

9-7-2019

The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Socio-Economic Status in the Life of Bessie Coleman

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Gender is everywhere and influences everything. Gender can often be a system of social control. It is the primary way society groups its inhabitants. That said, gender does not act in isolation. Rather, it is part of a larger network of control that includes such elements as race, color, creed, religion, sexuality, gender identity, national origin, and socio-economic status. These factors are clearly evident in the life of Bessie Coleman, the first African American pilot of either sex to earn an international pilot's license. Born into poverty in the waning years of the nineteenth century, Bessie Coleman had four distinct disadvantages: she was poor, female, and African American and Native American in the post reconstruction South. Bessie Coleman's story is both encouraging and heart wrenching. She was a woman far ahead of her time in a society not yet ready to accept a woman of color succeeding in what until then had been the private domain of white males.

Recommended Citation:

Cline, P.E. (2019). The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Socio-Economic Status in the Life of Bessie Coleman. *Collegiate Aviation Review International*, 37(2), 133-156. Retrieved from <http://ojs.library.okstate.edu/osu/index.php/CARI/article/view/7915/7308>

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Each of these areas act synergistically with the others to enforce and perpetuate the status quo. As part of a system of systems, gender helps to reinforce the established social norms and ideals that shape the behavior of people, generate hierarchy, and oftentimes results in economic and non-economic inequalities among ascriptive groups (Arestis, Charles, & Fontana, 2014).

The interplay of these various foci of control are evident in the life of Elizabeth “Bessie” Coleman. Born into poverty in the waning years of the nineteenth century, Bessie Coleman had four distinct disadvantages: she was poor, female, and African American and Native American in the post reconstruction South.

Born in Atlanta Texas on January 26, 1892. Bessie Coleman was “born in a one room cabin, raised in a single-parent family, and educated in a school for black children that closed whenever the cotton needed picking” (Rich, 1993, p. 2). Her mother, Susan Coleman was a tall, thin woman who gave birth to thirteen children over the space of twenty-three years, four of whom did not survive childhood. Her father, George Coleman, was 75% Native American and 25% African American. His family came from “Indian Country,” before settling in Texas. Bessie’s birth was not commemorated either with a birth certificate or in the family bible, since both Susan and George Coleman were illiterate; neither could read or write (Rich, 1993). According to Rich (1993):

The world Bessie entered was one of not only grinding poverty and incessant labor but repressed rage and fear. Two years before her birth the state of Mississippi had begun the process of disenfranchising African Americans by legal means, a process soon followed by all of the Southern states. Three months after Bessie’s birth a black postal employee in Memphis, Tennessee, and his two partners who had financed a small grocery store were taken by a mob from a Memphis jail and killed a mile outside the city. Their offense was to defend their property from an armed attack by white night raiders. (p. 4)

Despite the racial and economic repression, George Coleman managed to save enough money from his job as a day laborer to acquire a small plot of land in Waxahachie, Texas, a small hamlet 30 miles south of Dallas (Hardesty, 2008; Rich, 1993). In the segregated South, Waxahachie was divided by the railroad—whites to the west and people of color to the east. It was in this eastern section that George Coleman bought one quarter of an acre for \$25.

Bessie started school when she was six years old in the segregated, one room schoolhouse on the east side of Waxahachie. The school was “hot in the summer and cold in the winter” and staffed by one teacher for grades one through eight. A Columbia University study from 1922 showed that many rural schools were staffed by instructors with no more than a sixth-grade education (Rich, 1993, p. 7). The Waxahachie school was no exception. Bessie walked four miles each way to class and quickly established herself as a star pupil in math.

George Coleman left the family in 1901. He had, he told Susan, “enough of Texas.” Jim Crow laws (enforced segregation of public accommodations by race) prohibited him from riding in the same rail

car as whites, voting, or having any say in local government. His status as a day laborer denied him access to more stable employment in either the textile mills or railroads, both of which were booming at the time. In a strange twist of fate, George's Native American ancestry placed him in greater jeopardy than his African American lineage. Native Americans in Texas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were considered "savage and treacherous" and violence against Native Americans was common and unprosecuted. George wanted to move to Oklahoma, where he said he could enjoy the full rights of citizenship. Susan told him he could go if he wanted, but she was neither "pioneer nor squaw" (Rich, 1993, p. 8).

George's leaving left Susan with four young daughters to raise, the oldest Bessie at nine. To support the children, she began working as a cook and domestic servant to a white couple, Mr. and Mrs. Elwin Jones. This placement proved a Godsend for Susan and her daughters. Mrs. Jones provided most of the food Susan and the girls ate during this time. Additionally, the young girl's dresses were often hand-me-downs from Mrs. Jones' own daughters, and far nicer than anything Susan could afford or sew (Rich, 1993, p. 9).

Women of color rarely fared so well under codified segregation. "Violence is the mortar that lies between the brick and stone constructing this space. Violence is a daily reality that seems to exist just about everywhere. For a woman living within the confines of Jim Crow, violence resides in and outside of home: the bed where she sleeps, the space in which she strolls, the environment where she works, and even the places where she goes for recreation" (Norwood, 2018, p. 97).

The systematic use of rape as a form of control under conditions of chattel slavery has never been seriously contested. The use of black women for sexual gratification and as a means to humiliate and emasculate the male slave population has been adequately chronicled by historians and social scientists alike (Roberts, 1998). What is less well known is the continued abuse that occurred under Jim Crow from Reconstruction until the latter half of the twentieth century.

There was little to deter white men from committing racist sexual violence. Rape against a woman of color was not considered a crime in many jurisdictions, and if it was, it was rarely prosecuted, as African Americans were restricted from testifying against white men in court (Thompson-Miller & Picca, 2017, p. 936). The fear of retaliation and losing their sole source of income induced many domestic workers to leave assaults unreported, and deal with the physical and psychological trauma in any way possible. While there is no evidence that either Susan or Bessie suffered directly, sexual violence and degradation were so pervasive it would have been an unavoidable stressor for both women; especially as they traveled to the west side of Waxahachie.

While Susan was at work, Bessie took over the running of the Coleman household. Cooking, cleaning, mending clothes and watching her siblings was Bessie's new reality. These activities were carried out without the luxury of electricity or running water. "Water was drawn from an outdoor well. Laundry was done in an iron tub, and meals were prepared on a wood-burning stove that also heated the house" (Rich, 1993, p. 9). She often missed days and weeks of school in order to care for her younger siblings. When the children were old enough to attend school, they made the eight-mile round trip with their older sister. In Texas, like much of the South, cotton remained king. Because of this, the small one room schoolhouse was shuttered during harvest. This was a mutually beneficial arrangement. The wealthy landowners and farmers needed labor, and the Coleman's and their neighbors needed the money. Even Susan was excused from her duties at the Jones' to work in the fields.

Despite these roadblocks, Bessie completed all eight grades of Waxahachie's one room black school. Bessie knew her future did not lie in the dusty fields of Texas. With Susan's encouragement Bessie began working as a laundress in order to save for her escape.

Bessie worked from home, collecting and delivering her client's dirty laundry once a week. Each trip to the west side of Waxahachie was 5 miles each way. There was no public transportation and the Coleman's sole means of transportation was their feet. Bessie would boil the clothes in a tub in her back yard, scrub it on a washboard, rinse, starch, wring it out, and hang it on a clothesline to dry. She ironed with a heavy metal instrument heated on the top of the wood fired stove. On Saturday Bessie would deliver the laundry, "keeping her place" by bringing it to the back doors of the west-side residents (Rich, 1993, p. 13).

In 1910 Bessie left Waxahachie for Langston, Oklahoma to enroll in the "Colored Agricultural and Normal University." Langston, one of several all black municipalities in Oklahoma, was named after John Mercer Langston, an uncle to the poet Langston Hughes' mother.

