

Andre Ye

Dr. Reagan

TS History

10 December 2020

In *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, Jacqueline Jones details the role of the black woman from slavery to freedom. Freedom to black women, Jones asserts, was not a lazy escape from labor nor a pursuit of materialistic individualism, but instead dedication and devotion to the family. Amidst the dislocation brought about by the Civil War, a priority of blacks was to keep families together; postbellum, attitudes towards blacks, given their prioritization of the family, revealed both the North and the South's anxieties of race, sex, and power. The family transformed from a second thought during slavery into a fundamental and primary economic and social unit of the black community.

In a statement released by Louisiana governor William Kellog in response to the White League Massacre at Coushatta in 1874, Kellog details the events that transpired such that citizen could more fully understand the severity of the incident and assist law enforcement officers. The White League of Louisiana had, in an effort to force Republican officials to reign from their positions through intimidation and violence, culminating in the murder of six white Republicans and as many as twenty black witnesses.

Jacqueline Jones, in her book *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, writes about the black family after they were freed from formal institutions of slavery. One important component of her argument is the disdain with which elite whites had for the freed people, seen as lazy for choosing family and community over hyper-individualized wage earnings. She accompanies this

relationship between elite whites and freed people with another between nonelite whites and freed people. “Class relationships that had prevailed before the war shifted,” Jones writes, “opening up possibilities of cooperation between the former slaves and nonelite whites. The two groups met at a historical point characterized by landlessness and economic dependence.”¹ However, I argue that, tragically, the race-based divisions of labor instituted by slavery continued to persist, and that this racial divide caused poor whites and freed people to isolate themselves racially. Although it is true that there certainly was a division between poor whites and more elite whites – the “rich man’s fight and the poor man’s war” – this did not push poor whites closer to freed people. For one, it is apparent that poor whites, fueled by the Free-Soil Ideology that argued against the expansion but not against the fall of slavery, were in ripe condition to develop racial tensions. White soldiers in the North often refused to serve alongside black soldiers, and economic rivalry with blacks became a real concern among working-class whites.² White working-class people, economically devastated by the failure of Northern and Southern governments to compromise on slavery, were even more hostile towards blacks in anticipation of the economic challenge an increasing labor supply would pose. Racial isolation, perhaps in a different sense but isolation nevertheless, was also propagated in the black community, as well. Poor black women refused to let their children accept clothing donated by whites that they judged to be improper.³ Aunt Judy, a black laundress, “benevolently [had] taken in, and was nursing, a sick woman of her own race ... The thoughtless charity of this penniless Negress in receiving another poverty-stricken creature under her roof was characteristic of the

¹ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 2009), 66.

² W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), 81.

³ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 76.

freedmen.”⁴ That is, when freed people – having been subjected to brutal conditions on the basis of their race – were thrust into society, they were wary of whites and chose to highlight their black dignity. This involved some exclusive action, like being stringent with white-donated clothing, and inclusive action, like being extraordinarily generous in support of other members of their community in need. Both these actions reinforced racial isolation. When combined with the hostility poorer whites that felt cheated by the war expressed toward blacks, the possibility that the two would unite against the white elites was minute.

⁴ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 66.