

The Daughters of Myrtle Baptist Church *Womanist Consciousness in Motion*

The Daughters of Myrtle, founded in 1921, is a black women's church club in a predominantly black church in West Newton, Massachusetts, a majority-white suburb eight miles west of Boston, Massachusetts. While other scholars have examined black women's roles within the church from denominational perspectives and as they relate to the larger black women's club movement, this article employs the extended case study method and explores how women in this predominantly black suburban community exemplify womanist consciousness and practice within their local church.

The Daughters of Myrtle club was founded in 1921 when Pastor Wade Ryan recruited seven young married women to help with a regional New England conference sponsored by Myrtle Baptist Church. These seven black initiates of West Newton, Massachusetts, a majority-white suburb eight miles west of Boston, were mothers and, as such, their community activism was rooted in womanist and cultural mothering ideals (Abrahams, 1996; Edwards, 2000; Harley, 1990; Lawson, 2000). Womanism is activism embedded in daily experience. Black women practiced womanist actions and strategies before this term was coined, however, by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alice Walker, who uses it in *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose* (1984) to describe the perspective and experiences of “women of color.” A need for the term arose because the early feminist movement, which was led by middle-class white women advocating social changes, such as woman's suffrage, overlooked diversity within women's experiences. The movement focused primarily on gender-based oppression, and ignored oppression based on racism and classism. Yet black women had been exercising agency within oppressive situations for long periods. The term “womanism” indicates action within culturally determined positions, and provides a racialized and often class-conscious reflection of the

political, social, and spiritual linkages between women of color and society. In practice, it bridges personal and political activism, not only for the sake of self, but also for the sake of culture and community. This article employs the extended case study method and explores how one small group of church mothers exemplified womanist consciousness and practices (Dodson, 2002; Higginbotham, 1993; Weise, 2004). This consciousness was enacted through community mothering, an ethos based on nurturing and rearing children according to collective means and ideals. Community mothering is grounded in womanist practice, combining Patricia Hill Collins's (1991) concept of "other mothering," Cheryl Townsend Gilkes's (2001) belief that mothering is a form of community-based political activism, and Katrina Bell McDonald's (1997) contention that mothering is activist due to its collective and empathic nature. Although the women of Myrtle Baptist Church did not claim to be womanist, their actions express womanist consciousness and praxis (Carlton-LaNey, 1999; Baer, 1993; Cannon, 1995).

Historical overview of Newton's black community

Relatively small numbers of African Americans have lived in Newton, Massachusetts, since 1765 (Vital Records of Newton). Settled by Europeans in 1630, Newton was first a section of Cambridge, Massachusetts, but became autonomously incorporated in 1688. The population divided among fourteen villages, with West Newton being one of the oldest. Because Newton is bordered by the Charles River on three sides, most of its nineteenth-century industrial development took place along the riverfront (Dargan, 2000: 27). Historical records reveal that 18 African Americans lived there in 1765; most were enslaved. Slave holding in Newton and in Massachusetts was not widespread, and was legally barred in 1783. Newton was becoming a home for free black women and some white Anglo-Protestant abolitionist women. Louisa Addison, for instance, migrated from Prince Georges County, Maryland, in 1849, carrying her freedom papers in a handmade silk bag (Holzman, 1979).¹ Upon her arrival in Newton, as few as ten blacks lived in the area. Ellen Jackson, a white abolitionist, was one of her new neighbours; she was instrumental in founding the Newton chapter of the Freedmen's Aid Society in 1865 and became a lifelong supporter of the Tuskegee Normal and Hampton Institutes.²

After the state abolished slavery in 1783, Newton's black population remained in the single digits or low teens for more than a century. In 1865, there were only 14 blacks out of a population of 8,978, but by 1875, the population of Newton was 16,105, and the black population had grown to 130.³ The combination of employment opportunities, transportation, and housing made life in Newton a possibility for working-class blacks. In 1874, the *Newton Journal* observed that in West Newton and the immediate vicinity, "some colored persons, men, women and children have established themselves, and have prospered in their labours, some having purchased homes. Also, they are

industrious and prudent, serving faithfully in their various positions” (“West Newton”).

In his 1914 book, *In Freedom's Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes*, John Daniels briefly discusses the emergence of black suburbanites. He mentions the late-nineteenth-century creation of black churches in Malden, Medford, Brockton, and Newton, all towns with close proximity to Boston. Daniels does not pay special attention to the emergence of black suburban communities, but there is some recognition of the early growth of these communities. Daniels states:

Instances of Negroes living outside of distinctively Negro neighborhoods were exceedingly rare 'till twenty to thirty years after the [Civil] war. Then the number of such cases began to gradually increase, and today [1914] from 5 percent to 10 percent of the Negroes in Greater Boston [meaning suburb] live in predominately white neighborhoods. Sometimes a single street or section of a street, or sections of several adjacent streets, are occupied by Negroes, with no others of that race on any of the other streets within a wide radius. More frequently, a small contingent of Negro families will be interspersed among the white residents in a neighborhood. (151)

Interracial connections were not foreign to some of the blacks who arrived in Newton after the Civil War. In Boston, interracial coexistence was considered common. In fact, one study indicates that interracial marriage—marriages between black men and Irish immigrant women—was so pervasive in Boston's black community that by 1877 they accounted for 38 percent of all of Boston's black marriages (King, 1999: 70; Pleck, 1979: 114-115). These interracial marriages occurred within shared class boundaries. The creation of Myrtle Baptist was significant because in establishing the church, Newton blacks crossed class lines and connected with elite whites—both socially and economically.

In 1874, seven of Newton's 130 black citizens decided to found Myrtle Baptist. As rail services out of Boston expanded in the late nineteenth century, suburban homes were built within easy reach of the railroad stations, and new villages developed (Abele, 2000). With this growing technology, in 1874, Newton officially became a “city,” although in terms of its political economy, it remained a suburb of Boston.

Newton's black population lived and worked locally earning a living from their day labourer jobs and domestic work. At least three of the founding members of Myrtle Baptist—Thomas Johnson, Charles Simms, and Lydia Hicks—were able to own and support homes, granting stability to the slowly growing black Newton community.

By the 1870s, black women and men who lived in this neighborhood had paid jobs as domestics and paid labourers, janitors, and bricklayers. Most of their employers were white Anglo-Protestant. Although in the white discourse

of American social class distinctions, people working in those jobs would have been perceived to occupy “working-class” status, in the social maps being drawn by post-Civil War northern African Americans, these families were considered middle class. The income gained from working-class employment provided the material basis for building black-controlled cultural and financial resources. Community economic stability provided black residents with the premise that they too were a part of the changes taking place in Newton, especially the shift from an agrarian to suburban society.

Leading Boston abolitionist and newspaper editor William Lloyd Garrison (1874) was aware of Newton’s small black community and the cordial race relations that appeared to have developed between the suburb’s black and white residents. Garrison viewed it as a “common fellowship,” a successful legacy of abolitionist efforts. Black Massachusetts residents seemed, in Garrison’s eyes, to feel free in “the cradle of liberty.” In reality, after abolition, racism existed in subtle and not so subtle ways in New England society. In Newton, black children had access to public education, yet black churchgoers had to sit in the rear of the white-run Protestant church during worship services (Kelly).

In 1865, there were under 20 blacks living in Newton. However, in the decade following the Civil War, Newton, along with Boston and its other suburbs, attracted new black residents because of its reputation for fairness among freedmen and women (despite ongoing racist practices). Those blacks living in Massachusetts before the *Civil Rights Act* of 1875 moved to new locations in search of more rewarding employment opportunities.

By 1870, Newton began to feel the effects of the economic boom in Boston. Successful white businessmen and their families moved to Newton, thereby altering the homogeneous agrarian landscape. Most were of English descent and identified with one of several Protestant denominations. By the mid-1870s, the Boston businessmen and agrarian landowners came to the consensus that they wanted to make Newton a “garden city” or a suburban space—a city unlike Boston, though Newton benefited from close proximity to Boston, as well as a relatively cost-efficient and easy railroad commute, and plenty of land on which newcomers could settle. A railroad line between Newton and downtown Boston opened in 1830. The less than ten-mile railroad trip between Newton and Boston took 39 minutes and cost 37 cents per person (Abele, 2000). The relatively simple commute for the mostly male work force and merchant community, and ongoing business exchanges between Newton manufacturers and urban buyers, promoted Newton’s economic growth. The “garden city” grew steadily, and cheap labour was needed to sustain Newton’s transition to a suburban place. Ethnic whites and blacks provided that labour source.

During its early period, Newton was in the process of forming a suburban landscape, one that countered the density and diversity of nearby Boston. By the mid-1850s, portions of Newton’s space was suburbanized by the shrinkage

of farmland, the relative absence of multistoried brick and stone buildings, and the construction of spacious single-family homes surrounded by gardener-tended lawns, which were laid out along tree-lined streets within sight of each other. Even with small spaces of urbanity, Newton was considered an “ideal” suburb, with its manicured lawns surrounded by sprawling single-family homes (Jackson, 1985; Daniels, 1914). Kenneth T. Jackson (1985) and John Daniels (1914) acknowledge that blacks moved to the suburbs in the late nineteenth century because they had employment opportunities and could find housing, yet both scholars ignore that black suburban communities created their own suburban social connections. Lisa Y. King (1999) asserts that black Civil War veterans had limited access to the housing market in Boston so a few sought access to outlying areas. These men and their families became vibrant parts of political and social life in the communities in which they settled. I argue that Myrtle’s creation is evidence that blacks did more than just provide domestic and day labourer services for suburban Anglo-Protestants: they created their own social institutions.

Over a number of generations, Newton became increasingly class stratified, with ethnic differences shaping intra-white local relationships. The first generation of low-paid white workers rented homes in underdeveloped areas of Newton that were close to their jobs. By 1870, the Irish, Italians, and Russian Jews accounted for almost one-quarter of Newton’s population. By the early twentieth century, each European ethnic group had organized distinct communities. For example, the Irish Catholics had created four parishes, and the Russian Jews had incorporated Newton’s oldest synagogue in 1911 (Dargan, 2000: 34; Fleishman, 1986). Each European ethnic group created a religious center in close proximity to where the majority of its population lived. Within a few generations, they owned property near their religious centers and used those spaces as focal points for community life. Despite Anglo-Protestant bias, distinct ethnic identities flourished (Dargan, 2000: 34; Fleishman, 1986). Even though blacks shared more religiously with Anglo-Protestants than their Jewish and Irish or female Canadian counterparts, their process of negotiating the suburban landscape has gone unnoticed until this study.

The emergent black suburban identity was embedded in the paid work black residents performed, which enabled them to claim Newton as home. Wages were no higher than what urban blacks earned, and housing reflected this reality (Jones, 1996; Lerner, 1973: 226; Franklin and Moss, 1997: 311). The neighborhood where most of Newton’s black residents lived, known since the 1890s as “the village,” did not have dwellings with sprawling lawns and single-family homes. In the 1870s, a few black families owned homes or rented on Curve Street, and Myrtle Baptist Church soon became the cornerstone of Newton’s growing black community. Curve Street and Prospect Street demarcated the village informally, along with Hicks Street (named for Lymus Hicks, a founder of Myrtle Baptist Church), Virginia Road (the lower half of Hicks Street), Prospect Place, Simms Court (named after the Simms,

another founding family of Myrtle Baptist), and Douglas Street (named for black abolitionist and civil rights leader Frederick Douglass). These streets were blocked off by the Boston Albany Railroad at the intersection of Washington Street, Auburn Street, and parts of Crescent Street.⁴

Newton's black women performed domestic and agricultural duties for wages, and men worked as day labourers and a few in manufacturing. These jobs supported their livelihood in "the village." Both black women and men worked outside of the home in working-class jobs. Black women and men living in a suburban place made equal wages, and when the family unit consisted of male and female joint heads of household, the family benefited.

In the 1870s, more black women than black men lived in Newton.⁵ These single or unmarried women relied on an extended family to help sustain their households, and they did not commute (Jefferson, 1996). One of the factors attracting black women to Newton was a high demand for domestic workers resulted from the shift among whites of Newton from an agricultural and manufacturing suburb to a "garden city" (Ryan, 1913: 24). Wealthy white Anglo-Protestant newcomers wanted servants to accommodate their leisure lifestyle, providing a year-round and more consistent demand for domestics than for day labourers. Employment brought blacks to Newton and enabled them to stay, and the creation of Myrtle Baptist Church signified the beginning of a conscious black suburban organized existence.⁶

The majority of Newton's 200 black female residents worked as domestics. Some were able to accumulate enough wealth to own their own homes or contribute equally to their households, but their activism centered on community mothering. Domestic work provided black women with steady employment. Therefore, Myrtle members of the 1920s and 1930s are categorized as working class or at least lower-middle class, but that should not be an unexamined assumption. Because they lived in Newton, a suburban enclave, black women were considered middle class, yet their lived experience was lower middle or working class—similar to that of urban black women. Although the larger black women's club movement began just eight miles away in 1893, and community mothering ideals permeated this movement, Daughters of Myrtle members chose to perform locally focused activism (Smith 1986; White, 1999; Phillips 1999.)

By the 1890s, black urban and rural women began mobilizing in black social institutions inside and outside the church, creating spheres of influence for themselves and providing relevant services to black community members (Spain, 2000; Morton, 1989; Knupfer, 1996). The libraries, orphanages, settlement houses, vocational schools, kindergartens, and playgrounds provided black urbanites social spaces of ownership and demonstrated a womanist or black feminist community mothering consciousness. Black women were employing public spaces and using the church space as the catalyst for settlement house start-ups, literary clubs, anti-lynching clubs, and other social reformist groups. The national club movement consisted mostly of Protestant members, and

they emphasized education, economic uplift, and the importance of home and women's influence (Giddings, 1984). Noted black women's historian Deborah Gray White (1999) contends that clubwomen rarely compartmentalized their programs, using similar strategies to address the problems of race, gender, and poverty. The strength of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs and the Women's Convention Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention was that they addressed issues on all three fronts (Spain, 2000; White, 1999). The Daughters of Myrtle Baptist maintained a similar model, yet chose to implement community mothering that translated to womanist activism embedded in local service needs.

Womanist praxis at the center

Myrtle women took another structural step toward reshaping their positions of power within the church in 1902, when the Missionary Society, which evangelized black and white community members, delivered copies of their pastor's sermons to sick and shut-in members. They formed the bridge between current and infirmed congregants, maintaining a link between church members and simultaneously reaffirming religious and community ties. As a result, the missionary, mutual-aid function was multidimensional—both religious and social—and culturally relevant to black community members, though open to non-blacks.

The creation of the Jolly Quartet represented the second step toward a larger leadership scope. This group, which met regularly at Miss I. C. Burke's on Sunday evenings, was a singing group that performed church outreach services for the sick and shut-in. It also sponsored events at which invited guests discussed current issues affecting Newton's black residents. For example, on one Sunday in late May 1902, the singing group held a program titled "What Is Needed in the Garden City to Interest the Young People?" Through these programs, Myrtle women provided a space for community dialogue about issues pertaining to their growth and development.

Mothering practices formed the core of such community-based political activism. The program that explored young people's interests carried a dual message. First, it permitted the members of the Jolly Quartet to fulfil their community mothering ethic by allowing the concerns of youth to take centre stage. Second, it revealed the group's desire for youth and the community as a whole to continue feeling politically connected to their suburban landscape. Through the work of the Jolly Quartet, black women were able to fulfil two service functions for their local community: community mothering and political commitment.

A third offshoot of community mothering was the Silver Star Club. Although purely an entertainment group, its activities were designed to raise money for Myrtle Baptist Church, and it also served as a social outlet for its members. By enlisting financial support from black and white non-Myrtle members, it moved Myrtle's name recognition beyond church boundaries. The

Silver Star Club became a social evangelistic ministry on both religious and racial fronts. It also served as a bridge between white and black community members who wished to support the church. The theater and concert events hosted by the club reinforced the boundaries of the community, and further exposed it to artistic expression.

Local womanist activism within the church

For women at Myrtle, the Sunday school was a key site for activism. Community teaching was an occupation many nontraditionally trained religious black women performed to aid church efforts (Gilkes, 2001; Higginbotham, 1993). Women reshaped the Sunday school into a place where students studied social—as well as religious—topics. For example, the school's curriculum enhanced self-esteem through public speaking exercises conducted during holiday programs. Sunday school teachers emphasized women's roles within the Bible and focused on biblical stories that displayed community cohesion. These teachings inspired the students, strengthening their community and religious identities. Church work, especially Sunday school teaching, elevated the status of community mothers years before the Daughters of Myrtle was formed. Hence, the club's consciousness and practice had already been established. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (1988) argues: "Black women community workers have moral power and prestige because they are women who represent the total community's interest and who build carefully a culture of resistance through community work in many critical places."

The Daughters of Myrtle, then, exemplify community mothering because their activities focused around service to youth and the church community. Community mothering provided a protective sphere of encouragement and cultural understanding for youth and the women themselves; mothering practices are often the basis for community-based political activism (Gilkes, 2001). According to bell hooks, black women's struggle against racism (and sexism) infuses their mothering practices inside and outside of their "homeplace." bell hooks (1990) refers to the homeplace as a "site of resistance." She explains, "Working to create a homeplace that affirmed our beings, our blackness, our love for one another was necessary resistance" (46).

Othermothering reshaped the way these women perceived their sense of home, and their modes of parenting. Community mothering within a public place, like the church, comprised a site for resisting racism and sexism and elevating black women's community status, thereby justifying the space of leadership that women developed inside black church ministries, especially the Sunday school.

The Daughters of Myrtle organized their first generation of activities around dual service commitments. Today, this would be categorized as womanist practice, extending sociologist McDonald's contention that "black activist mothering" (another name for community mothering) is a form of activism deriving from a conjunction of empathy for other black women who suffer

or have suffered similar social disadvantages and African American norms of solidarity, responsibility, and accountability (McDonald, 1997). Through activism, black women mingled social reform, motherhood, and religious teaching. As activist mothers, Newton's black Baptist women were engaged in an ongoing process to reshape black womanhood in their church community. As Sunday school teachers, they expressed community mothering ideologies. However, what set Daughters of Myrtle apart was their extension of community mothering not only to community youth, but also to one another. This evolution highlights how a homeplace emerges and womanist or black feminist consciousness becomes practice.

Community children viewed their activist mothers as community service agents. Mr. James Spikes (1996), a lifelong member of Myrtle Baptist, a son of the founder of the Daughters of Myrtle, and the husband of a member, remembers the work these women provided:

Well, they would have programs, and they would have speakers come on the programs. Their principal job, besides taking care of the communion and stuff like that, would be helping with families, take care of girls that needed female assistance of women, who had had children, and they would go into the houses and take care of the houses and clean the houses up and prepare meals and everything.

The women also taught current black history, which always delivered a social reform message of racial uplift and community solidarity. Mrs. Leahora Hill (1996) remembers that in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the Daughters of Myrtle ordered copies of the *Carter G. Woodson Journal* from the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. This journal was circulated among members, and they shared its research on topics relating to black experiences with their Sunday school classes. At Myrtle Baptist Church, the Sunday school was a window through which black children from “the village” connected to the greater black community.

When Pastor William Wade Ryan asked a group of young married mothers to help supply the refreshments for an annual meeting, he had no idea that he was founding a significant organization for his church. As Helen Lomax (1961) wrote in a church archive correspondence about her observations of the creation of the Daughters of Myrtle, Rev. Ryan was thankful for the help with conference and selected the group's name. He highlighted these women due to their limited activity influence in the church.

The founding members were Mrs. Lorena Spikes, Mrs. Josephine Williams, Mrs. Helen Lomax, Mrs. Olivette Cooper, Mrs. Mary Meredith, Mrs. Mary Spikes, and Mrs. Octavia Walker. Their motto demonstrates the duality of their mission: “to support the church and community spiritually and financially whenever and wherever possible” (C. Haywood, 1996). Providing service to the church by garnering financial support, organizing social events

for the congregation, and holding educational meetings for youths became the pinnacle goals of the group. Their unwritten goals were to provide informal support to one another and to enable the group to serve as a homeplace for each member (hooks,1990).

Each member was scrupulously selected by current members based on the “care” model (Jefferson, 1996). Candace Haywood had migrated to Newton from rural North Carolina as a teenager in 1928, and she became a member of the Daughters of Myrtle in 1938. Mrs. Haywood explains:

When I first joined, I was the only young person of my group. And I was sure that the others would be joining. They told me that they had been watching me and seeing what I was doing and they had decided [I] could qualify to come into their group.

Membership in the Daughters of Myrtle was reserved for a select few. Reverend Howard Haywood (1996), the current pastor of Myrtle Baptist Church and a lifelong church member whose mother was an early member of the Daughters of Myrtle, explains:

I would think that at one point that people would say that the Daughters of Myrtle was an elitist organization. Not everybody was welcome into the Daughters of Myrtle. They [other church members] said those people [DOM members] think they are better than anybody else.

There were a multitude of auxiliaries at Myrtle Baptist, such as the usher board, the flower club, and the willing workers club, all of which provided support for the worship service and the pastor. For its first forty years, Daughters was “the club.” Daughters of Myrtle members were leaders in other church clubs like the Young People’s Society, the Booster Club, and Senior Missionary Circle. For example, Candace Haywood (1996) was the chairperson of the Booster Club (fund) in 1942 and had been a member since the early 1930s; she later became president of the usher board. During the early part of his 30-year pastorate at Myrtle Baptist, Reverend Ford appointed Mrs. Haywood to head up the Community Parents Organization, which raised money for a neighbourhood playground. Mrs. Candace Haywood did not envision herself as a leader at the time of her appointment. Reverend Ford convinced her otherwise:

He said, “If anybody can talk to people, you can and I want you to get this together.” I said, “Reverend Ford, I don’t have time,” and he said, “Oh, yes, you can. I’m trying to get together a group of parents to supervise children on the playground. Who else are you going to get to get this organized?”

Mrs. Haywood enlisted the Daughters’ help; the playground was a com-

munity project and so fit their mission. Even though they were not directly credited for organizing the campaign, community members knew who the Daughters were, as well as who was on the Community Parents Organization; the lists were similar. Being assigned leadership roles was not unique for DOM members. Mrs. Lorena Lomax was the president of the Senior Missionary Circle in 1936, and a Sunday school teacher. Candace Haywood (1996) remembers some of the financial support projects the DOM provided to the church in its first generation:

We used to have different things at different times of the year. Our [DOM] job at that time was to pay the electric bill and the gas bill. And that was a big undertaking. And when we had meetings, we discussed what we needed and how we were going to earn the money.

The Daughters of Myrtle was not the only organization to support the church and foster community mothering ties, but it was the only one whose primary mission was to serve the community and its members.

The ties that bind the Daughters of Myrtle together

The Daughters of Myrtle created a supportive environment for its members that provided lasting meaning for the group. The DOM is indeed an example of what hooks calls a homeplace. Candace Haywood (1996) puts this process into perspective:

When you heard [a] member of the DOM [was sick] or having a baby or whatever, you just put your things down and went to her house and you didn't ask her "What can I do?" You just went right along and you did what you saw needed to be done. And that's the way they did all the time. I remember, I think it was Trustena [Edwards] who said, "You know, we're just like sisters."

Even male members of the community commented on the support system that Daughters of Myrtle members had created for themselves. Mr. James Spikes (1996) remembers how the DOM members would aid sick mothers:

When there were families who were having problems, like the mother or something was sick, some of the Daughters would constantly take food over, they'd fix meals, and they'd go over to the house and stay with the sick person. I guess sometimes, someone would spend the night. 'Cause in those days, up here, the families didn't spend the night in the hospital.

Community mothers rarely compartmentalized their social reform work, often using similar strategies to address different dilemmas (Spain, 2000: 106). Daughters of Myrtle members fostered the community mothering ethic by

sponsoring programs that shared their club's purpose with the community. The mother-daughter teas demonstrated the club's adoption of middle-class social graces. Elizabeth Clark-Lewis (1994) writes about black female domestic workers in Washington, D.C., who organized clubs so they could use the secondhand garments, china, and linens given to them by their employers. At first, these gatherings mimicked the social activities of white female employers. The speaker would be a member of the Daughters of Myrtle and topics would range from edifying the mother-daughter relationship to the need for higher education and stronger family values, always preaching to the converted.

An authentic cultural phenomenon evolved through which domestic clubs carried a separate and higher meaning than reusing employers' hand-me-downs; they became a mode of social expression for black suburban women. The teas served the dual purpose of informing attendees about black women's contributions to both society and the local community and reaffirming their ongoing cooperative process. They became a place where local black women were honoured for their contributions to community efforts and a staple in homeplace development. The Daughters of Myrtle worked together to create this space, which affirmed their heritage and the supportive relationships they had constructed as a public act of opposition against negative stereotypes.

Another crucial service conducted by the Daughters of Myrtle was one that demonstrated their community mothering ethic: socializing community youth. The members saw a void within white, male-dominated Newton public schools, and wanted to endow their children with racial and gender pride. To facilitate this goal, the Daughters started the Junior Daughters of Myrtle and the Sunshine Band. The Junior Daughters met monthly and focused on educating youth about black history outside of their suburban place; the Sunshine Band taught young girls domestic chores. Mrs. Rosalie Carter Dixon (1996) remembers Mrs. Helen Lomax, a Daughters of Myrtle member, leading the Sunshine Band. By the 1940s, the exclusively female group had learned how to sew and knit while being mentored about various life issues (Dixon, 1996). The Sunshine Band was Myrtle's rendition of a mother's club. Kimberly Phillips describes mother's clubs as places where women gathered to engage in lively discussions about parenting and race-conscious topics. Mrs. Leahora Hill (1996) grew up in the village and later became a Daughters of Myrtle member. She recalls that her public school education provided no information about the contributions of African Americans to society. Instead, she learned about her culture as a junior DOM member in the 1930s when the elder Daughters taught her black history:

On Thursday afternoon, they [the Daughters of Myrtle members] took a group of us girls, we went to Josephine Williams' [a founding member] to sit around her dining room table, and they told us about Carter G. Woodson [the founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and Culture

and the Journal of Negro History]. They ordered material and gave us some insight into black history.

Black contributions to society were neglected in the Newton school system; therefore, Daughters of Myrtle members took it upon themselves to introduce children to works of noted historian Carter G. Woodson and publications like the *Journal of Negro History*: “In the 1930s, we used to come every Friday afternoon for Friday afternoon Bible school” (Hill, 1996).

The group was financially independent and collected dues to support its programs. Mrs. Cora Jones was the treasurer for many years. The dues ranged from 25 to 50 cents per meeting. Mrs. Lillie Jefferson (1996) remembers the due paying system also: “We used to put money in a kitty so when we would go away to play or whatnot the money would be there. And when Cora Jones, who was the treasurer for years, retired, she had all these little envelopes with people’s names on them. If you had 50 cents in an envelope, she was able to give it back to you after she retired.”

In the 1930s, Trustena Edwards, the Daughters of Myrtle president, organized one-day summer outings to Maine. When Candace Haywood (1996) was invited to join the Daughters of Myrtle in 1938, one of the major enticements was these trips to Maine:

They took trips to Maine every summer and at that time, it took you a whole day to go to Maine, have a picnic, and come back. Everyone went (our husbands drove). We just enjoyed ourselves. If you could see us [laughter]. We went all out. (Haywood, C., 1996)

Candace Haywood (1996) went on to remember that, “We took our shoes off and went into the water ‘cause that’s good for your feet.”

The day trips were the only vacation time most of the members had. Daughters of Myrtle members created such spaces to treat themselves as worthy of leisure activity. The trips built self-worth and the ethos of a home-place. Creating leisure activity for themselves and by themselves made their social needs visible to their families and communities, thus reflecting a true community ethic and exercising womanist principle.

Conclusion

Myrtle Baptist Church is still thriving today, with well over 500 members. The Daughters of Myrtle is now an intergenerational group and its community mothering activities persist. The DOM’s history illustrates the evolution of black, womanist values, specifically how a group of black suburban women practiced community mothering and provided mutual aid for their church community, supporting and nurturing one another while educating and guiding community youth. The Daughters of Myrtle is womanist effort in action. This study has highlighted how black women living in a suburban place created

community links inside and outside of suburban boundaries as crucial steps toward developing black suburban womanist identity. Creating a multi-tiered community enabled black women living in a suburban place to create an identity that extended the boundaries of race, class, and gender.

In the late nineteenth century, blacks immigrated to Newton, Massachusetts, to work as day labourers for middle-class Anglo-Protestants. Black women were domestics, and black men performed seasonal day labour. Most lived in extended families and shared housing within a four-block radius of the West Newton railroad station. In 1874, seven black Newton residents (four women and three men) left a majority Anglo-Protestant Baptist Church and founded the first black Baptist church in Newton: Myrtle Baptist Church. Scholars of Newton and suburban history generally paid little attention to the mobilizing actions of black residents within suburban boundaries. The creation of Myrtle Baptist Church receives little recognition in Newton history, and even less attention is paid to the roles that female founders played in the first generation of the church. The core discussion of blacks in suburbia centers on the interaction between black and whites, not black community dynamics.

Paul Douglass (1968) authored one of the earliest studies of black suburban life. First published in 1925, *The Suburban Trend* argues that the main reason blacks resided in the suburbs was to serve wealthy Anglo-Protestants as domestics and service workers (97). Meanwhile, Anglo-Protestants were in the suburbs to fulfill the dream that John Stilgoe (1988) describes as representing “the good life, the life of the dream, the dream of happiness in a single-family house in an attractive, congenial community that inspires...” (2). Blacks were viewed as supporters of this idea through their labour, but not as full participants. Yet in examining the roles and choices of black women, an active participatory community life unfolds—one where obstacles are acknowledged, and strategies are developed to create a substantial community life, one beyond the narrow view of servitude.

Women supported the pastors’ leadership and their own leadership missions by organizing church clubs to realize the tasks each pastor proposed. After the church fire tragedy, women spearheaded connections with urban black congregations for financial support and social connections to help realize the rebuilding of Myrtle Baptist Church. Women were also the main contributors for the initial building funds within Newton’s black community.

The creation of the Daughters of Myrtle Baptist Church in 1921 extended the earlier generations’ conception of black suburban womanhood. Early DOM members thrived on their visibility in church business and their connectedness to outside community efforts; this became the beacon for their brand of black suburban womanhood. What the Daughters later added to this conception was the notion of self-care. Daughters of Myrtle members performed church and broader community work, but also took time for group retreats and relaxation. In addition, they combined community work with rituals of black middle-class etiquette.⁷ This reinforced class distinctions within Newton’s black community,

with Daughters of Myrtle members exemplifying an ethic of black female middle-class collective consciousness.

Stephanie Shaw (1996) and other social scientists present the concept of collective consciousness as a process of mixing individual and community social responsibility. The concept of social responsibility and collective consciousness is performed by black women “to enhance individual development in a manner that regularly demonstrates, frequently demands, and often yields individual postures of collective consciousness and social responsibility” through visible service measures (Shaw, 1996: 6). These are service measures that often cross-geographic and spatial boundaries. The Daughters of Myrtle worked within the rubric; their service work was located at Myrtle Baptist Church, but extended well beyond Church boundaries.

¹Addison is Reverend Howard Haywood’s great aunt. Reverend Haywood is the current pastor of Myrtle Baptist Church (1985–present).

²The Jackson Homestead at the Newton Historical Society has the original copy of the 1888 letter written by Booker T. Washington. The letter is written to the Newton Center Woman’s Club, thanking them for their \$5 donation for Tuskegee Normal School (now Tuskegee University).

³In 1875, there were approximately 18,000 non-blacks and 130 blacks.

⁴Myrtle Baptist Church 120th Anniversary Calendar (part of the church archives).

⁵1870, Newton City Directory, Newton Room, Newton Public Library.

⁶Minutes, Lincoln Park Baptist Church, 1871–1874, West Newton, Massachusetts, p. 1, Chapter 2.

⁷The Daughters of Myrtle sponsored Mother-Daughter Teas and sponsored plays and classical musical events at the church.

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