To describe the Langston school as a university would be a stretch. A land-grant institution, it was much more a vocational school or small college than a full-fledged university. Offering four-year degrees in education, agriculture, home economics and mechanical arts, it also included a preparatory school for new students who lacked the requisite qualifications to be admitted as a normal student. It was to this category that Bessie was admitted, being placed (at the age of 18) in the sixth grade.

Despite adequate academic performance, Bessie ran out of money after one term and was forced to return to Waxahachie and other people's laundry. Five years later, in 1915, Bessie's older brother Walter suggested she move to Chicago and stay with him (Hardesty, 2008). The train trip between Waxahachie and Chicago took twenty hours and was another example of the pervasive inequality and racism at the time.

The car on which Bessie sat on a hard wooden bench exemplified the oppression she longed to escape, a world of rear seats on buses and balcony seats in theatres, of forbidden public restaurants, water fountains, and lavatories, a world in which the old taboos and fears were now being augmented by a new one, the resurrection of the Ku Klux Klan, first in the South and soon after throughout the nation (Rich, 1993, p. 16).

Bessie Coleman was not alone. Between 1915-1920, a period known as the "Great Migration," "10% of the black population fled the South" (DeSantis, 1998, p. 475). The reasons for this mass exodus are varied, and there is no clear consensus among historians as to the primary cause. Many believe the main driving force behind the Great Migration was economic. Known as the *Push-Pull theory*, it posits that African Americans were pushed out of the South by the grinding poverty, social inequity, and lack of hope for any meaningful change. Conversely, these migrants were pulled towards the north by the promise of employment, fair pay, civil rights and the chance for a better future.

A second theory, the *Socio-Emotional or Sentimental theory* emphasizes the social motivations for abandoning the South. In addition to the intolerable inequality, there is also a familial dimension to the exodus: a desire to join friends and family who had previously migrated and were now established in cities such as New York and Chicago. Elements of each theory can be seen in Bessie Coleman's exodus. She was anxious to leave behind the dehumanizing reality of life under Jim Crow, excited to be reunited with her older brother and his new family and was looking forward to making her own way economically in a place where race was not the sole determining factor.

It would be wrong to suggest that Chicago in 1915 was a nirvana void of racial tension and animosity—it was not. The main difference between Chicago and Waxahachie was that racism was not institutionalized and codified like under Jim Crow. For all that, it was no less insidious. Rather, "shunned by all other groups, blacks erected their own enclave. Pride, habit, and the need for mutual

protection led to the establishment of a self-segregated ghetto with its own churches, clubs, and fraternal organizations” (Rich, 1993, p. 16).

Nowhere in America at this time were African Americans viewed as equal. This is readily apparent by one of the highest grossing movies of entire twentieth century, D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*. Described as “the most controversial motion picture of all time” (Knight, 2010, p. 78), Griffith’s three-hour marathon glorified the Ku Klux Klan in their fight to maintain racial and cultural purity in the face of repeated assaults by African Americans, foreign born immigrants, Catholics, and Jews. The cultural panic Griffith tapped into was very real, even in the North. The film “expressed the defensive reaction of white Protestants in small-town America who felt threatened by the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and by the large-scale immigration of the previous decades that had changed the ethnic character of American society” (“Ku Klux Klan,” n.d.).

The Birth of a Nation was America’s first full length feature film. Consisting of over 13,000 individual shots and occupying 12 reels of film, it was an immediate sensation, with over 200 million viewers between 1915 and 1946 (Finler, 2003, p. 47). A *Variety Magazine* poll of 200 film critics voted *The Birth of a Nation* the greatest motion picture in the first 50 years of the industry (Rogin, 1985, p. 150). After a private screening in the White House, Woodrow Wilson declared, “It is like writing history with lightning! And my only regret is that it is so terribly true” (Pitcher, 1999, p. 50).

This one film is credited with reinvigorating the modern Ku Klux Klan. Its influence can be seen today, over a century after its release. The iconic white robes and peaked hats worn by modern Klansmen are not historical; they are an invention of D.W. Griffith’s cinematic fantasy (Rice, 2016, p. 2).

It is hard to overstate the influence of the Klan during this time. On August 8, 1925, over 30,000 robed Klansmen marched 22-abreast down Pennsylvania Ave in Washington, DC. The next morning, the Washington Post’s front-page headline declared, “White-robed Klan cheered on march in nation’s capital.” The main story went on to describe how the “Phantom-like hosts of the Ku Klux Klan spread their white robe over the most historic thoroughfare yesterday in one of the greatest demonstrations this city has ever known” (“White-robed Klan cheered on march in nation’s capital,” 1925).

It was into this environment that Bessie Coleman arrived. She was “leaving the segregation of the South for the ghetto of the North” (Rich, 1993, p. 17). Walter Coleman was the first of the Coleman children to leave home and had been living in Chicago for the last decade. The Coleman household was crowded. In addition to Walter and his wife Willie, another Coleman brother, John and his wife Elizabeth were already living there when Bessie arrived.

Walter’s wife Willie was a domineering woman accustomed to getting her own way. This caused no small degree of strife within the Coleman household. Bessie clashed frequently with Willie, who she considered “too bossy.” Willie had cowered everyone in the household, everyone except Bessie (Rich, 1993, p. 18).

From the moment of her arrival in Chicago, Bessie began looking for work. As in the South, most African American women working outside the home did so as domestics. This was not part of Bessie’s plans. She had not left Texas to do other people’s laundry in her new home.

Soon after arriving in Chicago, Bessie enrolled in the Burnham School of Beauty Culture for a course in manicuring. This was a shrewd decision. The manicurist course was short and did not require the extensive preparation needed for a beautician, even though she would frequently function as one. She was successful. In 1916 Bessie won a contest to decide who was the best manicurist in black Chicago.

Bessie Coleman was a gifted self-promoter. She initially plied her trade not in beauty shops catering to well-heeled African American women, but in the barber shops that lined State Street, an area Chicago historian Dempsey Travis described as a “black Wall Street and Broadway” (Travis, 2014, p. 30). Working at a table sat in the window, Bessie’s customers could be seen having their nails done by a “very pretty woman.” “As a manicurist she could do men’s nails in a barbershop, where the customers appreciated her looks and charm and expressed their admiration in generous tips” (Rich, 1993, p. 20).

Much like the African American church, African American owned barber shops and beauty parlors were an integral part of life during the Great Migration. “Jim Crow ordinances forced places such as churches, bars, social clubs, barber shops, beauty salons, even alleys to remain ‘black’ space” (Gill, 2010, p. 3). These places gave African Americans a space undeniably their own and they were treasured and protected. When the migrants moved to the North, they took these quasi-social institutions with them.

During his travels later in life, Booker T. Washington noted with pride how just one generation removed from the shackles of enslavement, and fighting for their ever-diminishing citizenship rights, African American men and women were embracing entrepreneurship. These small businesses offered the hope of lifting African American citizens out of the grinding poverty and servitude that had characterized their existence since arriving involuntarily on the shores of the New World (Gill, 2010).

According to Gill (2010), this “golden age” of African American business, saw

...unprecedented growth of black business enterprises and the celebration of entrepreneurship as a promising venue for middle-class blacks to rise above the economic ravages of segregation ... business and economic empowerment was viewed by black leaders of the day to be one of the more effective challenges to white supremacy and the ravages of second class citizenship” (p. 8).

This “racial uplift” ethos was primarily a masculine undertaking. At an 1899 conference hosted by W. B. Du Bois, women’s voices were decidedly muted. Although three women addressed the conference, they all discussed the need for “black men to help the race as well as himself by owning a business enterprise ... none of them discussed the role of women in the black business community” (Gill, 2010, p. 12).

African American women were acutely aware of the need for economic independence and sought to make it a central tenet of the racial uplift movement. Alberta Moore Smith, one of the founding members of the Colored Woman’s Business Club of Chicago argued that “the strength of many young women was being wasted by laborious work in sweat-shops, factories and stores” (Gill, 2010, p. 16). In her mind, these women would be better served working for themselves, rather than those with no interest in improving conditions for African American women.

For African American women during the first part of the twentieth century, entrepreneurship was a way to preserve one’s dignity while moving from abject poverty to working-class status. “African American women have worked outside of their homes for centuries” (Wade, 2010, p. 483), what separated them from their white feminist counterparts, is this labor was not an option or a freedom to be gained. Work outside the home was a prerequisite to the family’s survival.

In Bessie’s case, the visibility offered by her job, and the status she received, played a key role in making the future events of her life possible. By working on the most prominent thoroughfare in black Chicago, Bessie saw, and was seen by the movers and shakers of Chicago’s African American community.

The acquaintance that would have the greatest impact on her career was Robert S. Abbott, publisher of the *Chicago Defender*. “Spokesman for the race and owner of a newspaper whose readers would soon number a half million, Robert Abbott was a handsome, elegantly dressed, still youthful man in his mid-forties.” He would stand on the street corner and “hold court” with community leaders. “Abbott told them what they ought to do and they often did it” (Rich, 1993, p. 21). Although there is no indication of any romantic involvement between Abbott and Bessie, she clearly idolized both his persona and political power.

The *Chicago Defender* was one of the most influential African American newspaper during the early and mid-20th century. It had a national editorial perspective and played a leading role in the great migration of African Americans from the South to the North (“Chicago Defender,” 2019). As publisher, Abbott was simultaneously cheered and vilified. Florette Henri, a historian and writer who studied discrimination against African Americans and American Indians, said that if “there was finally a black Joshua it was Robert Abbott” (Henri, 1975, p. 63). Sociologist Gunnar Myrdal described Abbott as “the greatest single power in the Negro race” (Desantis, 1997, p. 63).

Abbott’s detractors took a decidedly different view. Black-nationalist leader Marcus Garvey accused Abbott of being a “race defamer” that “publishes in his newspaper week after week the grossest scandals against the race” (Desantis, 1997, p. 63). Julius Rosenwald, the multi-millionaire business tycoon and philanthropist whose Rosenwald Fund donated millions of dollars to help educate African American children in the rural south, thought Abbott a “monkey with a shotgun” (Desantis, 1997, p. 63).

Love him or hate him, there was no denying Abbott’s power to influence millions of readers. A lawyer by training, Abbott was told he was a “little too dark to make any impression on the courts of Chicago” (Desantis, 1997, p. 64). Tired of the racism and eager to be economically self-sufficient, Abbott decided to start his own paper. This was no easy task given there were already three African American papers in circulation.

The first issue of the *Chicago Defender* went to press on May 5, 1905 (Desantis, 1997, p. 65). The early years of the *Defender* were markedly different in style and content than those published during the paper’s heyday. These early offerings were concerned with local gossip and special interest stories. There was no mention of the racial injustice, segregation, or white-on-black crime that characterized Abbott’s later journalism. That was to change in 1910-1911.

His inaugural expose dealt with the white-supported red-light district on Chicago's black South Side. Abbott became outraged by the blatant disregard white governmental officials showed for his community. A thousand black readers a week began snatching up copies of the *Defender* to read Abbott's editorials about the sins of sex, drinking, and the white governmental officials who promoted such behavior. While the issue itself is historically insignificant, the ramification of the story for the development of the *Defender* cannot be underestimated: Abbott learned that if he could get his readers involved in a fight, "especially if underscored by a racially high-minded purpose," he would not only uplift his race, but achieve wealth and success as well. (Desantis, 1997, p. 66)

It was Abbott’s eye for the sensational, and his never-ending quest to advance the position of African Americans in U.S. society, that set him on a collision course with Bessie Coleman. With no diaries to enlighten later generations, it is not known for certain how or why Bessie became interested in flying. What is known is that during World War I Bessie had read the exploits of the early military aviators, and that her brothers, soldiers during the Great War, had regaled her with stories of French female aviators.

Whatever the motivation, Bessie Coleman had decided aviation was her vocation and she was not going to take no for an answer. Her early attempts at finding an instructor were failures. No one would train an African American woman to fly. As one white flight instructor put it, “there was no room for black birds in the sky over America” (Creasman, 1997, p. 158).

Bessie shared her hopes and frustrations with Robert Abbott; gaining not only an ally, but a source of funding. Abbott realized the potential economic and political bonanza an African American female aviator could produce. It was Abbott who insisted that Bessie go to France to learn to fly. He instructed her to learn French and save her money. When it became time to go, he would find a way to help finance her travel.

To many in the African American community, France was the new Jerusalem; a country known not for segregation, but acceptance. France became a fixture in the African American consciousness following World War I. The war occasioned “the largest transatlantic movement of black men since the days of the middle passage (200,000 African Americans would serve in France during and after the Great War)” (Whalan, 2005, p. 776). This resulted in large numbers of soldiers returning to the United States having enjoyed a level of acceptance heretofore never imagined. The impact of these experiences cannot be underestimated.

In his account of inspecting African American troops in Europe following the armistice, W. E. B. Du Bois remarked that “there is not a black soldier but who is glad he went, — glad to fight for France, the only real white Democracy; glad to have a new, clear vision of the real, inner spirit of American prejudice.” Similarly, in his welcome address to returning African American soldiers in Washington in April 1919, the Reverend F.J. Grimké told the troops that in France they had had “the opportunity of coming into contact with another than the American type of white man; and through that contact you have learned what it is to be treated as a man, regardless of the color of your skin or race identity. Unfortunately, you had to go away from home to receive a man's treatment, to breathe the pure, bracing air of liberty, equality, fraternity.” (Whalan, 2005, p. 778)

The experiences of returning African American soldiers affected not only the African American community, but white America as well. In his influential work, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” Richard Wright (1991) lists several subjects that were taboo for discussion between African American and white men. Paramount among them were “American white women; the Ku Klux Klan; France, and how Negro soldiers fared while there ...” (p. 15).

In addition to Abbott, the notorious Jesse Binga became Bessie’s main financier. Binga was known as a “block-buster” real estate dealer. He would buy properties in white neighborhoods and sell them to African American clients. When the white neighbors began to flee, he would buy their properties at rock bottom prices and re-sell them for sizeable profit. Binga was “unloved, but respected and even feared” (Rich, 1993, p. 31) in Chicago’s African American community. While there were rumors that Bessie was Binga’s mistress, there is no proof of this.

Little is known about Bessie’s personal life at the time. Extremely independent, she flaunted social convention and was often seen in the company of different men, unchaperoned. Her niece Marion Coleman recalled that “she had a lot of men callers, some were black and others were white – and several nationalities. I remember hearing different languages.” While there is no evidence that any money exchanged hands, or that these gentlemen friends received sexual favors in return for their support, rumors of this type dogged her until her death (Rich, 1993, p. 31).

It is worth noting the moral strictures in place at the time. Racial boundaries are also sexual boundaries. As such they are “heavily patrolled, policed, and protected” (Nagel, 2000, p. 107). When race and sex collide, you get a strange, often contradictory and hypocritical set of social controls. “Our women (often depicted as virgins, mothers, pure) v. their women (sluts, whores, soiled). Our men (virile, strong, brave) v. their men (degenerate, weak, cowardly). These heteronormative ethno-sexual stereotypes are nearly universal depictions of self and other as one gazes inside and across virtually any ethnic [racial] boundary” (Nagel, 2000, p. 113).

The prohibition against inter-racial sexual relations was, at least officially, iron clad. That is not to say inter-racial sexual relationships were not common. To a large extent, whether a relationship was accepted depended upon its makeup. White men had been involved with African American women since the earliest days of the African slave trade. Since the legal status of the child followed the mother, the offspring of such relationships did not threaten the prevailing social order. A child of a slave was born a slave (Hodes, 1993, p. 402). This remained painfully true long after the end of the Civil War, especially under Jim Crow.

