

“Sexual Angst of Empire: Race, Manliness, and Prostitution on the Panama Canal, 1914-1921”

After the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914, chaotic red-light districts and unruly prostitutes contradicted claims that the gateway between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans heralded a new age of modern scientific virtues that promoted orderliness, sanitation, and efficiency. Underneath the canal’s systematic efficiency and pretensions of cleanliness flourished a seedy underbelly associated with drunkenness, opium dens, gambling halls, and houses of prostitution. U.S. soldiers fled the monotony of the military barracks in the Canal Zone and found pleasure in the neighboring cities of Panama, where they spent their paychecks and leisure time. The cities’ red-light districts offered two particularly enticing activities largely absent in the Canal Zone: drinking and sex. U.S. soldiers and civilians from the Canal Zone constituted the largest group of customers for the burgeoning business of saloons and houses of prostitution. Inside the red-light districts, soldiers paid for sex and company with a multinational assortment of women, including a large number of English-speaking West Indian women.<sup>1</sup>

As twentieth century unfolded, people of African descent from the British Caribbean migrated by the thousands in search of economic opportunities. They found work on banana plantations, sugarcane fields, and construction sites as North American capital, technology, and personnel expanded throughout the region. The U.S. presence in the Caribbean basin facilitated an increasingly interconnected space of commodities, people, and ideas linked by a growing complex of railroads, canals, and steamships intended to buttress emerging export economies. During the construction of the Panama Canal from 1904 to 1914, a transnational network of

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “West Indian” or “Afro-Caribbean” interchangeably. The term encompasses people of African descent from various islands in the Caribbean under the imperial jurisdiction of the British Empire during the early twentieth century, including Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, Montserrat, St. Lucia as well as other islands.

Afro-Caribbean migrants supplied the bulk of labor. Afro-Caribbean women also migrated to the canal, albeit in smaller numbers, and worked primarily as laundresses, domestic servants, and cooks among other jobs. With the completion of the canal in 1914, employment opportunities for Caribbean migrants decreased substantially. Many continued to search for economic prospects in Cuba, Costa Rica, New York, and elsewhere, while others decided to remain in Panama. Regardless, some female migrants made ends meet through commercial sex while risking physical violence from patrons as well as confrontation with the Panamanian state and U.S. authorities.

The sexual contact between U.S. soldiers and Afro-Caribbean women, in particular, conjured up an array of sexual anxieties among distressed U.S. authorities, apprehensive Panamanian politicians, and indignant Afro-Caribbean men. Worried about the increasing cases of venereal disease, U.S. officials quickly blamed West Indian prostitutes (while ignoring the complicity of men in the Canal Zone) and scheduled the deportation of one-hundred and fifty women from the isthmus to the British Caribbean. These black women, according to one U.S. official, epitomized the “dirtiest and filthiest type [of prostitute].”<sup>2</sup> Panamanian politicians, on the other hand, upbraided the U.S. soldiers who flooded the Panamanian streets “in search of bad women” threatening to insult “decent Panamanian women.” Meanwhile, Afro-Caribbean protesters marched through the streets with placards decrying: “Must our girls be sacrificed on the altar of vice? No!”<sup>3</sup>

While canal authorities, Panamanian politicians, and black activists all agreed that prostitutes were morally depraved women infested with disease, they strongly disagreed on the appropriate manner of dealing with the crisis. The problem of prostitution near the Panama

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<sup>2</sup> Gasperry Offult to Secretary of State, 11 July 1919. File 819.1151/53, RG 59, United States National Archives (USNA).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Michael Conniff’s *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama, 1904-1981* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 54.

Canal tapped into a myriad of anxieties over sexuality, manhood, womanhood, patriotism, U.S. imperialism, and racial advancement. During the late 1910s, West Indian prostitutes functioned as a prism for U.S. officials, Panamanian politicians, and Afro-Caribbean activists to articulate conflicting constructions of masculinity.

An examination of masculine discourses surrounding the contentious issue of prostitution allows for a broader exploration of a various ideas of race, class, gender, and sexuality circulating among various populations throughout the U.S., Caribbean, and Latin America. I employ a transnational, socio-cultural, and gendered methodological approach to expand our understanding of the Canal Zone beyond the customary narratives of engineering and commercial histories based on political personalities from the United States. In addition, studies of the Panama Canal tend to place an extraordinary amount of attention on the era of construction from 1904 to 1914. This study extends the chronological focus to explore the social and cultural aftermaths following the opening of the canal. My periodization corresponds with the opening of the canal in 1914 and the largest labor strike ever on the canal by Garveyite labor activists in February 1920. During these seven years, the issue of prostitution evoked a multitude of concerns regarding imperial arrangements in Panama that carried profound global implications.

This paper begins by examining how during the U.S.-led anti-prostitution campaign during World War I, authorities discursively mapped out a sexual geography onto the emerging U.S. imperial project in Panama and beyond, while embarking on a crusade to inculcate a new culture of military manhood among the soldiers. For U.S. officials, controlling sexual transmitted disease became especially important in Panama where the U.S. empire and the “white race” at large faced the debilitating effects of tropical degeneration not only due to the climate but also through interracial sex. The next segment explores the motivations behind

Panamanian politicians' confrontational stance toward the sexual contradictions of U.S. policy. The final section delves into how Afro-Caribbean activists employed a twofold deployment of black manhood that simultaneously policed female sexuality while confronting canal authorities over economic justice and racial equality.

### **The Sexual Geography of Empire**

Following the opening of the canal in 1914, U.S. officials understood sexually transmitted disease in the context of a previous epidemic on the isthmus: yellow fever. The widely praised "conquest of yellow fever" had made the construction of the canal possible and signified the stunning possibilities of a new scientific knowledge that would enable the U.S. to extend its control and influence beyond its borders. With the successful defeat of the disease, U.S. health officials bestowed upon themselves a self-proclaimed mandate to make the tropics safe for white people to inhabit. Drawing from positivist and eugenic ideas of the time, William Gorgas portrayed the entire course of human history in relationship to climate and disease. Clothing and fire, according to Gorgas, allowed the "most vigorous and healthy races, mentally and physically" to migrate to temperate climates and escape the diseases which flourished in the tropics.<sup>4</sup> Only in the early twentieth century would "sanitary discoveries" allow "man to return from the temperate regions to which he was forced to migrate long ago, and again live and develop in his natural home, the tropics." The triumph over yellow fever allowed for a progressive stage of human history to unfold, and white, healthy men led the march.

Racialized knowledge of disease pervaded understandings of the "white race" and the "negro race" in relation to tropical disease during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Anglo-Saxon men, for example, armed with scientific knowledge, possessed the capability to conquer yellow fever. Meanwhile, medical erudition claimed that people of African descent

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<sup>4</sup> Gorgas, *Sanitation in Panama*, 286.

naturally possessed more immunity to yellow fever and other tropical diseases. The counterpart to “Negro immunity” involved white vulnerability to the tropics.

A central tenet of white susceptibility to tropical disease posited that whites in tropical climates would degenerate morally, mentally and physically. White people in the tropics remained liable to “degenerate themselves in that lethargic but contented state” known as “tropical morals.”<sup>5</sup> Anxiety over racially mixing with inferior peoples functioned as a key element of this central tenet of degeneracy. These fears surfaced during the anti-prostitution campaign, especially in regards to West Indian prostitution. In a military investigation during January of 1919, Captain Burnap submitted a report of conditions on the island of Taboga off the coast of Panama City. The island represented an isolated case of the horrific outcomes if vice continued out of control, especially if white soldiers continued having sex with black women in the tropics. Burnap wrote to General Richard Blatchford that “a drunken negress had offered her little twelve year old daughter (nearly white) to two soldiers for twenty pesos.”<sup>6</sup> The intermixing of white soldiers and black prostitutes, according to Burnap, produced racially mixed children bound for a life of depravity. The potential “mongrel” offspring of such an encounter symbolized the unnerving prospects of racial mixing in the tropics.

U.S. officials expressed serious concerns over interracial sex in tropics in relationship to the geographic boundaries of the emerging U.S. empire. With the prevalence of prostitution in the red-light districts of Panama City and Colón, U.S. canal authorities worried that moral corruption and decadency of the Panamanian cities would spill into the U.S.-controlled Canal Zone. The cities, under the jurisdiction of the Panamanian government, lingered precariously close to the Canal Zone. Located on the Pacific end of the canal, Panama City lay adjacent to Balboa, a key U.S. administrative center. On the Atlantic side, Colón bordered Cristobal, the

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<sup>5</sup> “Venereal Disease in the Canal Zone,” *Journal of Social Hygiene* (1919), 262.

<sup>6</sup> A.M. Burnap to Richard Blatchford, 21 January 1919. File 819.1151/139, RG 59, USNA.

other major executive outpost. The Canal Zone represented an ideal space of orderliness, efficiency, and sanitation. The isthmus cities represented the opposite characteristics, exemplified by the red-light districts where gambling flourished, alcohol flowed freely, and diseased prostitutes ran rampant, at least in the U.S. officials' imagination. U.S. authorities envisaged the cities as a chaotic, immoral, and unsanitary environment governed by a corrupt, inefficient Panamanian government. The vice-ridden Panamanian cities loomed dangerously close to the Canal Zone and threatened to unravel the imperial project.

The relentless threat of diseased prostitutes tempting young innocent U.S. soldiers in the Canal Zone mirrored broader fears of failing to control the adjoining urban centers in Panamanian territory. These concerns manifested themselves most clearly in relationships of sexual commerce between U.S. soldiers and urban prostitutes. U.S. officials considered the Panama City and Colón as “unrestrained hot beds of vice” and therefore the major source of sexually transmitted disease.<sup>7</sup> The direction of transmission, however, remained lopsided. According to U.S. officials, prostitutes infected the soldiers; soldiers did not infect prostitutes. U.S. officials depicted female prostitutes as the wellspring of venereal disease intimately connected to the other venues of urban vice.

In order to achieve the goals of deporting foreign prostitutes and eradicating red-light districts in the Panamanian cities, U.S. officials had to work closely with their Panamanian counterparts. In a letter to Panamanian President, McCormack charged that the British West Indian women acted as “parasites on the body politic... busily engaged in destroying and degrading the young manhood of your Republic and civilian population of the Canal Zone.” He recommended that the Panamanians “send the British and other foreign subjects back to the countries from which they came.”<sup>8</sup> His letter underscores how marginalized black migrant

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Blatchford to the Adjunct General of the Army, July 9, 1918. USNA RG 59/819.1151/31

<sup>8</sup> Arthur McCormack to Belisario Porras, January 18, 1919. USNA RG 59/819.1151/42.

women became a chief concern of many influential health officials, such as the “particularly anxious” Dr. Henry Goldthwaite, who argued that West Indian prostitutes made up the “worst and filthiest type [of prostitute].”<sup>9</sup>

### **Competing Notions of Military Manhood**

U.S. officials grappled employed a two-pronged strategy to grapple with the problem of prostitution near the canal. First, as demonstrated above, they tried to get rid of foreign prostitutes through deportation. Second, military and health officials attempted to educate soldiers on the perils of venturing into the red-light districts in the Panamanian cities. According to these officials, prostitutes, infested with syphilis and gonorrhea, would first tempt the young, naïve soldiers with alcohol. After intoxicating them, the diseased prostitutes would then lure the men into their clutches with sex. The corruption of innocent soldiers, according to officials, undermined their patriotic service to their country by debilitating them from active duty. Moreover, the prostitutes, via the soldiers’ weaknesses, threatened to contaminate chaste women waiting virtuously back home for their servicemen abroad to return. In order to protect women in the United States and soldiers on duty abroad, authorities in Panama actively contributed to a broader educational campaign throughout the U.S. military to combat prostitution and venereal disease by reformulating notions of a manly sexuality and patriotic service.

As the onset of World War I encouraged an alliance between the social hygiene movement, temperance advocates, moral reformers, and U.S. military officials, new concerns of a culture of military manhood coalesced around the issues of prostitution, drunkenness, and venereal disease. Leading military and health officials in Panama including William Gorgas, Edgar Bock, Arthur McCormack, and Herman Goodman became heavily involved in the social hygiene movement, writing articles and lecturing on the efforts of the anti-prostitution

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<sup>9</sup> Gasperry Offult to Secretary of State, July 11, 1919. USNA RG 59/819.1151/53.

campaign in Panama. The Red Cross, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and the American Social Hygiene Association worked closely with the Secretary of War and the Surgeon General of the Army to develop a Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA) headed by Raymond Fosdick.<sup>10</sup>

As chairman of the CTCA, Fosdick coordinated the coalition between these various reformers. In Panama, General Blatchford and William Jennings Price, the U.S. foreign minister, consulted Fosdick regarding "vice and liquor conditions" in Panama City and Colón. Fosdick suggested to Price that Blatchford should issue a military order to prevent soldiers from entering the cities. Price and Fosdick also raised funds from "private citizens and organizations" to treat an estimated 2000 diseased prostitutes "to protect the troops from venereal disease."<sup>11</sup> Fosdick, however, knew a simple military order and treatment of prostitutes would not solve the problem. Rather, it would require the introduction of a new military culture of manhood.

The cultivation of an appropriate sense of manliness required the CTCA to develop a sophisticated education campaign. According to Gorgas, health officials would not achieve success in controlling venereal disease "until we get our communities educated up to the point of believing that it is the individual action and the individual beliefs of the people affected that are finally going to control the disease." In Panama, U.S. soldiers became the key demographic target for such education. Pamphlets, posters, motion pictures, and guest speakers warned of the dangers of prostitution while appealing to a sense of family values and a patriotic manliness.

Linking prostitution and alcohol as "twin evils" remained an integral component for educating soldiers on family values, patriotism, and manhood. Saloons and red-light districts, according to Fosdick, caused "mental and moral disintegration".<sup>12</sup> Alcohol threatened to

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<sup>10</sup> Raymond B. Fosdick, "The War and Navy Departments Commissions on Training Camp Activities," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 79, War Relief Work, September, 1918.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond B. Fosdick to Richard Blatchford, July 29, 1918. USNA RG 59/819.1151/31.

<sup>12</sup> Fosdick, "The War and Navy Departments Commissions on Training Camp Activities": 130.



undermine the mental and physical self-control and discipline instilled in the soldier by military training. Without self-control, the soldier became easy prey for “a whore.” *Keeping Fit to Fight*, a handbook for soldiers on venereal disease prepared by the American Social Hygiene Association and distributed by the War Department, argued: “Booze makes it harder to control your thoughts and your actions. It makes you an easy mark for the whore and helps you get a disease from her.”<sup>13</sup> Alcohol perpetuated a downward spiral of degeneracy resulting in venereal disease as it warped the soldier’s judgment, resulting in a loss of self-respect as well as a debilitating infection.

In order to prevent moral decline, soldiers had to exercise mental restraint by vigilantly policing their own thoughts. Maintaining self-respect required self-control. “Smutty talk” and dirty mental images accompanied alcohol on the descending slope of self-destructive habits, according to broadsheets YMCA-issued posters. Visitors to prophylactic stations encountered posters that read: “A good sailor keeps his body healthy and his mind clean.” The poster also offered hope to infected patients. After medical treatment, the individual needed to promise himself “never again” and embrace “clean living” with “decent pals.”<sup>14</sup> Yet, a soldier continually had to fight off indecent thoughts. “Remember that thinking about women makes you want them, just as thinking about food makes the mouth water, and thinking of something sad makes you want to cry,” concluded *Keeping Fit to Fight*. Being a “better man and a better soldier” required keeping certain types of women out of mind.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to the female temptations of the tropics, moral reformers and the CTCA held up the American family and the female personas of mothers, wives, and newborn baby girls as central components to patriotic manliness. Each female figure evoked the gender-laden emotional responses of shame, honor, and duty. A YMCA poster entitled “Mother-Mine”

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<sup>13</sup> *Keeping Fit to Fight* (New York), 1918: 14.

<sup>14</sup> See *Journal of Social Hygiene*, 1919.

<sup>15</sup> *Keeping Fit to Fight*, 13-14.

featured a mother with a letter in one hand and the other hand on her chest, standing in front a soldier's portrait meant to evoke a sense of honor and pride. Below the sentimental scene, a poem read, "Dear mother-mine! I must be strong, I must be clean; In mind and body, too; My debt to all posterity; And women such as YOU."<sup>16</sup> Another poster of the same image read: "Your mother has been unselfish and devoted to you. Will you be worthy of her? Protect the honor of all women and girls." In another YMCA poster on "Advantages of the Smutty Story", the author used the mother to evoke shamefulness. Underneath a picture of a Victorian-dressed mother read, "Gee! I wish I was a feller like my mother thinks I am." Propaganda posters typically played off the individual's guilt by tying their actions abroad back to home. "Remember: The folks at home- They are waiting for you to come back with an honorable record. *Don't allow a whore to spoil the reunion.*"<sup>17</sup>

Anti-prostitution propaganda also invoked the fear that an infected soldier would ruin his family back home. If a soldier succumbed to the temptation of a prostitute, he risked infecting his innocent wife and child with disease. If he contracted a venereal disease while serving in the military, it became of the utmost importance to seek thorough treatment through the army's physicians. *Keeping Fit to Fight* warned: "A man who thinks he is cured, but who is not cured, may, if he marries, give the clap [gonorrhoea] to his wife. In that case she may be sick the rest of her life." In addition, she may be unable to have children as a result and if she happened to bear a child, according to the manual, "she may give the disease to her child, who will be born blind."<sup>18</sup>

Military propaganda also depicted prostitutes in military terms as the enemy masquerading as a beautiful female. The prostitute functioned as the foil to mothers and wives. To an unsuspecting sailor with a healthy sex drive but an unhealthy lack of self-control, a

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<sup>16</sup> Fairmont Snyder, "Mother-mine," *Journal of Social Hygiene*, 1919

<sup>17</sup> See *Journal of Social Hygiene*, 1919 (emphasis in the original)

<sup>18</sup> *Keeping Fit to Fight*, 9-10.

prostitute embodied the “hidden enemy.”<sup>19</sup> The term “hidden enemy” had a dual meaning. It both invoked the tempting beauty of the diseased prostitute as well as the difficulty in detecting lurking sexual diseases. “Remember this,” *Keeping Fit to Fight* exhorted, “all loose women are dangerous, and any man who goes with one, no matter how clean she may look or whatever she may say, runs the risk of getting a terrible disease.”<sup>20</sup> Progressive reformers equated freedom from venereal disease with patriotism; infection aided the enemy and undermined the sacrifices of fellow comrades, threatening the entire war effort.

Military officials also perceived athletics as an arena to redefine manliness. Sports teams and athletic competitions, according to Fosdick, provided a healthy outlet to channel natural manly impulses. Athletics offered a “legitimate expression” for men’s “healthy animal spirit” that would otherwise lead to prostitution and lawlessness. In addition to providing an alternative channel for sexual urges, sports offered valuable exercise and military training under the guise of recreation.<sup>21</sup> Team sports taught co-operation and trust among comrades, which further engendered a spirit of loyalty and duty to a larger community. A soldier who visited the red-light district implicitly let down his team in the fight against venereal disease.

In a similar vein, *Keeping Fit to Fight* used sports figures as models of manliness in terms of their actions as well as their bodies. “The fact that famous boxers and wrestlers keep away from women while in training proves that a man is even stronger when he does not go with them.” By avoiding “loose women,” soldiers would become manlier because “the testicles produce a substance which, when it is absorbed back into the blood, gives the body grit and manly vigor.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> *Keeping Fit to Fight*, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Fosdick, “The War and Navy Departments Commissions on Training Camp Activities”: 137-139.

<sup>22</sup> *Keeping Fit to Fight*, 6.

While U.S. officials understood prostitutes to be the vectors of disease, not everybody agreed with this contention. Top Panamanian officials, in particular, became acutely aware of the sexual politics around the Canal.

### **Panamanian Politicians React**

Panamanian politicians seized upon the contradictory idea that venereal disease originated from prostitutes but not the U.S. soldiers as they resisted U.S. attempts to shape domestic policies. During the anti-prostitution campaign, Panamanian officials reacted with indignation to the pressures from canal authorities to eliminate vice. Since Panama City and Colón remained under Panamanian jurisdiction, U.S. officials had to secure the cooperation of that nominally sovereign nation-state to eradicate red-light districts and deport foreign prostitutes. The highest levels of the Panamanian government resented that the U.S. authorities considered the red-light districts as a Panamanian problem arising from ineffective regulatory policies. The U.S. viewed suppression of prostitution, in contrast to regulation, as the only viable strategy for dealing with the problem.

The demands of canal authorities, according to Panamanian officials, placed an unjust burden on their country. The problem of prostitution, they argued, arose out of the sexual needs of North American men in the Zone, who visited the red-light districts in overwhelming numbers. As a result, the Panamanian nation paid the moral costs of providing a playground for U.S. soldiers and civilians. In September of 1919, Secretary of the Treasury, Santiago de la Guardia, delivered a public speech widely covered by the Panamanian and West Indian press. He began by acknowledging, “The problem of venereal disease... is as ancient as the history of civilization.” In Panama, however, the problem of prostitution did not stem from immorality in the cities as the U.S. officials contended, but rather from the Americans who “come into our territory in search of bad women to satisfy their sexual desires which they cannot do in the Canal

Zone.” Also during his diatribe, the secretary inverted the U.S. officials’ discourse on the source of venereal disease. “Men who infected [prostitutes]” became the perpetrator of spreading disease. From the Panamanian perspective, American men infected the prostitutes as opposed to the U.S. view that diseased prostitutes contaminated their innocent boys.<sup>23</sup>

The reason why Panamanian authorities contended that STDs originated with U.S. soldiers who then infected prostitutes stemmed from the struggles over how to deal with the diseases. The Panamanians advocated a system of regulation where women engaged in sexual commerce would be required to register with the state and check-in once a week for a physical examination. If medical inspectors deemed the prostitute diseased, then the Panamanian state would confine the woman to the Santo Tomás venereal disease clinic, where they remained under the armed guard of Panamanian policemen. The regulatory system underscored the centrality of sexuality for Panamanian officials’ vision of state-building and health policy. For Panamanian politicians, the regulatory system strove to keep prostitutes healthy and disease free.

Given their perspective on the direction of disease transmission, the Panamanian officials logically argued that the problem of prostitution and venereal disease required an American solution. De la Guardia reasoned that the U.S. had the responsibility of dealing with the spread of venereal disease among U.S. soldiers. If U.S. health officials could conquer yellow fever, he posed, then why could not these “men of science” solve this health problem? As a solution to the crisis, he suggested moving the red-light districts from Panamanian territory to areas under U.S. control. “Why not a red-light district in the Canal Zone?” he posed.

Panamanian officials also charged that the existing U.S. policy toward prostitution portended disaster for local women. What would happen if Panamanian officials closed down the red-light districts, while the Americans’ sexual desires remained unsatisfied? The results

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<sup>23</sup> “Fearless Talk by Panamanian,” *Workman*, October 4, 1919; Clipping “Gen. Guardia’s Views Regarding Social Evils on the Isthmus,” *Panama Star & Herald*, September 30, 1919 in USNA RG 59/819.1151/53.

would be devastating for Panama. De la Guardia forewarned, “If in the Canal Zone soldiers and sailors cannot satisfy their sexual instincts, do you not realize the danger that there is for the respectable and decent women of our society.” A key element of this uneasiness rested in anxieties over imagined sexual contact between elite Panamanian women and U.S. soldiers. De la Guardia insisted that the free reign of U.S. soldiers’ sexual appetite in the cities left “no guarantees for our honorable and virtuous women” and deplored “that our little nation should be converted into a hot bed of vice.”<sup>24</sup>

Panamanian officials dealt the U.S. anti-prostitution campaign a crushing blow by refusing to deport the West Indian women. In July of 1919, Ernesto LeFevre, the Secretary of Foreign Affairs, voiced vehement objections to the extradition of West Indian prostitutes in a meeting with U.S. diplomats, health officials, and military personnel. They feared that deportation would create a “vacuum” that would reduce many “Panamans of the lower classes” to the dens of prostitution. For Panamanian officials West Indian prostitutes served as an ideal buffer between the U.S. soldiers’ sexual desires and Panamanian women. LeFevre expressed the fear that if U.S. authorities “let loose” the soldiers, Panamanian officials would not be able to curtail the soldiers’ “desire for women.” As a result, the Secretary of Foreign Affairs agonized over the possibility “that many instances might occur” where U.S. soldiers would insult “decent Panamanian woman” in their quest for sex.<sup>25</sup>

### **Afro-Caribbean Activists and Racial Uplift on the Panama Canal**

Prostitution on the Panama Canal not only evoked responses from U.S. and Panamanian officials but kindled gendered anxieties among a very different population occupied with protecting “their” women: black activists struggling for economic justice and racial equality.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Gasberry Offult to the Secretary of State, July 11, 1918. USNA RG 59/819.1151/53.

The *Workman*, a newsweekly owned and edited by Barbadian H. N. Walrond from 1913 into the 1920s, offers glimpses into the contentious issue of prostitution from a male Afro-Caribbean perspective.<sup>26</sup> The newspaper regularly printed articles written by an active group of Garveyites on the canal. Many Afro-Caribbean activists maintained intolerant attitudes toward deviant female sexuality insisting that black females needed to fulfill more lofty ideals of womanhood and thereby advancing the race worldwide.

The contrast between female West Indian prostitutes and the black nuclear family became a crucial source of conflict for the politics of racial uplift on the canal. For black activists, the nuclear family composed a central building block to the successful advancement of the Negro race. West Indians females involved in urban sexual commerce undermined the position of reputable black families living in the city. “In these places respectable families reside also and in several instances promising young ladies are members of these families,” the *Workman* proclaimed, “the environment which surrounds them is most degrading as they both see and hear things that should never be done nor said in their sight or within their hear.” Prostitution, promiscuous sex and “immoral behavior” not only spelled “social and moral decadence” but also threatened to corrode the “sanctity of the Home.” By having sex before marriage, men and women shirked the “responsibilities and obligations” of creating nuclear families in order to “propagate the race”.<sup>27</sup> The fate of future generations required “social purity”, and the perceived rise in the “mad dissipation of pleasure and licentiousness” and “saturnalia of vicious indulgence” threatened to undermine stable patriarchal families. The successful advancement of

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<sup>26</sup>Carla Burnett, “‘Are We Slaves or Free Men?’: Labor, Race, Garveyism, and the 1920 Panama Canal Strike.” PhD. Dissertation, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2004: 53. Robert Hill, *The Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers, Caribbean Series Manuscript: Canal Zone Documents*, (unpublished manuscript: printed by the Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers Project, Printed February 5, 2002): 4, 22. I assume that Walrond wrote the editorials even though no author is given.

<sup>27</sup> “Immortality on the Increase,” *Workman*, May 22, 1920.

the race in Panama and beyond, according to uplift activists, depended on the coherency and stability of the family unit.

Black male activists consigned the majority of the moral burden of advancement on women. Prostitution, however, threatened to undermine this project. A *Workman* editorial entitled “The Eternal Feminine” warned of the dangers sexual promiscuity had for the goal of black nationhood: “The greatest, the most virile nations of history, preserved the sanctity of the hearthstone... their fall was primarily due to profligacy and prostitution.” The editorial revealed the degree of responsibility black men placed on women to uphold the race’s potential. The articles declared, “Three things contributed to the fall of the Grecian Empire- WAR, WINE, and WOMEN.” The fate of racial advancement, according to many male black activists, depended on the morality and sexuality of black women. The editorial, “Eternal Feminine,” proceeded to employ even more misogynistic language by articulating the important impact of female deviancy: “Woman’s influence has at all times affected the most momentous issues in the world’s history, sometimes benevolent; often malevolent.”<sup>28</sup>

Black women’s primary function as mothers, according to the *Workman* editorial, served to reproduce patriarchal authority among the black race. “The word ‘woman’ suggests to us the word ‘Mother’ –the dearest word in the English language- nourisher of youth, prop and stay of our later years; bearer of our ‘kings to be.’” Yet, the editorial went on to complain of a menacing problem: West Indian women of the Isthmus had failed to live up to these standards of “motherhood” because of rampant prostitution. The *Workman* decried, “It seems to us that our women, big and small, are not assuring to us this vision of a future worthy of the race to which we belong.” The editorial concluded, “We need good women.”<sup>29</sup> Prostitution and other forms of

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<sup>28</sup> “The Eternal Feminine,” *Workman*, May 8, 1920.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



female sexual deviancy undermined the entire project of racial advancement for black people the world over.

Racial uplift embodied a larger world of transnational political imaginings for the “Negro race”. Racial advancement necessitated a cross-class alliance among black people that tied individuals to a global collective laden with gendered expectations of comportment and conduct. Prostitution on the local level in Panama, therefore, had profound implications for the “Negro race” on a global scale. Indeed, ideas of black manhood transcended national boundaries in Panama; West Indians constructed ideas of manhood and politics in dialogue with racial events occurring in the United States, Cuba, Central America, England, the British Caribbean, and elsewhere.<sup>30</sup>

While Afro-Caribbean activists, as advocates of racial uplift, chastised Afro-Caribbean women who stooped to prostitution and hindered the advancement of the race worldwide, they also recognized that poverty drove many women to prostitution. They argued that if Canal authorities paid black men a reasonable wage, then their women would not have to resort to such a degraded status. These gendered ideas of labor pervaded the protest politics of Garveyite labor organizers. “We, men, are so underpaid,” wrote Stoute, “our women are forced to work in the laundry, laboratory, and packing house.” Men belonged outside the home, working in various industries providing enough income so that women could stay at home raising the family and caring for the domestic sphere. Stoute, like many West Indian professionals in Panama, believed that manual labor denied West Indian women a dignified womanhood. “This kind of work deranges their delicate organs,” he explained, “but they can’t afford to engage the services of a physician... so our wives are unfitted for motherhood...” Women unable to reproduce, according to black reformers, posed a grave threat to the Negro race worldwide. “Our children,

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<sup>30</sup> See the *Workman*’s coverage of international events throughout 1919 to 1921, including lynchings in Cuba and the United States as well as other events elsewhere with racial implications.

if any,” Stoute continued, “are deprived of virility and vitality... quite an easy way to exterminate a people.”<sup>31</sup> Stoute’s language of protest incorporated the dominant gendered ideas of the day that often measured racial groups by “virility” and capacity to reproduce.

The relationship between labor, female sexuality, and prostitution constituted a central theme in the emerging culture of protest. West Indian men understood themselves as the economic breadwinners of the family. Without a living wage to meet the rising inflation and increased housing costs the black family unit stood the risk of disintegration. “Men are receiving less than a dollar on their monthly paychecks after deductions for house rent and commissary books are made,” the *Workman* lamented in December, 1919. As a result, this “fact is sending our best girls into the lowest depths of degradation and prostitution,” the *Workman* protested. Prostitution portended disaster for black families because “wives are proving unfaithful,” according to the editorial, and “virgins are selling their virtue for the necessities of life.”<sup>32</sup> For black men, family coherency depended on the Victorian ideas of faithful wives and honorable virgin daughters. Virginity symbolized eligibility for a respectable marriage while sexually faithful wives devoted themselves to their husbands. Poor wages and high costs of living destabilized the patriarchal structure of the black family.

In this rhetoric of labor protest, black women became the victims of economic exploitation at the hands of Canal authorities who refused to increase wages. On Labor Day at the end of August 1919, West Indians took to the streets protesting wage cuts, deteriorating living conditions, and increasing costs of living. Among the demonstrators’ signs, one placard read, “Must our girls be sacrificed on the altar of vice? No!”<sup>33</sup> Even worse, deteriorated conditions drove black women into degrading sex work that specifically served the sexual needs of white American men.

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<sup>31</sup> William Stoute, “White Culprits and Black Victims,” *Workman*, July 26, 1919.

<sup>32</sup> “Who Will Help the Negro?” *Workman*, December 6, 1919.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Conniff, 54; see also *Workman*, August 30, 1919 for more placard slogans.

## **Conclusion: Empire's Angst**

Prostitution on the Panama Canal tapped into the sexual angst of an emerging empire. Sexual commerce between white soldiers and marginalized black migrant women ignited multifaceted reactions from various groups of men invested in different conceptions of manhood. U.S. authorities, Panamanian politicians, and black activists' construction of manhood each had diverging interests. For canal administrators, the relationship between soldiers and prostitutes surfaced as an unintended consequence of building an empire in the Caribbean basin. Panamanian politicians invested their notions of manhood in the relationship between West Indian women and U.S. soldiers as a means of cultivating a gendered nationalism in the heart of the empire. West Indian men, in turn, devoted their energies to a form of protest politics based on a transnational sense of black manhood and racial advancement. The sexual encounter between soldiers and prostitutes embodied sexual deviancy and endangered various political imaginings. Yet lost in these multiple discourses on manhood were the voices of working-class West Indian women. Their story remains untold.

Prostitution presented a vision of the U.S. imperial project gone awry. The much-heralded opening of the Panama Canal epitomized the optimistic possibilities of a new U.S. imperialism at the turn of the twentieth century. The substantial engineering and sanitary feats portended orderly progress that would facilitate burgeoning world trade. The booming business of prostitution in Panama defied imperial fantasies of a methodically controlled system of international commerce. Rather prostitution embodied a chaotic inversion of the desired imperial plan. Drunken soldiers and diseased prostitutes became more than a minor nuisance to canal authorities; their sexual deviancy threatened to unravel the designs of a nascent empire.