she reflected a desire to learn from them, and use their wisdom to guide the Neighborhood Union.

Hope believed that women were particularly suited to diminish class barriers and improve their homes and communities. In his book, *Veiled Visions: The 1906 Atlanta Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations*, Atlanta historian David Godshalk explains that the Neighborhood Union’s female leadership base was influenced by Hope’s belief in women’s expertise. While men, Hope asserted, were usually busy with jobs far from their homes, African American women had closer ties to their homes and neighborhoods.¹³² This gave black women special expertise to care for children

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Godshalk, *Veiled Visions: The 1906 Atlanta Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations*,

within their homes and neighborhoods. Hope's organizational model was shaped by what Godshalk describes as a belief in the "inherently mutualistic worlds of home and neighborhood."¹³³ Hope believed that women had special expertise to lend to their homes and communities as agents of moral consciousness. Her approach with the Neighborhood Union, however, was also sensitive to the circumstances of poor and working class African American women. Hope's focus on the home as a site of moral formation shaped the structure and affairs of the organization. As a result, its' beginning settlement houses provided services replicating a stimulating home environment. At its founding, the Neighborhood Union established various goals to improve the living conditions of the city's black poor and working classes. The aim of the Union as stated by its founding members in 1908 was:

To provide playgrounds, clubs, and neighborhood centers for physical, moral, and intellectual development; to develop a spirit of helpfulness among neighbors; to establish lecture courses for the purpose of encouraging habits of cleanliness; to promote child welfare; to impart a sense of cultural heritage; to abolish slums and houses of immorality; to improve the sanitation of homes and streets; to bring about efficiency in general homemaking; to cooperate with the Associated Charities and the Juvenile Court; and to cooperate with city officials in suppressing vice and crime¹³⁴

The Neighborhood Union provided many services that echoed Hope's belief in strengthening community solidarity. While some services were practical, others—music, books, the arts—were meant to "impart a sense of cultural heritage."¹³⁵ The organization included mothers and members of the black poor and working classes as valuable contributors to their communities who would benefit from the resources of each

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 228.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 67.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

community house.

The structure of the Neighborhood Union emerged from Hope's past social work experiences and religious, mother-centered perspective. Hope took inspiration from the previous, female-led, Christian organizations with which she worked in creating her own settlement model. Her community organization, however, departed from the white-led organizations with which she previously worked. Poor and working class African Americans were given opportunities to share their input and shape the leadership and affairs of the organization and its community houses. As a result, the Neighborhood Union was distinct from other black and white community organizations of the time. Settlement house organizations like Hull House ran and distributed aid from a centralized location. Social workers were usually the gatekeepers of such aid. This model, as welfare historian Linda Gordon notes, was most popular among white reformers whose work was most often centered on "charity and relief."¹³⁶ The community organizations of many African American reformers, however, reflected the reality that there was "less distance between helper and helped."¹³⁷ Black organizations were more often centered on sustainable, universal needs—"health and education."¹³⁸ While white welfare strategies most often maintained a hierarchical structure and paternalistic aid distribution, black-led organizations more often were focused on institution-building and a more democratic power structure.¹³⁹ It seems that Rouse's belief that Hope maintained a sense of superiority over other classes would be a more accurate characterization of some white reformers toward their white poor and immigrant clients.

¹³⁶ Gordon, *Black and White Visions of Welfare*, 23.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 23.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 23.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 24.

Hope's belief in the home as a center of children's growth and pride for women was influenced by her middle class status. Many middle class African American women paid great attention to maintaining comfortable and well-kept homes. As Dr. Sharon Harley indicates in her essay "For the Good of Family and Race: Gender, Work, and Domestic Roles in the Black Community, 1880-1930," engaging in a variety of chosen jobs within the labor market was not an option for a majority of African American women. Most did not view their work as identity-forming activities as did some white women. Time in the labor market was meant to provide the resources to take care of one's family and kin. Many middle class women focused on "a clean house, good meals, and well-mannered responsible children...major sources of pride and status in the black community."¹⁴⁰ While the labor market offered little opportunities for control and self-expression for middle class women, the home was a site of unpaid, yet autonomous work.¹⁴¹ For working class, poorly paid female laborers, the home was also a meaningful site. Given the nature of their work, however, many working class women did not have the time and resources middle and upper class women could invest in their homes. While some poor and working class African American women could work at home as washerwomen, they were still working—their time dictated by an employer elsewhere.¹⁴² Other poor and working class women worked far from home, many employed as domestics responsible for caring for the homes and children of white employers.¹⁴³ As a result, many services provided by the Neighborhood Union, including childcare and classes for mothers, sought to account for class discrepancies and racism in the labor

¹⁴⁰ Harley, "For the Good of Family and Race," 348.

¹⁴¹ Harley, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 349.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 58.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 56.

market that diminished the time women could spend with their families.

Hope's focus on the home as a site of moral development was informed by her class status. She was not, however, blinded by the relative privileges she possessed. She understood that working class women could not always afford the luxury of a limited work schedule and time spent cultivating a home environment. Hope did not always have that luxury herself, in her upbringing and in pursuing community work. Growing up, Hope worked with members of the poor and working classes and faced economic uncertainty herself.¹⁴⁴ These factors likely increased her empathy toward the work of the poor and working classes within and outside the home. Her belief in the home as a site of moral development shaped the Neighborhood Union's family and child-centered focus in its early years. The organization's activities grew out of her commitment to providing resources to families so that they could maintain more enriching homes and sources of entertainment for their children. These services included free kindergartens, classes on childcare, and extracurricular activities for adults with little leisure time.¹⁴⁵

For the black poor and working classes, the Neighborhood Union provided valuable spaces for leisure in which they could spend time away from their work and cultivate skills of their own choosing. The Neighborhood Union's services asserted the capabilities, creativity, and strength of Atlanta's black poor and working classes outside of the workplace. These services were meant to stimulate community members' various interests. Among its many services, the Neighborhood Union provided books for children and adults to read, music by black artists, dancing, story telling, and singing¹⁴⁶ The

¹⁴⁴ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 16.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 69.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*.

organization also placed great emphasis on providing opportunities for the poor and working classes to engage in intellectual and political discussion. Speeches and lectures by activists including Margaret Murray Washington and Mary McLeod Bethune engaged community members in discussions on news, education efforts, and community-building.¹⁴⁷ These stimulating lectures also provided poor and working class women with exposure to black female leaders who were renowned activists, conscious of issues faced by various classes. The Neighborhood Union also taught vocational classes for poor and working class girls and women interested in medicine to become nurses' assistants. Many graduates of the class went on to fight rampant tuberculosis in their communities, and to work at the Neighborhood Union clinic.¹⁴⁸ The organization's social work classes, which trained many of Atlanta's first social workers, eventually spearheaded the Atlanta School of Social Work. The Social Service Institute at Morehouse brought together prominent reformers, black and white professors, and other experts.¹⁴⁹ As a result, young African American women gained instruction from some of the country's top scholars and pursued their own careers in social work. These social workers provided an all-female team of leaders for the organization, who checked in on each family. The Neighborhood Union's approach was not one of charity, but was a solidarity-based approach that provided members of the black poor and working classes with the knowledge and resources to implement sustainable changes within their communities.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 71.

¹⁴⁹ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 140.



First Graduating Class of Nurses' Assistants, 1910.¹⁵⁰

The Neighborhood Union initially relied on the leadership of middle class African American women. However, embedded in its organizational structure were also opportunities to strengthen the leadership capabilities of young women, and poor and working class women and mothers. The organization was an exception even among African American organizations in its efforts to actively involve members of all classes.¹⁵¹ The Neighborhood Union's ability to bring together members of various classes was partly shaped by segregation; upper, middle, and poor and working class African Americans in Atlanta often lived in close proximity to one another. The organization's leadership structure was a proactive attempt to diminish class barriers. Hope felt that the two largest barriers that kept African American women from more fully strengthening their homes and neighborhoods emerged from individualistic and classist

¹⁵⁰ Neighborhood Union Collection, Photo, "First Graduating Class of Nurses' Assistants," 1910, box 14, folder 26, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

¹⁵¹ Godshalk, *Veiled Visions*, 229.

attitudes.¹⁵² As a result, the organization included members of all classes; wives of intellectuals, most of whom founded the organization, college students, and poor and working class citizens of Atlanta. With the assistance of community members, Neighborhood Union members divided the city into zones.¹⁵³ They then created mini governments for each neighborhood, led by members of all classes elected by members of that community. Each zone had chairperson elected by neighborhood members. Zones were then divided into neighborhoods, neighborhoods into districts. Districts were overseen by a neighborhood president, who dealt with neighborhood organization and record preservation.¹⁵⁴ Each district was also overseen by a director chosen by the original Neighborhood Union board. Directors conducted surveys at each home, educating members of the community on the improvement plan for their neighborhood.¹⁵⁵ This structure, carefully planned by Hope, functioned to keep all members of the community educated on changes in their neighborhoods and give them opportunities to report feedback.¹⁵⁶

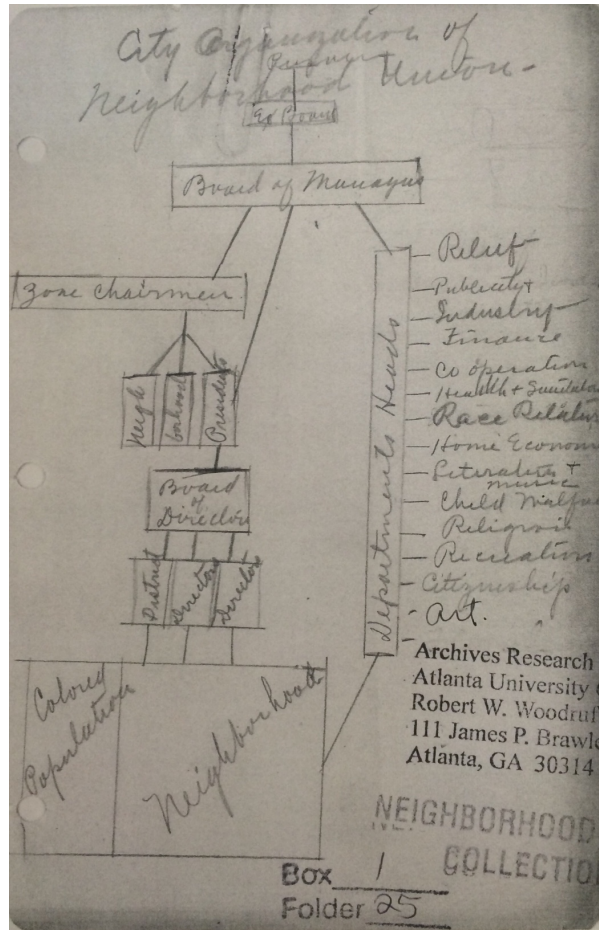
¹⁵² Godshalk, *Veiled Visions*, 229.

¹⁵³ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope* 67.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 68.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 67.



Sketch by Ms. Lugenia Burns Hope, “City Organization of the Neighborhood Union” Shows detailed delegation of responsibilities from the President, Executive Board, Board of Managers, Zone Chairmen (looked after Neighborhood Presidents), Board of Directors (oversaw District Directors), Neighborhood, and Department Heads.¹⁵⁷

Throughout the history of the Neighborhood Union, domestic workers and women of other wage-earning jobs were active in the leadership of the organization. Laura Bugg, a domestic worker, was one of the original, founding members. Bugg was married to a carpenter and had three children.¹⁵⁸ She served as the group’s “spiritual leader,” leading group prayers at the beginning of each meeting and speaking to them

¹⁵⁷ Neighborhood Union Collection, Sketch “City Organization of the Neighborhood Union” n.d., box 1, Folder 25, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

¹⁵⁸ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 141.

about spiritual matters.¹⁵⁹ Bugg was eventually elected vice president of the organization. The fact that Bugg was both a domestic worker and spiritual leader among middle class women of the Neighborhood Union is a testament to Hope's belief that all classes possessed knowledge on morality and leadership. Hattie Barnett, another member, was a domestic and laundry worker.¹⁶⁰ In addition to her work, she contributed her time and resources to the Neighborhood Union as a member of the board of directors and a the second vice president. Other women of the Neighborhood Union elected Barnett to speak with government officials at city hall, alongside Hope. Ella Crawford, a domestic worker, and her minister husband were community activists. She managed her neighborhood district, served on the board, acted as a chairperson, and as an assistant secretary to the Neighborhood Union. As indicated in their various class positions and backgrounds, the organization was driven by poor and working class women who knew best what their communities needed. These women also encouraged the involvement of their husbands who contributed their skills and social networks to the organization as well.¹⁶¹

The Neighborhood Union was recognized for its positive contributions by members of the poor and working classes. A 1925 article from the *Chicago Defender*, "Atlanta Thanks College Women for Community Service Center: Neighborhood Union, Under Leadership of Mrs. John Hope Covers Wise Field," communicates the organization's reputation. The article recognizes the Union's popularity among members of the poor and working classes who "grasped ... opportunities eagerly," filling every

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 141.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

class so as to require more spacious settlement houses.¹⁶² The article also recognizes the Neighborhood Union as providing both “real help and inspiration to the common folk at their doors.”¹⁶³ While the author’s use of the phrase “common folk” should be scrutinized for its patronizing tone, it is clear that the Neighborhood Union gained a positive reputation beyond Atlanta for its work with the poor and working classes.

The Neighborhood Union’s localized leadership model allowed members of each neighborhood to gain the services they felt their community needed. Within this more democratic structure, the middle class board of the Neighborhood Union still maintained a level of control in implementing leaders. The directors that oversaw each district were approved by Neighborhood Union board members. The Neighborhood Union’s focus on receiving feedback from each family also meant that middle class women were afforded access to the personal lives of community members. In its early years, women from the original board would interview members of each household to assess the needs of each neighborhood. Some scholars interpret the home interviews as opportunities for the women of the Neighborhood Union to evaluate the morality of certain families, and implement changes to discourage behaviors they deemed immoral.¹⁶⁴ Immoral behaviors, they claim, would be those that deviated from middle class, Christian standards of sexual respectability—prostitution, public dancing—and that some investigators found morally suspect.¹⁶⁵ This perceived class tension stemming from different conceptions of morality,

¹⁶² Neighborhood Union Collection, Newspaper article “Atlanta Thanks College Women for Community Service Center” 1925, box 7, Folder 26, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

¹⁶³ Neighborhood Union Collection, Newspaper article “Atlanta Thanks College Women for Community Service Center” 1925, box 7, Folder 26, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

¹⁶⁴ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 133.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 132.

however, is at odds with Hope's anti-classist community vision for the Neighborhood Union.

The Neighborhood Union sought to realize its primary goal of providing resources to strengthen and cultivate the moral, social, and intellectual standards in Atlanta's black neighborhoods by resolving a variety of infrastructural, educational, and sanitation issues within neighborhoods. Improving neighborhood conditions was not an expression that the poor and working classes needed to be uplifted by the middle upper classes. Instead, the Neighborhood Union sought to improve neighborhoods so that residents could be treated more equitably by the surrounding society. This primary goal tied the organization to a secondary goal of creating awareness and respect for the organization's work within the surrounding white community. Through its efforts, the Neighborhood Union maintained a commitment to cooperating with white city officials and showing that Atlanta's African American population were upstanding citizens.¹⁶⁶ This latter approach, seeking to build a reputable community, may have created some class tensions later on within the African American community, as the middle class potentially encouraged norms of respectability among other classes.¹⁶⁷ This secondary approach was at odds with the Neighborhood Union's primary goal, commitment to black community solidarity; it risked settling for white-imposed standards.

Hope's black Baptist worldview and past experiences were reflected in the Neighborhood Union's structure. Her desire to create stronger homes, communities, and to diminish class barriers was reflected in her womanist Christian philosophy. The Neighborhood Union sought to create a democratically organized community, and

¹⁶⁶ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope* 67.

¹⁶⁷ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 73.

simultaneously maintained certain middle class Baptist values. Hope's vision and work with the Neighborhood Union raises important issues surrounding the intersections of religion and institutional practice. While Hope envisioned a unified community, she possessed certain beliefs on moral and immoral behavior that may have encouraged uniformity among the poor and working classes. The next chapter will explore the impact of the Neighborhood Union's religious identity on creating class tension. Given its secondary aim to display the worthiness of poor and working class African Americans to white America, the next chapter will also address whether this motive marginalized certain members of the black poor and working classes.

CHAPTER THREE

THE INFLUENCE OF RESPECTABILITY POLITICS ON CREATING CLASS TENSION IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD UNION

The Neighborhood Union's empowering and democratic organizational structure validated the capabilities of many African American women across classes. As expressed in her personal notes, Hope's vision for the Neighborhood Union included implicit beliefs about what a healthy community should look like. Hope's middle class, black Baptist worldview shaped her organizational model. She believed that providing certain resources would enable African American women of all classes in Atlanta to survive and seek stimulating and fulfilling activities. Within her understanding of what a healthy community consisted of, Hope also believed some activities were destructive to self-worth. Scholars have claimed that Hope and the Neighborhood Union imposed their strict views of sexual immorality onto members of the poor and working classes by investigating and discouraging dancing in public dance halls. These claims also place Hope's actions within the larger context of beliefs among the black elite and appeals to respectability. These criticisms, however, are reductive. The actions of the Neighborhood Union to investigate public dance halls had less to do with appeals to sexual immorality and respectability. Instead, these actions were grounded more in a desire to meet needs voiced by poor and working class community members who wanted to live in safer neighborhoods with varied sources of entertainment. Understood within its context, and recognizing the diverse values and ideas among members of the poor and working classes, investigating public dance halls produced less class tension. The consequences of these actions, however, still marginalized certain individuals.

Scholars criticize the value system Hope and the women of the Neighborhood Union maintained. These values encouraged women to uphold behavioral norms, as indicated in the organization's efforts to curb the presence of public dance halls. Scholars interpret this action as Neighborhood Union women judging the leisure activities of some members of the black poor and working classes. The Neighborhood Union was explicit in its attempts to expel "vice and crime" from the city's black neighborhoods.¹⁶⁸ The "Achievements" section in a Neighborhood Union's annual report lists that "dives of immorality have been broken up."¹⁶⁹ One of the organization's original aims, to "abolish slums and houses of immorality" and investigate other forms of leisure like "dance halls, pool rooms, and vaudeville shows"¹⁷⁰ also conveys Hope's sentiments that such activities were not wholesome like alternative forms of entertainment provided by the Neighborhood Union.¹⁷¹ A few scholars have critiqued the organization for exacerbating class tensions by condemning the leisure activities enjoyed by some members of the black poor and working classes.

Historian Jacqueline Rouse claims that Hope's Victorian values gave her a sense of moral superiority over the poor and working classes.¹⁷² While Rouse does not define what she means specifically by Victorian values, Nancy Cott offers a definition in her article, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790 – 1850." Cott describes the ways in which Protestantism contributed to distinct views on how women should treat their sexuality. Placing value on self-control and bodily restraint was

¹⁶⁸ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 67.

¹⁶⁹ Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 502.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 501.

¹⁷¹ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 145.

¹⁷² Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 132.

upheld by the notion that “women who embodied God’s grace were more spiritual, hence less susceptible to carnal passion than men.”¹⁷³ When Rouse refers to Victorian values, therefore, she may be referring both referring to Hope’s conceptions of gender—how women should present themselves in front of others, and the religious beliefs that affirmed sexual restraint. Rouse’s analysis supports the narrative that Hope was a black elite who maintained a patronizing sense of uplifting the black poor and working classes. Hope’s commitment to increasing solidarity and diminishing class divisions, as indicated in her community vision, problematizes Rouse’s analysis.

From Hope’s early upbringing and past social work experiences, Rouse’s characterization of Hope as a Christian reformer who maintained a sense of “conscious superiority” over the rest of the community seems like an oversimplification. She was exposed to many members of the poor and working classes and faced economic insecurity herself.¹⁷⁴ Rouse ties Hope’s Victorian morals to a desire to encourage affluent whites “to take notice of an educated black middle class.”¹⁷⁵ This analysis is missing a fuller understanding of Hope’s perspective, and overlooks the role of her past experiences and religious beliefs in shaping her behavior. Rouse places the emphasis on respectability politics rather than more deeply examining Hope’s perspective. While her perspective can be easily dismissed as Victorian, examining Hope more closely and within the context she lived reveals other interpretations of her values. It is possible that Hope felt she was allowing the poor and working classes more opportunities to express themselves, and the ability to recover a right denied to African Americans—that is, the ability to live

¹⁷³ Cott, “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790 – 1850,” (University of Chicago Press, 1978), 220.

¹⁷⁴ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 16.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 132.

with and care for one's family.¹⁷⁶ Hope's religious, womanist perspective—sensitive to the work of poor and working class African American women and men—was in some ways limited by her conceptions of gender, but presents another understanding of empowerment when taken within its context.

Rouse raises an important point about whether Hope's moral value system influenced the activities of the Neighborhood Union. The Neighborhood Union, she argues, reflected Hope's Victorian values because the organization alienated some black poor and working class women. Given its focus on building family-centered communities, "little attention was paid to persons who were judged undesirable...few projects were initiated to assist those whose objectionable behavior had called them to the attention of the reformers."¹⁷⁷ The Neighborhood Union's inability to reach certain members of the black poor and working classes can partly be explained by Hope's understanding of poverty as producing moral evil. The organization was guided by the notion that if it provided proper infrastructural and community services, certain behaviors perceived as immoral would diminish. In a speech Hope gave in 1908, the year the Neighborhood Union was founded, she asserted her belief that poverty and class division were environmental phenomena that adversely affected all classes of African Americans. In this speech, Hope described poverty as a moral problem that degraded the poor and produced crime:

I have dwelt much on bad housing and extreme poverty and tried to show the relation of this condition to crime. I have tried to emphasize that there may after all be some sort of relation between physical uncleanliness and moral uncleanliness. I have dwelt much on the difficulties of social uplift in Atlanta with its loose enforcement of law. But there must be kept in mind the hopeful side.

¹⁷⁶ Gordon, *Black and White Visions of Welfare*, 24.

¹⁷⁷ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 133.

People living in slums do not have to die in slums. Nor do slums have to continue to be slums. We can improve the houses and we can make the people hopeful. And after all that is the problem—to encourage our people and bring sunshine into their lives. Our obligation is to those in need—one must love our neighbor as ourselves¹⁷⁸

The Neighborhood Union's efforts to create healthier, cleaner, stimulating and more supportive communities were grounded in Hope's understanding of poverty. As indicated in this speech, Hope believed that communities built through the services of the Neighborhood Union would create happier, more hopeful people. Hope does not describe what exactly she intends by "moral uncleanliness," but it is clear that she believed that diminishing poverty would produce more hopeful, morally attuned people.¹⁷⁹ The role of the women of the Neighborhood Union to "bring sunshine" into the lives of the poor indicates Hope's belief that women possessed a certain sense of morality that allowed them to encourage others. This speech excerpt could support Rouse's characterization of Hope's feelings of moral superiority. Her desire to provide encouragement, however, imploring the middle class to "encourage our people" and to "love our neighbor as ourselves," carries purer ambitions to support one another out of a sense of equality, not judge the poor for their poverty. The democratic leadership structure of the organization also challenged class power dynamics, as leaders of the Neighborhood Union constantly collaborated with members of the poor and working classes.

Rouse believes the Neighborhood Union was exclusionary in some ways because it focused its efforts on meeting the needs of families and young adults and neglected the

¹⁷⁸ Neighborhood Union Collection, Speech "We have but to look about us..." 1908, box 1, Folder 24, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

¹⁷⁹ Neighborhood Union Collection, Speech "We have but to look about us..." 1908, box 1, Folder 24, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

circumstances of some individuals with “objectionable behavior.”¹⁸⁰ This is a fair criticism. Hope believed that children living in slums were particularly vulnerable to morally depraved influences. In the same 1908 speech, Hope conveyed her belief that communities were meant to cultivate positive values among children;

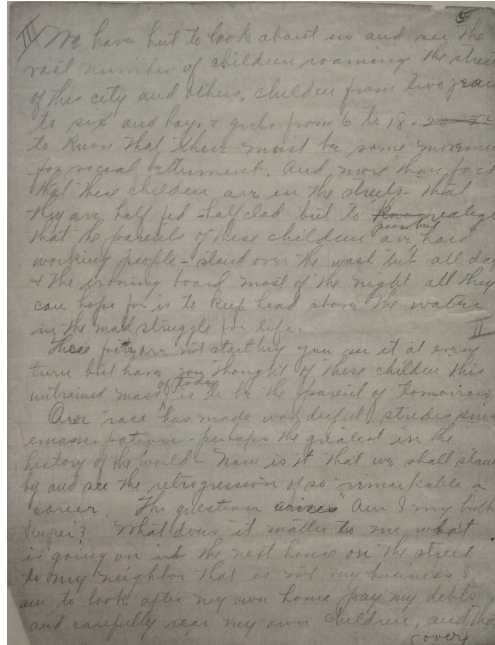
The children of these people who are shut in among surroundings which sear the mind by suggestions of evil, whose hideous ugliness warps the soul away from ideals of truth and beauty and purity. What hope is there for the child? Someone has said the most pitiful victim of modern life is not the slum child who dies but the slum child who lives. Every time a baby dies the nation loses a prospective citizen, but in every slum child who lives the nation has...a possible criminal¹⁸¹

In this statement, Hope conveyed her belief that children needed to be protected from surroundings that “sear[ed] the mind by suggestions of evil.” Slums were “hideous” places, incapable of providing a proper environment in which to raise morally upstanding citizens; in fact, Hope asserted, children who grew up in slums were at risk of becoming criminals. Such assertions deserve critical examination. If innocent children were at risk of criminal behavior, then what was Hope saying about the grown men and women who lived in the slum-like neighborhoods of Atlanta? This speech complicates the Neighborhood Union’s empowering treatment of many members of the black poor and working classes. By attributing moral decay to the surrounding environment, Hope fell prey to the assumption that some individuals needed to be reformed and incorporated into a body that reflected black, middle class Baptist behaviors and values. In her essay, “African American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” Higginbotham indicates that for some black Christian reformers, “non-conformity was equated with

¹⁸⁰ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 133.

¹⁸¹ Neighborhood Union Collection, Speech “We have but to look about us...” 1908, box 1, Folder 24, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

deviance.”¹⁸² In this way, Hope’s value system may have influenced the organization’s affairs. There is no evidence that the Neighborhood Union encouraged non-normative forms of self-expression. Instead, the Neighborhood Union has been critiqued for discouraging certain forms of behavior that created class tension and alienated certain individuals.



Excerpt of Hope’s speech encouraging members of the black middle class to combat poverty, 1908.¹⁸³

These limitations will be taken into account in examining historian Tera Hunter’s critique of the Neighborhood Union. The Neighborhood Union’s efforts surrounding public dance halls provide a case study to more closely examine how the organization may have raised class tensions. Hunter asserts that the Neighborhood Union inhibited the agency of some poor and working class African Americans by curtailing activities some

¹⁸² Higginbotham, “African American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” (*Signs*: 1992), 271.

¹⁸³ Neighborhood Union Collection, Handwritten Speech, “We have but to look about us...,” 1908, box 1, folder 24, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

felt were liberating. Dancing allowed African Americans of all classes ownership of their bodies, a right often denied to them at the expense of their employers who wanted to assert full control over the lives of their employees.¹⁸⁴ While dancing “threatened the social order” by allowing men and women control over their bodies and the right to enjoyment, these practices were viewed differently by Hope and the women of the Neighborhood Union.¹⁸⁵ Hunter illustrates the white societal context in which certain leisure activities were viewed as unsophisticated. After the Atlanta Riots, white city officials tried to rebuild downtown Atlanta into a “white consumer fairyland.”¹⁸⁶ Class tensions among Atlanta’s white citizens were reflected in rhetoric condemning sources of entertainment frequented by working class whites, including “cheap theaters, vaudeville shows, moving pictures, saloons, [and] dance halls.”¹⁸⁷ White upper class men and women asserted the “wholesome” nature of their amusements—like frequenting European-style dances and parks—and degraded the activities of poor and working class whites.¹⁸⁸

Atlanta, “The White City,” was meant to create an entertainment culture that encouraged whiteness and homogeneity while positioning the city’s black population as interlopers.¹⁸⁹ White citizens of Atlanta crafted vitriolic characterizations of poor and working class African Americans. African Americans who frequented two of the most popular downtown streets of Atlanta, Auburn Avenue and Decatur Street, were subject to various stereotypes; Benjamin Davis, the editor of the *Atlanta Independent* advanced

¹⁸⁴ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 168.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 169.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 146.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 147.

¹⁸⁸ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 147.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 146.

stereotypes like the “Auburn Avenue Negro” who was described as “industrious and thrifty” and the “Decatur Street Negro” characterized as “shiftless and fun-loving.”¹⁹⁰ African Americans frequenting Auburn Avenue were somehow viewed as more acceptable because they were characterized as more honest and worthy due to their work ethic and monetary restraint. Words like “shiftless and fun-loving” characterized members of the black poor and working classes who frequented Decatur Street as unreliable, unintelligent, and unworthy of enjoying themselves.

Some black elites maintained their own judgments of the leisure activities of some members of the black poor and working classes. Spaces like public dance halls, some asserted, inhibited efforts to pursue equal citizenship. These spaces were viewed as open to those willing to pay a small fee, and therefore less sophisticated than dance halls for invited, “socially responsible” guests.¹⁹¹ Henry Hugh Proctor, Pastor of the First Congregational Church in Atlanta, one of Atlanta’s largest black churches, viewed public dance halls as “a stumbling block to the weak and the immature of both sexes... a center of evil influences... a vestibule to the house of shame.” Dances popular among some members of the black poor and working classes like the “Slow Drag” and “The Itch,” were seen by some black elites as promiscuous and unrefined. Hunter describes Proctor and Hope as viewing dance halls as “the single most egregious activity contributing to the moral decay of the black race.” While Hunter ties Hope’s beliefs on public behavior to her moral values, she does not provide a complete analysis of Hope’s perspective. Instead, Hunter groups her among black middle class reformers who “tried to mollify white animosity and racial prejudice... by insisting that blacks conform to the standards of

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 153.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 147, 173, 172.

a chaste, disciplined, and servile labor force.”¹⁹² Hunter’s analysis does not closely examine Hope’s reasoning behind discouraging the presence of dance halls, because she views all black elites through the same lens.

Rouse and Hunter engage with the concept of the “politics of respectability” in their critiques of Hope. The politics of respectability describes the efforts of some members of the black middle and upper classes to discourage certain behavioral expressions of the black poor and working classes in an effort to disprove harmful stereotypes. Respectability “opposed lower class idleness and vice on the one hand and high society’s hedonism and materialism on the other.”¹⁹³ As a result, expressions of respectability encouraged expressions of morality shaped by class position. From their interactions with white Christians, their desire to be treated with respect by white Americans, and from their own faith, Black Baptist women were encouraged to use respectability politics to combat negative stereotypes and demonstrate their Christian morality. In their efforts to promote equal citizenship, Higginbotham argues, some middle and upper class black Baptist women wanted to appear respectable to white Americans and participated in efforts to stifle the expressions and ‘improper behavior’ of the black poor and working classes.¹⁹⁴ Such activities often communicated conservative understandings of institutional racism as strengthened by certain behaviors of the black poor and working classes, like wearing “gaudy” colors, dancing in ways deemed un-

¹⁹² Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 173, 168.

¹⁹³ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 187.

¹⁹⁴ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 15.

dignified and sexually suggestive, and disobeying the Sabbath by attending baseball games on Sundays.¹⁹⁵

Hope's exposure to patronizing, hypocritical white Christian reformers and her efforts to preserve her own independence as a woman, problematize characterizations of her as a reformer entrenched in respectability politics. She communicated her frustration with hypocritical uses of Christian morality to the white women of the Young Women's Christian Association. Hope grew frustrated after white YWCA reformers resisted black representation on the YWCA's national board. In a letter to the board, she fervently asserted, "We [colored women] would rather have no YWCA and go back to our church organizations than have a special policy for colored women under the direction of Southern white women who know absolutely nothing about us."¹⁹⁶ Hope's years in Atlanta indicate her frustration with the hypocrisy of white Christian reformers. It is more realistic that Hope was motivated by her religious beliefs about healthy communities and proper behavior than by appealing to white America. While at times Hope uses the phrase "uplift" in her writing, her efforts do not indicate a desire to for all classes of African Americans to become equal by mimicking white Americans. Instead, she maintained a Christian perspective that affirmed blackness and was committed to black community solidarity. Framing her actions as predominantly motivated by respectability politics without further explanation is misleading. Hope's views on emerging black, urban working class entertainment were motivated more by her Christian worldview and the

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Neighborhood Union Collection, Speech, "The Cleveland Meeting of the YWCA" 1920, box 14, Folder 12, Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

realities of limited extra curricular activities for women. In addition, if Hope practiced respectability politics, it was likely in the discursive fashion Higginbotham reveals.

Higginbotham argues that black Baptist women engaged in respectability politics in a way that allowed them to use their morality as weapons against racism. The 1910 Baptist's women's conference had a short speech to direct individuals' etiquette on streetcars to communicate their dignity and self-control; the speech instructed black women to show their superiority by "remember[ing] that the quiet, dignified individual who is respectful to others is after all the superior individual, be he black or white."¹⁹⁷ Respectability politics allowed some black Baptist women to challenge racist discourse by showing that race was socially constructed, and in doing so demonstrate their moral and religious superiority.¹⁹⁸ Higginbotham also affirms the ways in which respectability politics was both used as a discursive tool to combat negative stereotypes, and appeal to whites through Christian morality.

In her engagement with community work and personal history, Hope encountered many people from very different backgrounds, political and class positions. She did so both out of necessity and to network for the success of the Neighborhood Union. Hope's identity as an African American, middle class, Christian woman allowed her to traverse multiple worlds; she harnessed the power of many groups with varying interests, ranging from white and black Christian women, black intellectuals, members of the black poor working class, and eventually white government officials.¹⁹⁹ She was able to gain the support of some white reformers while maintaining her integrity and own goals for the

¹⁹⁷ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent* 193.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 192.

¹⁹⁹ Hine, *Black Women in America*, Web.

black community through the Neighborhood Union. Given Hope's devout faith and deep understanding of white Christian hypocrisy, it is likely that Hope was not focused on proving the worth of African Americans so they could obtain equal rights. She was keenly aware of how to interact with whites while maintaining her own convictions.²⁰⁰

Hunter argues that efforts by the Neighborhood Union to discourage public dance halls exacerbated class tensions and further marginalized African Americans, whose bodies and time were under constant judgment and surveillance by white Americans and black elites. Hunter pins the efforts of the women of the Neighborhood Union against the backdrop of anti-black, anti-poor and working class leisure activities. In doing so, she oversimplifies the perspectives of Hope and the women of the Neighborhood Union as judging the morals of the poor and working classes, and as trying to appear respectable to white Americans. By failing to provide the necessary context that informed Hope's perspective, Rouse and Hunter present limited analyses. Hope, Hunter explains, felt that dance halls hindered communal efforts against racial injustice because they were not "virtuous."²⁰¹ She summarizes Hope's view that dance halls were morally damaging to the African American image, as indicative of "broader tensions about race, class, and sexuality."²⁰² Beyond this, Hunter does not provide an explanation of the religious values and political and historical contexts that informed Hope's belief that such behaviors were not "virtuous."²⁰³ Hunter notes that Hope felt the Neighborhood Union provided a "wholesome... alternative to the dance halls."²⁰⁴ Hope, as Hunter recognizes, wanted girls

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 137.

²⁰² Ibid, 169.

²⁰³ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 137.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 137.

to have a place of recreation besides the dance halls. In her own words, Hope established the Neighborhood Union to “encourage wholesome thought and action by disseminating good literature among the young.”²⁰⁵ By categorizing Hope’s perspective as part of a larger imposition of black elite body politics, Hunter glosses over the fact that Hope’s disdain for public dance halls was largely shaped by her anxieties about limited entertainment for children and young African American women. These anxieties were influenced by conservative Baptist beliefs on drinking, dress, card playing, and other forms of ““improper” decorum,” which likely included particular dances.²⁰⁶ Equally significant, Hope perspective on dance halls was informed by a political and historical climate that threatened the wellbeing of black women.

Hope was not as fixated on the immorality of dance halls as much as she was fixated on abolishing Atlanta’s slums. Public dance halls were one of the few extracurricular spaces available to members of the black poor and working classes in slum-like neighborhoods. These halls were scrutinized by the women of the Neighborhood Union, many of who were working class women, because they gained a negative reputation among many poor and working class families. A 1924 survey, “Opinions of A Hundred Heads of Families,” conducted by the Neighborhood Union and the Atlanta School of Social Work, indicates the limited recreational opportunities available to families, and the safety concerns they constantly dealt with in their surrounding community.²⁰⁷ The Neighborhood Union conducted the survey after

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 140.

²⁰⁶ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 15.

²⁰⁷ Neighborhood Union Collection, Speech “A Survey of the Opinions of A Hundred Heads of Families Respecting Washington Park Made Jointly By The Neighborhood Union and Atlanta School of Social

members learned of frequent criticisms of Washington Park by the surrounding African American community. Surveyors from the Neighborhood Union and the Atlanta School of Social Work conducted a survey to “determine the real opinions of the residents respecting the park.”²⁰⁸ From this survey, it appears that many members of the poor and working classes disapproved of the dance halls in their neighborhoods. When families were asked for general impressions of the park, they voiced their concerns; “Disgusted; it’s not a park. Just a place.”²⁰⁹ The park consisted of various dance halls, grassy areas, and a pool. When asked about the amusements in the park, surveyors received 34 negative and 16 favorable responses.²¹⁰ Multiple respondents voiced their concerns for the wellbeing of young girls: “the Dancing Pavilion is dangerous, especially for young girls,” other respondents wanted to “cut out” the dancing pavilions. Some respondents stated that the dance halls had “vulgar dancing,” and that amusements were “not very wholesome,” “degrading,” and “a nuisance.”²¹¹ A majority of responses reflected safety concerns: “Shooting is very bad along the streets and over in the park,” and “endangers residents...[with] fights and drunken men,” “The language and fighting is awful. Several times they would shoot and bullets go in the houses.” Residents also commented that it was not safe to go outside, “[You] cannot sit on your porch. Afraid of shooting,” when the police were needed, they “don’t seem to be there.”²¹² The effect of these concerns

Work” 1924, box 7, Folder 5, p 1. Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Neighborhood Union Collection, Speech “A Survey of the Opinions of A Hundred Heads of Families...”

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Neighborhood Union Collection, Speech “A Survey of the Opinions of A Hundred Heads of Families Respecting Washington Park Made Jointly By The Neighborhood Union and Atlanta School of Social

most often related back to the safety of the neighborhood's children. The park and dance halls, residents shared, had a "bad effect on young folk."²¹³ Many were concerned about the lack of stimulating children's recreation; "There are no amusements for children," and the "park is too near to the schools."²¹⁴ Multiple respondents expressed their concerns that poor lighting also contributed to safety threats in the park.

Dance hall investigations were tied to legitimate safety concerns expressed by community members. Given these responses, Hope's view of dance halls gains a deeper significance. Hope likely disapproved of the dancing based on her own beliefs as a Baptist woman who obeyed a strict code of ethics. The Neighborhood Union's behavior toward dance halls, however, had more to do with creating a community safe enough for residents to comfortably sit outside their homes and where children could experience a variety of stimulating recreational activities. In addition, many members of the black poor and working classes affiliated themselves with the Baptist tradition. It is likely that some of those who felt dance halls were degrading were also motivated by their religious convictions.²¹⁵ Hunter's claim that the Neighborhood Union created class tension should be examined more closely. It appears that many members of the poor and working classes also sought alternative forms of entertainment, and bemoaned the increased crime their communities faced from the large crowds public dance halls attracted. The Neighborhood Union aided in these projects by petitioning the city to install proper street lighting, making young women and children safer from attack and by providing various

Work" 1924, box 7, Folder 5, p 1. Archives Research Center, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 7.

recreational services. Hunter's argument, while valid in its criticisms of body politics, does not take into account the reality that leisure spaces sometimes threatened neighborhood safety. A closer analysis of the Neighborhood Union's stance on public dance halls presents a caution against a dualistic understanding of class behavior. Class position in itself is not an indicator of different beliefs on behavior and morality. The Neighborhood Union's main flaw was not that it erected class barriers by investigating public dance halls, but that its services did not reach certain marginalized individuals, as Rouse and Hunter both indicate. Hope's community organizing approach was limited by her view that poverty increased the chances of individuals falling prey to immorality.

Hope's female-oriented, Baptist worldview perhaps informed her views on the need for African American women to display agency over their bodies.²¹⁶ Relocating public dance halls likely alienated some poor and working class women. Hunter reveals that dancing allowed African American women a type of ownership of their bodies historically denied during slavery and in their workplaces. Hope's actions were limited in their ability to honor public dancing as an act of liberation. Hunter's critique raises an important point: when moral beliefs become bound with class position, they can result in judgmental behavior that misinterprets the various expressions of the poor and working classes. Hope's beliefs, however, also advanced an alternative understanding of women's agency over their bodies. From her perspective, closing the dance halls, spearheading infrastructural improvements, and providing alternate sources of recreation may have been attempts to combat the risk of sexual exploitation and provide more recreational activities. In doing so, she asserted the multidimensional talents of African American

²¹⁶ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 1.

women, who deserved various outlets for leisure and self-expression. Hope should be understood as a woman who deeply cared for members of the black poor and working classes around her. Understanding her perspective merely as “Victorian” overlooks the complexities of her perspective, and that of women like her, on women’s agency. By creating communities centered around the needs of children and their families, Hope was not merely emphasizing stringent gender roles, but asserting an important right. While slavery destroyed families, Hope constantly worked to create communities in which families could live in safety, strengthen themselves through practical resources, and enjoy social and intellectual stimulation.

CONCLUSION

This thesis focuses on providing insights into Hope's worldview as a middle class, black Baptist woman. Her convictions on faith and community served as guiding forces throughout her work, and shaped much of the vision and structure of the Neighborhood Union. My argument, that scholars have presented only partial information on Hope's perspective, is not meant to serve as an indictment. Rather, this has been an attempt to examine Hope's perspective more fully, and speaks more broadly to America's incomplete historical memory that fails to fully honor the individual stories of activists of color. Mischaracterizations of Hope speak to the reality that few have contributed to the conversation on Ms. Hope. If the stories of incredible reformers go unexplored or unquestioned, history may remember them as different people than they were. In this case, some interpretations of the Neighborhood Union have focused on examining class division, while the more relevant question is how African Americans have often been forced to sacrifice their leisure time and activities since emancipation in order to ensure their safety.

The failure of the dominant, American historical narrative to honor fully the stories of individual black reformers also means that we lose a richer understanding of their nuanced perspectives. Hope should not merely be categorized as a black elite or as limited by Victorian values. She should be recognized for her own astute community vision. This vision sought fulfilling stimulation centered on the self-preservation of black women, their bodies, and other members of the black poor and working classes. Her community vision sought to secure the safety and enrichment of black women and their

families. Her alternative conceptions of stimulation and fulfillment for the black poor and working classes was shaped by a context of racialized violence, and her religious beliefs. Hope's work and the work of black congregants and clubwomen challenges common conceptions of the Progressive Era, the Social Gospel movement and the settlement house movement. These movements were not new to the black community. The settlement house movement was not a movement solely for immigrants, and black activists were always on the frontlines of both basic and progressive reforms amidst resistance from "progressive" whites. In her activism, Hope went beyond analyzing poverty to examine class inequity, challenging women in her own class to think beyond their needs and dispel their class biases. She envisioned the Neighborhood Union as part of a collective struggle, rather than a beacon symbolizing the charity of the black middle and upper classes toward the poor and working classes.

In 1935, Hope resigned from her position on the board of the Neighborhood Union. While she attempted to resign multiple times before and was persuaded to stay, Hope finally resigned. She was sixty-four, had faith in the leadership of the Neighborhood Union, and was engaged in various other national and local activist groups.²¹⁷ Under her leadership, the Neighborhood Union achieved tremendous changes, including reshaping black schooling in Atlanta, improving the city's infrastructure in black neighborhoods, starting homes for girls who were not in contact with their families, and gathering support for the improvement of sanitariums and the increased hiring of black nurses.²¹⁸ The Neighborhood Union achieved such amazing, widespread change because it harnessed the leadership capabilities and expertise of many individuals from

²¹⁷ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 88.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, 89.

all classes. After John Hope died of pneumonia in 1936, Lugenia Burns Hope suffered from a stroke before passing away of heart failure in 1947. Her ashes were scattered over the Morehouse campus.²¹⁹ The Neighborhood Union's involvement in creating the Atlanta School of Social Work, and the city's adoption of various Neighborhood Union projects slowed the growth and scope of the organization. It ran until the 1970s, after its funding decreased and the city took over many of the organization's projects.

The story of Hope and the Neighborhood Union maintain relevance today. While her current legacy does not fully honor the breadth of her work, traces of her story have been brought to public consciousness. In 1994, community organizer Barack Obama founded the Lugenia Hope Center to encourage leadership development, civic engagement, and community organizing in Bronxville, Chicago.²²⁰ When Hope is referenced in various books, scholars often recognize the unique nature of her organization for its empowering treatment of African Americans of all classes. Hope's story is not only relevant because she is an inspiring historical figure; the systemic violence and racism she rejected still threatens black communities today. During a time in which the safety of black children is threatened on the streets and play structures of their own neighborhoods, Hope's story is relevant. In a year in which politicians postponed addressing the Flint water crisis in a city that is a majority black and faces widespread poverty, Hope's story is relevant.

Hope presented a vision of community that honored African Americans of all classes, and sought their leadership. The Neighborhood Union implemented immense

²¹⁹ Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 127.

²²⁰ Lugenia Hope Center: Leadership Development and Organizing Institute, "About Us," (Chicago: Lugenia Hope Center) Web.

changes, held white policy makers accountable, and was unapologetic in protecting its commitment to black solidarity. This vision is relevant today. As a historical figure, Hope provides a model for what anti-racist, anti-classist, religiously motivated activism can look like. Her story, and that of the black church, still have the power to critique the hypocrisy of white Christians—progressives, and those on the religious Right—by offering a faith that honors African Americans and seeks to dismantle oppression through constructive action. In reflecting on the role of Hope’s values in shaping the Neighborhood Union, her story presents a call to institutions to examine the values of their founders. The Neighborhood Union’s multi-class, shared leadership structure was shaped by members of the poor and working classes, but was also in some ways limited by its founder’s unique focus on women and families. As a result, the history of the Neighborhood Union communicates an important message about the flexibility of institutions to remain changing and open to criticism.

Hope’s vision for the Neighborhood Union was not fully realized. Today, there is still a need for more community organizations that seek the expertise and leadership of the black poor and working classes. On the 25th anniversary of the Neighborhood Union, a member of the Atlanta’s Citizen’s Committee gave a speech honoring Hope and her work with the Neighborhood Union. Her words indicate the organization’s inspiring achievements, and its members’ expansive vision that the Neighborhood Union would spread across the U.S. This speech celebrated Hope, and encouraged members of the Neighborhood Union as they looked forward to their future work with the organization;

In a broader sense, your work is not complete, the finer accomplishment, the richer attainment, to which all this has been but preliminary groundwork, lies ahead in the years to come. We feel that at the end of this twenty-five year period

your vision must be greatly broadened and your soul inspired by the evidences of development and the manifestation of gratitude on the part of the throngs of followers that surround you tonight. May you live to carry your torch of inspiration to still greater heights; and may those who have caught the flame from you build for America and for the world a greater, a stronger citizenship through the far-reaching influence of the Neighborhood Union²²¹

It seems many black activists have “caught the flame” of inspiration from the Neighborhood Union, and from black activists who have spearheaded other community organizations since. The strategies of the Neighborhood Union shaped the work of SNCC, as students canvassed neighborhood houses to educate community members on voting practices.²²² The Highlander School’s citizenship training classes also gained inspiration from the legacy of Hope and the work of black activists who started citizenship education courses. Today, this passage from the 25th anniversary of the Neighborhood Union still demands a response among American society at large. The Neighborhood Union’s attention to empowering and standing in solidarity with the black poor and working classes remains a relevant approach for all organizations.

²²¹ Neighborhood Union Collection, Box 7, Folder 41, “A Tribute of Love and Appreciation to Lugenia Hope, honoring her on the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Neighborhood Union,” 1933.

²²² Hine, *Black Women in America*, 2005.

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