What does it mean to be a woman? What does it mean to be working class? What does it mean to be black? These are all things that were part of daily life for Virgil Mackey, an African American girl growing up in Chicago. Born to a father who was a tailor and a mother who was a nurse, Virgil grew up in a segregated and racially charged Chicago in the 1910’s and 1920’s. Despite the historical violence through which her life took place, she was able to overcome obstacles and further her own education and career path. Some questions that lead to further insight into her life are; what was it like, growing up in Chicago during the times of the housing riots? And, what were the racial and sexual problems associated with college, and getting a job, as a woman of color in the 1930’s? Through research into the historical background of early twentieth century Chicago, the gender based and racial implications of Virgil Mackey’s life, education, and career present themselves, and affirm the great lengths that she went to in order to achieve her goals.

Virgil Mackey, daughter of Virgil McKnight Mackey and Louise Brydie, was born in Chicago, Illinois on September, 29th, 1906. Her family lived in the neighborhood of Hyde Park. The early 20th century was a time of great upheaval in Chicago, and in many other cities around the country as well, as riots and violently charged attacks were abounding against minority groups, specifically, African Americans. “During the period of 1910-1940, for African Americans in Chicago, efforts of progressive education seemed rather elusive and both educational as well as housing patterns overlapped and coagulated to constrain African Americans. While there were some White supporters, overall, the struggle for quality education remained an arduous, politically intricate task (Homel, 1976)” explains The Handbook for Urban Education (Milner). This alone would make receiving an education, as a person of color, and as a woman, especially difficult. The attacks were especially vicious for African Americans living in the “white neighborhood” of Hyde Park. “Black residents of largely white neighborhoods like
Hyde Park and Englewood were much more vulnerable. Mobs burned many of their houses to the ground, and some were chased and stoned to death.” (Nightingale 316). These atrocious events would have had a large impact on Virgil’s life. When a person is not ascribed, and cannot achieve, the status needed to be considered into the dominant group, the group that holds the power in society, it automatically makes things like education and career choice all the more difficult. The sheer fact that, because of the color of her skin, Virgil might have been unable to do all the things that she set out to achieve is an example of the extreme social stratification found in America. Social Stratification, or “the hierarchical classification of the members of society based on the unequal distribution of resources, power and prestige” (Parillo 58), is the reason, on an institutional level, of why minorities weren’t/aren’t able to become educated as quickly, or as easily as the dominant group. The intragenerational influences that receiving an education had on Virgil Mackey was that she was able to use her degree to obtain a job as a social worker, moving her up on the hierarchical ladder of economics. Because of the social stratification at play, Virgil’s achievements – graduating high school and graduating college in early 20th century Chicago – are that much more significant.

Despite the immense difficulties put in her way, she went on to graduate from the University of Chicago with a degree in Social Work. After graduation from the University of Chicago, “She began working for the Juvenile Court's social service division in 1933 as a probation officer” (Manuscript). She later took on the job of a social worker, in order to utilize her degree. “She served as a social worker under Judge Sylvester White and was the coordinator of Juvenile Court's Lawndale unit when she retired in 1976.” (Manuscript). The decades in which Virgil worked as a social worker were very exciting, but not in a positive way. During the 1950’s there were a series of rape reports made by African American women in Chicago. However, these rapes were slighted by the fact that, because of racial stereotypes of black women being promiscuous, the (dominant-group controlled) “justice system” did not consider the cases worth their time. “Black women, due to their membership in two subordinate groups that lack access to authority and resources in society, are in structural opposition with a dominant racial and a dominant sexual group.” (Lewis 343). As an African American woman working in the time before the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s, Virgil Mackey’s place in the workforce was probably seen as a problem by the white male (dominant group), and also female, population in the workplace. These racial and sexual perceived inferiorities were likely
represented in Virgil Mackey’s workplace as well, showing the challenges that she faced in her everyday life.

One of the three major sociological perspectives that can be actively seen in many aspects of Virgil Mackey Dixon’s life is the Conflict Theory. The sociological perspective of the Conflict Theory sees society “as being continually engaged in a series of disagreements, tensions, and clashes as different groups compete for limited resources.” (Parillo 24). This perspective can be seen in the drowning of a young African American boy swimming in “white” water of Lake Michigan (Philpott 171), all the way to the 1950’s Chicago courtrooms, where African American female rape victim’s cases were not treated as real cases (Flood 76) because of perceived stereotypes, or “oversimplified generalizations by which we attribute certain traits or characteristics to a group without regard to individual differences” (Parillo 92). Both are examples of instances occurring in Chicago during Virgil Mackey’s lifespan. These constitute the types of conflicts that she would be knowledgeable of, in addition to everyday slights and aggressive behavior, such as ethnophaulisms (“derogatory word or expression used to describe a racial or ethnic group”) (Parrillo 93). The constant conflict between African Americans and Caucasians, and between men and women, are identifiers pertaining to the Conflict Theory, under the scope of Virgil Mackey’s life. This theory particularly resonated in Virgil Mackey Dixon’s life, but she was able to overcome those obstacles, in order to receive an education and get a job in her field.

The racial and sexual implications of being a woman of color in the early to mid-20th century are evident in the historical occurrences against people of color, and women in particular. Throughout her lifespan, Virgil Mackey Dixon was present during times of severe racial unrest in the United States, and as such, her life would have been drastically impacted by it. However, despite having been ascribed the status of an African American woman, Virgil was able to work past some of the racial and sexual inequalities, as is seen in her degree earned and her position held at the Cook County Juvenile Court. By examining Virgil Mackey Dixon’s life experiences, implications are made about the great deal of improvement the world has made since her youth, but more so implies the many improvements that are still needed in American society.
Works Cited:


