## Self-Assessment, 2013-2016

Assistant Professor, Department of History Michigan State University Submitted Summer 2016

As per the Bylaws of the Department of History, this self-assessment discusses my accomplishments as a scholar from August 16, 2013, the start of my appointment as a tenure stream Assistant Professor, until the present (Summer 2016).

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## **Scholarship**

Between 2007, the year I received the Ph.D. from Howard University's Department of History, and the present, I have established an active publication record, publishing one monograph and five single-authored articles.

In April 2016, the University of Illinois Press, under New Black Studies Series, published my book: Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City's Underground Economy. Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners interrogates the fascinating lives of New York City black women informal economy laborers during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Gotham's working-class women carved out niches for themselves within the city's noteworthy informal economy as both wage earners and entrepreneurs. These women toiled at a myriad of under-the-table jobs, including street peddling, fencing of stolen goods, and drug dealing, and occupied legal service positions as hostesses, coat checkers, cooks, and domestic workers at speakeasies, brothels, and other illegal business establishments; Many even became successful entrepreneurs, launching lucrative and modest street vending, hair care and massage, and shoeshine enterprises. Despite black women's multi-faceted informal work, this book focuses on the labor patterns and economic activities of those that were part of the city's profitable yet illegal sexual economy, gambling enterprise, and supernatural consulting business. While this study focuses on the nuanced sub-culture of informal economy laborers, it also delves into reformed-mind activists, city politicians, and ordinary New Yorkers' perceptions of off-the-books labor.

Filling a void within African American women's labor historiography and presenting a more nuance perspective on women's work, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners* situates black women informal laborers within the larger context of urban female work of the early twentieth century. Scholars of the urban black female experience have produced seminal and insightful studies on the private and laboring lives of black women. Both past and recent studies explore city women's leisure habits, their social and political activism against legal and customary racial segregation and white violence, and their roles as formal wage earners, namely that of domestic, laundry, and industrial laborers. Similarly, historical scholarship on black women entrepreneurs typically chronicles working and middle-class women's failing and successful attempts at creating legitimate formal businesses, including beauty shops, restaurants, insurance

companies, boardinghouses, and funeral parlors. Absent from historical interpretations of urban black female labor or female entrepreneurship are the labor experiences and voices of sex workers, unlicensed street and home-based vendors, games of chance laborers, magic practitioners, and other extralegal workers. According to historian "black women employed outside of agriculture, domestic labor, and industry represented a diversity of work experiences, not all of which lend themselves to close

historical scrutiny." At the same time, recent studies by

others

challenge scholars to re-conceptualize the diverse ways in which twentieth century black women earned a living wage and how their labor (both free and imprisoned) contributed to New South and northern ideas about labor and modernity and industrialization. Presenting fresh historical narratives and methodological approaches to analyzing female labor, these particular scholars offer new historical accounts and fascinating analyses on urban and rural women, delineating their less familiar experiences as prison laborers, career criminals and confidence artists, pornography workers, sex entrepreneurs, and well-known narcotics dealers.

No doubt, black women's multi-faceted employment patterns warrant historical attention and inquiry. My study broadens historical perspectives on urban female labor by shedding light on female labor that fell outside New York's formal wage system. It injects the stories of individuals that have been left out of mainstream historical conversations on urban black women. This study offers a more complicated portrayal of urban women workers in New York, while challenging historians of the black female experience to expand theoretical frameworks on labor and reconsider how city women financially support themselves and their loved ones. By offering another viewpoint on female work, the book underscores that the role of black women in the urban labor market was larger than scholars once thought. An examination of African American women's nontraditional and extralegal labor also contributes to existing urban, social, and cultural histories of New York. It departs from more familiar topics on black New York, such as Harlem's literary and New Negro Movement of the 1920s & 1930s, black women's club reform, and the political activism of African American and Caribbean male intellectuals and activists including

suggests that New York history, particularly that of Harlem, "has become largely the story of poets, artists, religious eccentrics, political activists, and exclusive clubs and cabarets." Commenting on the scholarly preoccupation with elite black women, historian work on New York black women during the first half of the twentieth century rightfully states that: "scholars and students know far more about the objectives and accomplishments of elite and middle-class black women than about the goals and strategies adopted by the masses." An exploration into working-class black women's overlooked and long-forgotten labor narratives uncovers hidden histories of New York, the black metropolis, and most importantly the dynamics of urban poverty.

Additionally, my research appears in leading academic journals. My work, focusing on various aspects of African American women's lives including their political activism as American Communist Party members, their encounters with the criminal

justice system, and their participation in the urban informal market, is published in *Black Women, Gender & Families / Women, Gender, & Families of Color* (a journal published by the University of Illinois Press), *Journal of African American History* (the oldest and leading journal on the African American historical experience), *Journal of Afro-Americans in New York Life and History, Journal for the Study of Radicalism* (a journal published by Michigan State University Press), and the *Journal of Social History* (a topranked journal in the field of social history; published by Cambridge University Press). My *Journal of Social History* article, "'The Commonwealth of Virginia vs. Virginia Christian': Southern Black Women, Crime & Punishment in Progressive Era Virginia" was award the Association of Black Women Historians' Article Prize in 2015. I have also authored over five short encyclopedia essays and over ten scholarly book reviews, including a 20-page review essay in the *Journal of African American History*'s special issue on Black Women and the Carceral State (Summer 2015).

Recently, the *Journal of Urban History* (JUH) accepted my article, ""Women and Girls in Jeopardy by His False Testimony:" , Urban Policing, and Black Women in New York City," for publication. This article will be published sometime in 2017. Drawing from state and federal census records, newspaper editorials, and court documents, this article examines how police surveillance, particularly the NYPD officers' use of criminal informants, impacted 1920s New York black women. Positioning urban women's often dangerous encounters with criminal informants at the center of conversations framed around police brutality, this essay contributes to recently published scholarship on African American women, police violence, and legal injustices. At the same time, this article offers a more nuance interpretation on the intersections between race, gender, and urban policing. This work goes beyond well-documented historical narratives and analyses of police brutality cases that primarily involve black women and police officers. Instead, this article complicates existing accounts of police surveillance, exploring the less familiar labor of African American police informants.

My future academic projects include conducting research for two projects. Similar to Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City's *Underground Economy*, the projects are concerned with black New Yorkers. I am interested in the post-1945 of black New Yorkers. The first study is a book project that explores the socioeconomic, political, and cultural lives of black New Yorkers during the 1980s. Commonly referred to as the era of Reagan, the 1980s, a time of rapid socioeconomic and political changes, was a pivotal decade for Americans in general and for urban blacks in particular. Like many urban blacks around the nation, New York African Americans witnessed the rise of crack-cocaine cartels in their neighborhoods, rising city crime, homelessness, and racial violence, diminishing housing and economic opportunities, and the impact of Post-World War II federal and state legislation aimed at tackling urban crime especially drug-related offenses. This book will be the first major study on New York African Americans after the Civil Rights / Black Power eras. This work will join recently published studies ( . The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins: Justice, Gender, and The Origins of the LA Riots, Oxford University Press. 2013: Black Silent Majority: The Rockefeller Drug Laws and The Politics of Punishment, Harvard University Press, 2015; and From The War on Poverty to The War on Crime: The Making of Incarceration in

America, Harvard University Press, 2016) that focus on 1970s & 1980s urban America. While I am in the preliminary stages of research for this new project, I have identified useful archival materials at the New York Municipal Archives, Columbia University, The City University of New York (CUNY John Jay College), Fordham University, Bronx Historical Society, and the Schomburg Research Center. Proposed chapters examine black labor, black youth and the city's emerging crack-cocaine drug economy, racial violence and police brutality, and black political leadership and community activism. I plan to submit the book proposal to several leading university and trade presses, including New York University Press, Columbia University Press, Oxford University, and Beacon Press.

The second project is an article length manuscript that examines the highly publicized and controversial 1984 police shooting of sixty-something-year-old Bronx, New York resident and grandmother . Secondary scholarship on primarily focuses on killing and the subsequent trial of New York Police Department (NYPD) officer . This article departs from that narrative. Instead, it provides a brief history of the Bronx (an understudied area of New York City) and the different ways in which New York City's racially and ethnically diverse community interpreted the shooting and connected the case to other incidents of police brutality within the city. More importantly, this essay offers a critical story that is often negated in biographical sketch of ; an aspect of the the scholarship. The case is significant in analyzing black men and women's long history and experience with police and state sanctioned violence. Moreover, the case casts a spotlight on contemporary black women's horrific and even deathly encounters with law enforcement. I plan to complete the article by Spring 2018, and will submit to Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society.

Overall, my scholarship falls within many categories of African American historiography that are currently attracting significant attention and represent future areas of foci, popularity, and intellectual concern, including 20<sup>th</sup> century Urban History and Black Women's history. Additionally, my work has reached both academic and nonacademic audiences. Some of my articles have been adopted in several African American and Black women's history courses around the country. I've presented my work at various leading professional conferences, including the Newberry Library in Chicago, Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, American Historical Association (AHA), Southern Historical Association (SHA), Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University, Schomburg Center For Research in Black Culture, Association of African American Life & History (ASALH), and the Labor and Working-Class History Association (LAWCHA). In January 2013, TV-One, a television network owned by Radio One & NBC Universal, and producers from the A. Smith & Company, invited me to appear on their nationally syndicated show Celebrity Crime Files as a historical commentator. The show is a crime documentary series, and aired in September 2014. Portions of my book were featured on the program. My segment, which was seen by over 1 million viewers, highlighted my research on one of New York City's most notorious and popular female underground entrepreneurs of the 1920s and 1930s. The television appearance served as a great opportunity to promote different aspects of my work to a broader audience.