A sexual relationship between an African American man and a white woman was universally forbidden, and if discovered often had disastrous, if not lethal consequences. This relationship has been treated as taboo since the early days of chattel slavery and signified the greatest fears and insecurities of a white population outnumbered by their slaves. Maintaining this prohibition was essential to maintaining order.

Intimate, heterosexual relationships between white women and black men have historically been considered a challenge to the gender and class-based racial privilege of white men, who were allowed to engage in intimate sexual relationships with “other” women with relative impunity. The gendered and racialized privilege of sexual agency belonged only to white men for centuries. In every colonial society, the only socially accepted ethno-sexual adventurers were privileged white males, since they wielded the economic, militaristic, and discursive power in society. (Meszaros & Bazzaroni, 2014, p. 1260)

In the years immediately following the Civil War, and well into the 20th Century, the most common excuse given for lynching African American men was the accusation that the man had sexual intentions towards a white woman. These accusations triggered “the cult of southern honor, the need to reaffirm traditional hierarchical power relationships, and white-black psychosexual tensions channeled into ritualized killings that helped preserve the economic and social preeminence of southern white males” (Finnegan, 2014, p. 850). A white man raping a black woman was not illegal in many states. A black man talking to a white woman unbidden could result in the man’s very public and gruesome death.

Additionally, a woman of any race being single into her middle and late twenties was also very unusual. For Bessie to be single, and seen in the company of different men, invariably invited the type of malicious gossip she was routinely subjected to. Given the hypersexualized and fetishized image of African American sexuality so prevalent at the time (Blair, 2014, pp. 4–10), it was beyond the imagination of contemporary society that a man may be willing to assist an African American woman achieve her goals, for whatever reason, without the exchange of sexual favors in return.

On November 4, 1920 Bessie applied for a passport at the Chicago office. For reasons unknown, she gave her birthdate as January 20, 1896, four years after her real date. Her brother John acted as a character witness and swore his sister was an American citizen born on that date. The passport was issued on November 9th. After securing a month’s transit permit from the British and a French tourist visa valid for one year, Bessie left for the continent on November 20, 1920, sailing from New York City aboard the S.S. *Imparator* (Rich, 1993, p. 32).

Once in France, her initial attempt to secure flight lessons was rebuffed. The school had experienced two deaths of female student pilots and refused to train any more women pilots. She was finally accepted at what was at the time, one of the premier flight schools in France, Ecole d' Aviation des Freres (The Caudron Brothers Aviation School) in le Crotoy in the Somme region of northern France. Operated by Rene and Gaston Caudron, Bessie remembered the curriculum as being "strict and unforgiving" (Hardesty, 2008, p. 8). During her seven months with the Caudron brothers she learned rudimentary piloting and navigation skills as well as acrobatic maneuvers such as "tail spins, banking, and looping the loop" (Rich, 1993, p. 32).

In what sounds utterly preposterous to the modern ear, one of the early concerns with women flying was that their uterus would prolapse. Although more than likely the result of a moral panic caused by women's increasing independence, this concern was nonetheless couched in pseudo-scientific language and printed in reputable journals. In 1898 a Berlin doctor named Gerson claimed that "violent movements of the body can cause a shift in the position and a loosening of the uterus as well as prolapse and bleeding, with resulting sterility, thus defeating a woman's true purpose in life, i.e., the bringing forth of strong children" (Pfister, 1990, p. 191). This is simply biological determinism in action. As such, a woman is reduced to her reproductive functions and any activity outside of that is suspect and against the laws of nature. Reproduction is a woman's only "true purpose" in life.

That said, aviation can be extremely unforgiving, and accidents during this time were common. Flying aircraft made of wood and fabric, and with engines that were heavy, temperamental and prone to fire, pilots in the early part of the twentieth century rarely lived to die of natural causes. Bessie learned to fly in the French Nieuport Type 82 trainer, a twin seat, open cockpit biplane "known to frequently fail in the air" (Staurowsky, 2007). Based on the Nieuport 14 observation aircraft used by Allied forces in World War I, the Nieuport Type 82 had dual controls and was powered by an 80 horse power rotary engine and came equipped with "anti-turnover wheels" mounted ahead of the main landing gear designed to prevent the aircraft from nosing over on rough terrain or after imperfect landings (Sanger, 2002). While at the Caudron Brother's School she witnessed the death of another student, an event that "was a terrible shock to my nerves, but I never lost them; I kept going" (Rich, 1993, p. 32).

The Type 82 trainer was a primitive machine. The engine was started by a mechanic who first primed it with castor oil and then hand propped the engine to life. The noise, heat, and fine mist of oil blowing back into the pilot's face made communication difficult. Rudimentary tube intercom systems (a hollow tube with a funnel at either end that the instructor shouted directions into) were ineffective at best. Bessie learned to communicate with her instructor by feeling his movements on the yoke and rudder bar. She quickly learned to mimic these movements and thus learned to control the aircraft.

The instrument panel consisted only of a tachometer for the engine and a highly inaccurate altimeter. Attitude was assessed visually or by a metal nut attached to the end of a piece of string hanging from the windscreen. Since the dual controls were linked, if one of the two people controlling the aircraft "froze" at the controls and held them in place, it was possible both aviators could be killed.

Bessie Coleman earned her pilot certificate from the Federation Aeronautique Internationale (FAI), on June 15, 1921. The FAI was "the only organization at the time whose recognition granted one the right to fly anywhere in the world" (Rich, 1993, p. 34). It was founded by representatives from Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, and the United States, during meeting in Paris on Oct. 14, 1905. Chartered as a non-governmental, not for profit organization, its stated purpose is to promote and encourage private "sport" aviation and certify world records (Whittall, 2019). Of the 62 candidates to earn FAI licenses between January and June of 1921, Bessie Coleman was the only woman.

Bessie's return to the United States in September 1921 was far different from her departure ten months earlier. She was met dockside and interviewed by reporters who described her as "a full-fledged aviatrix, the first of her race" (Rich, 1993, p. 35). Upon her return to Chicago she gave an exclusive interview to the *Defender*, not surprising given her debt to Robert Abbott. In the interview Bessie reviewed every detail of her experience in Europe. When asked why she wanted to fly, she said

We must have aviators if we are to keep up with the times. I shall never be satisfied until we have men in the Race who can fly. Do you know you have never lived until you have flown? Of course, it takes one with courage, nerve and ambition. But I am thrilled to know we have men who are physically fit; now what is needed is men who are not afraid of death (Rich, 1993, p. 36).

This exchange is confusing. Bessie Coleman was the first African American of either sex to earn a prestigious FAI license, yet she emphasizes the need for African American men to step up and accept the mantle of the race in this new endeavor. Was she simply being politically correct? It seems highly unlikely that she held the same misgivings her male colleagues had regarding female pilots. There is no clear answer to this question. Her own life was a direct affront to the social conventions of the time, yet when pressed, she gave a very traditional answer.

Despite her newfound notoriety, Bessie had no visible means of support. Most pilots at the time earned their living barnstorming and performing in Flying Circuses. This was a miserable itinerant life. The term barnstorming originally referred to traveling theatre groups who set up, and often slept in barns as they performed for rural audiences throughout the south and Midwest. Following World War I, it came to signify pilots who would buzz a small community attracting attention, and then thrill the spectators with aerobatic maneuvers and take customers on their first ever plane rides, often charging "a penny a pound" (Kitchens, 2003).

In its heyday, "exhibition flying attracted huge crowds of ticket-buying customers. Stunt fliers rivaled vaudeville stars in their celebrity. Man's newfound ability to fly, the culmination of centuries of dreaming and ill-fated experimentation, commanded widespread enthusiasm and support among the public and the engineering minded in the scientific community" (Cameron, 1999, p. 8). It was also deadly. Pushing their fragile wood and cloth machines to the edge of the performance envelope, structural failure and crashes were common. Flyers at the time complained that the audience was not happy unless someone died (Hardesty, 2008).

Initially, most barnstormers performed either alone or in pairs. In time larger, better funded and more organized productions known as flying circuses began to appear. One of the best known was the "Gates Flying Circus." Ivan R. Gates began barnstorming in a homemade airplane in 1911. Over time he recruited several other fliers who performed in tandem. "Mr. Gates prospered, as did most fliers who were not killed or crippled ... one of the ordinary tricks was jumping from one plane to another in the air. The Gates' wing-walkers were accustomed to climb down, hang from the under carriage and drop to the upper wing of another plane flying underneath" ("Gates, Stunt Flier, Ends Life By Leap: Founder of Flying Circus Jumps out Window as Wife Tries to Hold Him Back," 1932).

It was against this backdrop that Bessie contemplated joining the barnstorming circuit. Knowing she lacked the requisite aerobatic skills to compete in such a competitive marketplace, she returned to Europe for additional training. Who funded this trip, given her seeming lack of income, is not known.

While on the continent she traveled to France, Holland, and Germany, meeting and charming aviation elites such as famed aircraft designer Anthony Fokker and Robert Thelen, the ninth pilot in

Germany to receive a pilot's license. With each of these dignitaries Bessie would share her desire to fund a flying school to train African American pilots. She promised large orders of ten or twelve planes to each manufacturer she met. None of these orders was ever placed or fulfilled.

The record is silent regarding with whom (if anyone) she received any additional flight training, the stated purpose of the trip. The Dutchman Fokker and the German Thelen both discuss being impressed with Bessie's flying skills. It is possible she received informal instruction from several sources as she promoted not only herself, but her dream of a school.

Bessie's first airshow in the United States was at Curtiss Field outside New York City on September 3, 1922. It was an event designed to honor the all African American 369 Infantry Regiment that was part of the American Expeditionary Force in WWI. Robert Abbott played a key role in getting her the job; promoting her as "The world's greatest woman flyer" (Hardesty, 2008, p. 9).

Bessie was the consummate show person and had a penchant for exaggeration and self-promotion. During her second trip to Europe she had purchased a "uniform" patterned after those worn by the WWI pilots she so admired. Consisting of a leather flying helmet, jodhpurs, high top leather riding boots, Sam Browne belt, and a long leather jacket, she very deliberately struck a swashbuckling pose, designed to emulate the "Knights of the Sky" so popular in American social imagination (Hardesty, 2008, p. 15).

Bessie's dress was both functional in nature and a daring social statement. "The marked gender differences in fashionable dress linked men with seriousness, power, authority and action, and linked women with frivolity, helplessness, compliance and inaction" (Burman, 2000, p. 305). By adopting a pseudo-military uniform, Bessie was sending a clear signal that there was nothing frivolous or helpless in her flying.

Women's dress at the time was designed to ensure modesty with long flowing skirts, high necklines, and covered arms. This type of dress was cumbersome and ultimately dangerous when attempting to fly an aircraft. The chances of a voluminous skirt becoming entangled in the rudder bar or pedals and fouling the controls was very real. Then there is the matter of altitude and airspeed. Air temperature drops predictably with altitude. The higher one flies, the colder it becomes. Bessie's choice of a long leather jacket was as practical as it was stylish; the leather provided a layer of insulation against the cold and a solid barrier against the wind. "For aviators, it was said 'there is nothing like leather, whether for warmth, durability, or impermeability'" (Burman, 2000, p. 309).

The leather flying helmet and goggles were equally necessary. Although her plane was slow by today's standards, it still produced 80 mph – 100 mph of freezing wind. All the aircraft that Bessie flew had open cockpits. Because of this, not only the physical elements, but the thin mist of oil from the engine were constant companions. Becoming blinded by flying debris or oil would mean almost certain death.

A famous picture from this time shows Bessie standing beside a Curtis JN-4, popularly known as the Jenny (Van Der Linden, 2006, p. 44). She is resplendent with stylish but short (bobbed) hair, a button-down shirt and tie, jodhpurs, Sam Brown belt, knee length riding boots, and holding her helmet. Her short stature is emphasized by the fact she is standing on an automobile's running board, yet barely reaches the engine of the aircraft. The Jenny's engine has no cowling and the internal workings are clearly visible. There is a small windscreen in front of the cockpit, but not nearly large enough to provide any meaningful protection from the elements or flying debris. It is no accident that this picture is almost an exact replica of the hundreds of such pictures taken by Allied airmen during the Great War. Bessie

never forgot it was her personality, as much as her piloting skills, that would determine her success or failure on the barnstorming circuit.

Bessie strode a very thin line between rejecting her femininity and profiting from it. Aviation is gendered almost entirely male. The attitudes and characteristics associated with being a pilot are male, and the technocentric aspect of manned flight are all decidedly androcentric. The vocabulary of aviation illustrates this fact. When she flew, Bessie lifted herself into the cockpit of the aircraft, where she fought to control a mechanical beast as willing to kill her as obey her commands. When she exited the aircraft upon landing, it was as a modern-day knight dismounting their steed, handing the reins to a squire while the knight approached the crowd to accept their accolades.

There were no female pilots in the skies over Europe during WWI. No nation allowed women to fly in the military, yet Bessie chose a pseudo-military uniform to represent her character. Her choice of costume is an example of a pattern women attempting to break into male dominated fields have used for centuries: they de-emphasize their femininity. In order to succeed, the woman must be perceived as changing in ways that make them more suited to their male oriented undertaking. Wechsler-Segal, 1995, p. 758). If masculinity is framed as being the opposite of femininity (a truly false dichotomy), then in order to succeed a woman must rid herself of all that is feminine.

Much of Bessie's attire was practical, but other women aviators reached the same goals by binding their dresses around their legs to prevent interference with the flight controls, placing their long hair in a bun and tying their "bonnets" to their head to prevent their headgear from becoming airborne (Burman, 2000, pp. 300–310). Bessie's choice to mimic the uniform worn by male pilots was a powerful statement that she would not be constrained by traditional social norms.

At the same time, she was conscious of the fact that it was her uniqueness as a female aviator that motivated people to come see her show. Bessie was a competent pilot that earned the respect of her colleagues on the barnstorming circuit (Hardesty, 2008). That said, her flying skills would not have been enough to set her apart in an already crowded field. She capitalized on her status as the first African American female pilot to earn a FAI license to fill stadiums with paying spectators, and lecture halls with well heeled customers eager to hear about her exploits.

This careful balancing act is evident in what is perhaps the most recognizable image of Bessie Coleman: the picture from her FAI license. In this head shot, she is wearing her leather pilot's helmet with her goggles perched on her forehead, yet there is an undeniable softness to the photo. The black and white image is slightly blurred and the background almost pastel. She was a strikingly beautiful woman in the classic sense, and not even a bureaucratic identification photograph could hide that reality.

Professor Elizabeth Freyberg (1989) opines that Bessie saw herself as a modern-day Joan of Arc. Just as Joan had united a disparate and often warring group of individual fiefdoms into a coherent military force, Bessie would unite and uplift African Americans out of their subjugation and poverty. "Joan of Arc sought to free her people, the French, from British tyranny and oppression; Coleman ... from Anglo American racial tyranny and oppression. Against all odds each chose an avenue to make social changes, yet uncharted by women — Joan the military, Coleman in the field of aviation" (Freydberg, 1989, p. 174). Bessie's emulation of Joan of Arc also shows just how in-tune she was with current affairs. Bessie began associating herself with the French heretic turned saint following her Canonization on May 16, 1920.

After the Curtiss field show, Bessie's next big event was the Negro Tri-State Fair in Memphis, Tennessee. Bessie was the "principal thrill" of the fair's opening day, October 12, 1922. Recalling this show, Bessie boasted to have flown before 20,000 spectators. In reality, 20,000 was the attendance for the full three days of the fair. The Memphis Commercial Appeal praised her for her "nervy flying," and

gushed that Bessie proved so great a draw that the organizers should have booked her “for a dozen shows” (Rich, 1993, p. 51).

With two successful airshows under her belt, “Queen Bess, Daredevil Aviatrix” was eager to return home to Chicago. Her first show in front of a home crowd was at Checkerboard Airdrome (Midway Airport). This show had originally been planned for Labor Day, but had to be rescheduled because of rain. She was to give a total of four flights, beginning at 3 pm.

The preshow publicity provided by the *Chicago Defender* was as over the top as their main attraction. Abbott’s paper declared that Bessie had “amazed continental Europe and been applauded in Paris, Berlin, and Munich.” It went on to explain that

Her flight will be patterned after American, French, Spanish and German methods. The French Nungesser start will be made. The climb will be after the Spanish form of Berta Costa and the turn that of McMullen in the American Curtiss. She will straighten out in the manner of Eddie Rickenbacker and execute glides after the style of the German Richthofen (sic). Landings of the Ralph C. Diggins type will be made. (Rich, 1993, p. 54)

The names used in this release would have been familiar to most aviation enthusiasts at the time. Nungesser, McMullen, Rickenbacker, Richthofen and Diggins were all World War I aces. Eddie Rickenbacker being a Medal of Honor recipient and the highest scoring American ace of the war with 26 aerial kills. The “German Richthofen” was the infamous Manfred von Richthofen, the German “Red Baron,” with 80 air combat victories.

The article misidentified the “Spanish” Berta Costa. Bertrand Acosta was an American aviation pioneer and protégée of Glenn Curtiss. By 1917 he was the “Chief Pilot Instructor and Director of Flying and Engineering for the Army Air Service. He was solely responsible for pilot testing, rating other engineers, and approving all planes seeing combat in World War One” (“Acosta, Bertrand ‘Bert’ B,” 2019). Acosta went on to pilot the aircraft Admiral Richard Byrd used to cross the Atlantic in 1927.

Admission for the show was \$1 for adults and 0.25 cents for children, a sizable sum in 1922, equivalent of \$15 today. While Abbott publicized the show, it was a white businessman, David L. Behncke, who provided the plane and airfield. Behncke was a very prominent figure in the early days of aviation. He owned and operated Checkerboard Airdrome and its associated repair shop and charter service. A former Army Air Service flight instructor, Behncke was five years Bessie’s junior, and had “no reservations about Bessie’s race or gender” (Rich, 1993, p. 55). Behncke would later go on to head the influential Air Line Pilots’ Association (ALPA), a position he held for over 20 years (Cohen, 2000).

Bessie used the Curtiss JN-4 “Jenny” for her airshow theatrics. Although it never saw combat, the JN-4 is one of the most famous aircraft of the time. “More than 90% of American pilots trained during the First World War received their primary instruction on the Jenny” (“Curtiss JN-4D Jenny,” 2019). Following the war, thousands were sold as surplus on the civilian market. They became the most common aircraft used on the barnstorming circuit.

The Jenny was similar to the Nieuport trainer Bessie had used in France. Both were made of wood and fabric and had a reputation for being fairly forgiving aircraft. The main difference was the Jenny had a much larger engine, 150 horsepower, compared to 80 horsepower for the Nieuport (Murphy, 2005).

Two thousand people came to Checkerboard Airdrome to watch her perform, including her mother, and sisters and their children. Her nephew was beside himself with pride, “My aunt’s a flier!”

and “she’s just beautiful wearing that long leather coat over uniform and the leather helmet with aviator goggles! That’s my aunt! A real live aviator” (Rich, 1993, p. 56).

The African American press was generally generous in their praise, but the mainstream media was less consistent. In 1922, Bessie accepted a role in a full-length motion picture titled *Shadow and Sunshine*. The initial reaction was lavish. Billboard magazine wrote a long piece detailing how the film would be produced by the African American Seminole Film Company, and result in the hiring of over 100 African American extras (Hardesty, 2008). This gushing praise quickly turned to scorn when Bessie withdrew over the opening scene. She was told she would appear “dressed in tattered clothing and with a walking stick and a pack on her back, to portray an ignorant girl just arriving in New York.” Bessie refused. “No Uncle Tom stuff for me” (Rich, 1993, p. 57).

Billboard’s reaction was quick and caustic. J.A. Jackson, a Billboard film critic and columnist said, “Miss Coleman is originally from Texas and some of her southern dialect and mannerisms still cling to her.” In a subsequent piece, he continued along the same vein. He described the actor replacing Bessie as being experienced, and possessing “unmistakable culture and social status, which will be an asset to the company” (Rich, 1993, p. 58). Bessie never received another film role, and even had trouble booking appearances at African American fairs in parts of the South and Midwest. She had obtained the reputation of being “unreliable” (Rich, 1993, p. 59).

Bessie’s actions resulted in her fighting a war on two fronts. It is clear her exit from *Shadow and Sunshine* was principled. She refused to perpetuate derogatory stereotypes. She was also fighting as a woman in an economic system that remained misogynistic even within the African American community (Hardesty, 2008, p. 15.). The producers never forgave her backing out and refused to sign her for their shows. After this episode, “she launched into a search for new backers. If show-business people on the East Coast would not give her a break, she would look elsewhere” (Rich, 1993, p. 62).

Since returning from Europe, Bessie’s one true passion was opening an aviation school for African American students of either sex (Williams, 2013). This was truly her calling and obsession. She wanted to turn “Uncle Tom’s cabin into a flying hangar” (Ivery, 2002). As with most of her endeavors, money was the main obstacle to reaching her goals. Following the *Shadow and Sunshine* affair Bessie had no steady means of support. She did not have a benefactor, a plane, or any solid future engagements.

Bessie boarded a train for California, where she worked for Coast Tire and Rubber Company dropping leaflets about their tires. Using the money she made from these flights, she purchased a surplus JN-4 at the Rockwell Army Intermediate Depot on North Island at Coronado. While at Coronado Bessie was interviewed by a reporter for the *Air Service Newsletter*, and influential trade publication. She explained her desire to open a school for African American students and boasted that she had ordered three planes (instead of one) which were to be delivered and assembled in San Francisco.

Despite her history of exaggeration, the reporter took her claims at face value and reported them as true. “When Bessie spoke as a pilot she became an actress on stage, uttering fictional lines with total conviction.” Although she did not lie to family or friends, her misstatements to the media and supporters was a tool she used whenever she thought it advantageous (Rich, 1993, p. 66). In her mind, the con was simply part of her persona.

In an age before internet fact checking, Bessie was free to create her own history. In an interview with the *California Eagle*, and African American weekly, she gave her age as 23 (she was 31), stated she had flown in six European countries (the actual number was three), and held German as well as French flying credentials (FAI is the only pilot certificate she ever held). She also claimed to be the only woman

to hold a FAI certificate. Bessie was the only African American woman to hold a FAI; there were other European women pilots with the same credential.

Once her JN-4 was ready, she started looking for places to hold exhibitions. Southern California was a hotbed aviation activity following the war, so traditional barnstorming would not have attracted much of a crowd. Bessie would have to rely on her carefully crafted persona to set her apart. The specter of an African American female pilot was too great to pass up and 10,000 people had gathered to watch her fly.

Once again disaster struck. Enroute to the show in Palomar Park, the Jenny's engine quit shortly after takeoff from Santa Monica and crashed. Bessie was unconscious when pulled from the wreckage. She had also broken her leg, several ribs, and had multiple lacerations and abrasions around her eyes (Ivery, 2002). Bessie was in the hospital for three months and was still wearing a cast on her leg when discharged.

Strapped for cash and without an airplane, Bessie arranged to give five lectures at the Ninth Street Young Man's Christian Association (YMCA) in Los Angeles. At these lectures, she showed films of her travels in Europe and described her exploits. Admission was 25 cents for children and 50 cents for adults (Rich, 1993, p. 73). She returned to Chicago in late June 1923 determined to arrest the downward spiral her career had taken since the crash.

Bessie's first show following the crash was to be on Labor Day in Columbus, Ohio but the show was rained out. In a sad irony, several thousand people, as many women as men met at the state fairgrounds a few miles away for an all day celebration of the Ku Klux Klan, "their enthusiasm undampened by the rain that was washing Bessie's show off the calendar" (Rich, 1993, p. 76). Bessie returned to Columbus a week later and flew before a crowd of 10,000.

What had always been unique regarding her shows was the demand that all spectators, white and black, enter through the same gate. Bessie would not fly before a segregated audience. It is a testament to her drawing power that in a place as steeped in racial hatred as Columbus Ohio in 1923, not only did the mayor welcome Bessie, there was only one entrance for all guests (Creasman, 1997; Ivery, 2002; Staurowsky, 2007).

It would be inaccurate and unfair to place all of Bessie Coleman's problems at the feet of racism, bigotry, and institutionalized misogyny. In many ways, Bessie was her own worst enemy. She hired and fired five managers in a period of two years and was often "temperamental and demanding" (Hardesty, 2008, p. 16). She was uncommunicative with her staff and made arrangements for appearances that conflicted with previously agreed to engagements. In the end her penchant for exaggeration (lying) and her willingness to change plans at the last minute, leaving venue promoters without a headliner after advertising money had been spent and tickets sold, severely sullied her reputation within the industry. Very few big-name promoters would hire her.

Despite her shortcomings, Bessie was a celebrity in Chicago and among the African American community. The problem was this celebrity did not equate to a steady income and she was perpetually worried about money. These shows produced a subsistence lifestyle that nonetheless kept her fed and clothed and provided her family with a sense of prestige. "In their eyes she was famous and because of that all the Coleman's had gained status" (Rich, 1993, p. 79).

In May 1925, Bessie returned to Texas for the first time. Staying in Houston, she gave lectures and worked to arrange a flying demonstration. Bessie's willingness to lie in order to promote an event was evident in the preshow publicity published by the Houston Post-Dispatch, a white daily. Giving her

age as 23 and claiming she had received flight training in Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris and “elsewhere;” she insisted that her shows were an attempt to change the fact that “The Negro race is the only race without aviators and I want to interest the Negro in flying and thus help the best way I’m equipped in to uplift the colored race” (Rich, 1993, p. 85).

This first Texas show was unique in two ways: it happened on Juneteenth, a celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation, and was segregated: “special reservations” (separate seating) for white guests. Juneteenth celebrates the end of slavery in the United States. On June 19, 1865 Major General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas and announced the end of the Civil War and the end of slavery. “Although the Emancipation Proclamation came 2 ½ years earlier on January 1, 1863, many slave owners continued to hold their slaves captive after the announcement, Juneteenth became a symbolic date representing African American freedom” (Higgins, 2017, p. 1).

In addition to her normal airshow, Bessie and four other pilots made it possible, “for the first time” for the “colored public of the South ... to fly.” Houston’s leading black newspaper, the *Houston Informer*, noted “about 75 of our fearless citizens, most of whom were women,” climbed aboard one of the five small passenger planes available to get “a birds—eye view of Houston from the sky” (Rich, 1993, p. 88).

The Houston show was so successful that three additional shows in and near Houston were held over the next month. Bessie also gave several lectures extolling the African American citizens of Texas to take an interest in aviation. She aimed these lectures at the women in the audience, knowing that “the white, male-dominated society found it easier to accept assertive black females than to accept the same characteristic in black males” (Rich, 1993, p. 90). Black women did not threaten white masculinity to the level confident African American men did.

It was during these lectures that Bessie began to wonder if perhaps the lecture circuit, rather than barnstorming, might be more effective in preaching the gospel of aviation and drumming up support for her long dreamed of school. Bessie never charged students admission for her lectures, hoping to inspire them to be pilots.

It was at an airshow in Wharton, Texas, eighty miles southwest of Houston on September 6, 1925 that Bessie added parachuting to her repertoire. Bessie had used parachutists before in her show, and after one refused to jump anymore, Bessie decided to do it herself. With a hired pilot from Houston at the controls, Bessie jumped, landing in the center of the crowd (Hardesty, 2008).

At a show in her hometown of Waxahachie, Bessie refused to perform unless all spectators entered through the same gate. Texas had the most restrictive Jim Crow laws in the South, and this concession by event organizers speaks volumes to Bessie’s commercial appeal at this time.

After her triumphant tour of her home state, Bessie returned to Chicago where she worked with her agent to put together a speaking tour of Georgia and Florida. Bessie’s lectures in Georgia were met with great fanfare. Although she promised to return to several locations to give a flying demonstration, this was not possible since she did not own an airplane.

Bessie received an even warmer welcome in Florida, where she stayed with the Reverend Hezekiah Keith Hill and his wife Viola Tillinghast Hill. The Hill’s thought Bessie’s message was of great import to the African American community of Orlando, and invited her to stay with them in the parsonage of Reverend Hill’s church (Rich, 1993, p. 101). It was with the Hill’s that Bessie found a new family and faith. She referred to the Reverend and Mrs. Hill as “Mother” and “Daddy,” and became a Born-Again Christian under their guidance.

As in Chicago, Bessie was a celebrity in the African American community of Orlando. Popular among the children, she was a frequent speaker at African American schools, thrilling the children with tales of her exploits. Bessie also spoke to adults in any venue that would host her. Theatres, churches, and pool halls were all enlisted for this purpose. She spoke for either a small fee or by passing the hat, depending on the venue. Despite her popularity, one thing was certain, she would never earn enough to open her school by speaking engagements alone (Rich, 1993, p. 104).

Against the objections of Viola Hill, who did not want Bessie doing any more airshows, Bessie booked a performance at the Orlando Chamber of Commerce's annual flower show. Once again, Bessie's refusal to perform before a white's only or segregated audience resulted in friction with event organizers. Like Texas, Florida was rigidly segregated and overtly violent towards African Americans. In Daytona Beach, African Americans could not be on the street after dark without a special transit pass, and in Tampa "Night Riders" terrorized African American residents into selling their houses and leaving the city (Rich, 1993, p. 105).

Dr. David Ortiz, in his study of African American resistance in Florida in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century makes it plain, "African Americans who raised their voices placed themselves in mortal danger" (Ortiz, 2000, p. 73). Between 1882 and 1930, African Americans in Florida suffered the highest lynching rate per capita in the United States. During those years, at least two hundred and sixty-six African Americans were lynched (Ortiz, 2000, p. 85). As in other venues, it is a testament to Bessie's economic power that the Orlando Chamber of Commerce integrated the flower show and agreed to allow all spectators to enter through a single gate.

Bessie then agreed to fly at the annual May Day celebration sponsored by the Negro Welfare League in Jacksonville (Freydberg, 1989, p. 155). This invitation was especially meaningful to Bessie. Although she was revered in the African American community, none of the prominent African American civic organizations had come out in support of her idea for a school for African American aviators. With this invitation she was hoping to gain the financial backing that had so far eluded her.

This was not to be. On the day before the show John T. Betsch, Coleman's Florida publicity manager, a Howard graduate interested in aeronautics, and member of the Jacksonville Negro Welfare League, accompanied Coleman and Wills [Bessie's Mechanic] at 7:15 A.M. to the Paxon Airfield on Friday, April 30 [1926], for a dress rehearsal of the impending performance. Before entering the cockpit, Coleman knelt in prayer beside the aircraft. When she arose she promised to take Betsch up after she test piloted the plane. Wills was piloting the plane as a few spectators watched the plane soaring in graceful patterns against the early morning sun. Suddenly the graceful circles turned into wildly, uncontrolled circles and the plane began to descend rapidly from the air into a sharp nosedive toward the ground. Bessie Coleman was catapulted out of the machine at about 2,000 feet when the plane somersaulted in several revolutions; she was not wearing a seatbelt or a parachute ... her body was found in a farm yard owned by Mrs. W. L. Meadows almost a mile from where the plane crashed, every bone in her body been crushed by the impact. (Freydberg, 1989, p. 156)

Wills, who was wearing a seatbelt, remained with the aircraft until it crashed near the end of the airfield. Betsch quickly ran to the wreckage, where in his excitement he struck a match to light a cigarette to calm his nerves. The match ignited the fuel vapors surrounding the wrecked plane and cremated Wills with the remains of the damaged aircraft. Betsch was arrested but released after several hours, because no malice was found in his actions; rather, they were attributed to confusion and panic after having witnessed such a horrific event (Freydberg, 1989, p. 157).

Following the crash, many in the African American community believed Wills guilty of murder. They believed that had it not been for Betsch's unfortunate decision to lite a cigarette, Wills would have lived. The most noteworthy proponent of this conspiracy theory was Robert Abbott of the Chicago Defender, who insisted that Bessie not fly with Wills because he, "didn't like the looks of the Texan" (Rich, 1993, p. 109). These rumors and conspiracy theories were largely abandoned after a wrench was found in the wreckage, and it was determined that it was this wrench, not Wills, that caused the loss of control that resulted in Bessie's death (Freydberg, 1989, p. 158; Rich, 1993, p. 111).

The impact of Bessie's death on the African American community can be seen in the three separate funerals held in her honor. Denied other forms of homage, funerals in the African American community have always been an integral part of the community's consciousness. They were a way for the community to come together to celebrate not only the deceased, but themselves. Funerals were an occasion where large numbers of African American citizens could gather without attracting the ire of the dominant white community. They were an African American space largely free of white interference (Bunch-Lyons, 2015).

In Jacksonville, mourners filed past her closed coffin at the funeral home until well after midnight. On Sunday, May 2, 1926, more than 5,000 members of Jacksonville's African American community showed up at her funeral to pay their final respects. Several hundred of the mourners were school children who had heard Bessie speak the day before her death (Rich, 1993, p. 112).

After the services in Jacksonville, Bessie's body was moved by train to Orlando, where a second service was held on Monday May 3. Bessie's friend and surrogate father, the Reverend Hezekiah Hill gave the eulogy. Following this service, Bessie's body was moved by train to Chicago, accompanied by Viola Hill; the wife of Reverend Hill and the woman who had tried unsuccessfully to dissuade Bessie from performing in anymore air shows (Freydberg, 1989, p. 159).

Bessie's body arrived in Chicago on May 5 and laid in state until her final send-off on Friday, May 7. More than 10,000 people paid their respects during that time. At the Chicago funeral, her flag draped casket was carried by six actual and twenty-four honorary pallbearers. Those that spoke in her honor emphasized her courage and indomitable spirit. They also highlighted her integrity and unflinching loyalty to her race. Although she was offered large sums of money to "give exhibitions exclusively for the other race, she steadily refused to accept them unless her people were allowed admission" (Freydberg, 1989, p. 161).

Bessie Coleman's legacy is as complicated as the woman who spawned it. She was loved by the rank and file of the African American community but lived mostly unsupported by its financial leaders – Robert Abbott being the most notable exception. At her funeral in Chicago, the Reverend Junius C. Austin, described Bessie as "100 years ahead of the race she loved so well, and by whom she was least appreciated" (Freydberg, 1989, p. 161).

Bessie was born a poor woman of color in one of the most aggressively segregated states in America; yet against all odds went on to become the first African American of either sex to earn a FAI. Despite this accomplishment, she was never able to realize her dream: an aviation school to serve the African American community. Bessie Coleman flaunted the socio-sexual mores of the time and this in turn was used against her to undermine her legitimacy. She slept her way to the top was the most common gossip heard among those jealous or angry at her success.

A tireless self-promoter, Bessie never let the truth get in the way of a good story; a failing the media often enabled by printing her assertions without any attempts to verify her claims. She saw herself

as Joan of Arc and worked deliberately to draw parallels between her own strident African American Nationalism and the ardent nationalism of the Maid of Orleans.

Bessie was very much in tune with the racial realities of her segregated world. She believed that white America was willing to accept the type of assertive behavior she became notorious for because she was a woman. Had she been an African American man, she would have been stopped and quite possibly killed. Bessie “knew that the white, male dominated society found it easier to accept assertive black females than to accept the same characteristic in black males” (Rich, 1993, p. 90). This is a reversal of normal gender roles due to race, and speaks volumes about the South’s continued fear and paranoia of African American male equality.

As a vehicle of social control, gender does not exist in isolation. Rather, it cooperates synergistically with other avenues of control such as race, religion, and socioeconomic status to perpetuate and maintain the status quo. Any attempt to alter the prevailing power structures is met head on, often violently, by those actors with the most to lose.

This dynamic is evident throughout Bessie’s life. Born in abject poverty, her dreams of flight were thwarted not only by economics, but race and gender as well. As a child she was relegated to a segregated rural school that lacked almost all necessities, including qualified staff. By the time she graduated, Bessie was as literate as her instructor.

As Bessie planned for her escape, she was forced to “remember her place” when picking up or delivering other people’s laundry on the west side of Waxahachie. Her status as “other” was reinforced during her trip to Chicago in rail car designed for human cattle. Once with her brother she was faced with the reality that she had exchanged Jim Crow for the self-imposed segregation on State Street.

It was in France that Bessie first felt the loosening of the social constraints that had dominated her life to this point. France between World War I and World War II was the New Jerusalem in the minds of many African Americans. Here race did not automatically mean exclusion, and the sexual taboos so common in America were less prominent. Race and gender are both social constructs. They change according to when and where they are created.

Bessie’s professional career was a continual balancing act between being restricted, and profiting from her uniqueness. Bessie walked this tight rope expertly. She was very attuned to the power of symbols and the subconscious messages they telegraphed. Her choice of dress was a delicate balance between practical considerations and profound social statements. Outfitted as a military aviator, Bessie at once hid and flaunted her femininity. Flying, like the military, is gendered almost entirely male and Bessie’s uniform paid homage to this reality. Yet, there is no denying her heteronormative, even exotic appeal. The conflicting signals were intentional. Bessie refused to be categorized in any traditional way.

Bessie’s refusal to perpetuate derogatory stereotypes or perform before segregated audiences is another example of this delicate balancing act. Had Bessie agreed to play her role in *Shadow and Sunshine*, there is little doubt her financial situation would have been more secure; she may even have made enough to realize her dreams of a flight school. Her refusal to play a role she saw as demeaning plagued her throughout the rest of her career. Likewise, her refusal to perform before segregated audiences severely restricted the shows she was able to book. That said, it is precisely this integrity that endeared her in the hearts of so many African American audiences. Her ability to demand and receive concessions from white promoters in Jim Crow South is astounding. Very few African American performers can claim this distinction. This single fact makes Bessie Coleman matchless among her peers.

Gender is ubiquitous. It is everywhere and influences everything. Yet gender does not operate in isolation. Factors such as race, religion, and socioeconomic status also conspire to maintain social control. Bessie Coleman embraced and overcame all these factors in order to understand that “the air is the only place free from prejudice” (Nash, 2015).

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