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**Working Out Their Economic Problems Together:
World War I, Working Women, and Civil Rights in the YWCA
Dorothea Browder¹**

This article examines how a group of Black and White YWCA staff members seized the opportunities of World War I to advance a racial justice agenda through Young Women's Christian Association programs for working women. First, they created YWCA program work for thousands of Black working women that paralleled the YWCA's Industrial Program, which followed YWCA segregation policies. Second, they made claims for social justice based on Black women's labor contributions, in contrast to both earlier reformers' focus on elite Black women and other wartime activists' focus on soldiers' service. Finally, in a period best known for White people's violent resistance to Black advances, they fostered a program culture and structures that encouraged White working-class women to view African American coworkers as colleagues and to understand racial justice as part of a broader social justice agenda. Arguing that interracial cooperation among working people was crucial to social progress, they made African American laboring women and White working-class allies both symbolically and literally crucial to wartime and postwar civil rights efforts. Their efforts contribute to our understanding of the changing discourse of "respectability" and the impact of World War I on the Black Freedom Struggle.

In July 1918, Mary E. Jackson, the Young Women's Christian Association's first Industrial Secretary for Colored Work, reported her positive experiences at a YWCA industrial conference for white working-class women at Camp Nepahwin in Canton, PA. Upon arrival she had found "the question of the white girl's responsibility to the colored girl" being discussed and a notable "spirit of justice and fair play ... among the girls"

¹ dorothea.browder@wku.edu. This article benefited from a superlative "World War I, Race, and Labor" panel discussion with Steven Reich, Paul Taillon, and Andre Skopje at the Social Science History Association conference, and from discussions at the international conference Women's Organizations and Female Activists in the Aftermath of the First World War: Moving Across Borders at Hamline University. Thanks also go to the Sophia Smith Collection, particularly Maida Goodwin, archivist extraordinaire; to Nancy Robertson and Mary Frederickson for YWCA wisdom; to Western Kentucky University for generous funding that allowed the completion of this research; and to two anonymous reviewers for this journal.

evident. She observed that “the climax of the entire week was a resolution ... ‘That we take an interest in the colored girl in industry.’”²

White working women at the conference had mixed feelings about racial issues. Another recommendation, to “have a democratic attitude toward immigrant[s] ... and ...the colored girls of our country,” was received with less aplomb than the one to “take an interest.” Immigrant women garnered little if any discussion, but vigorous debate ensued about what a democratic attitude toward “colored girls” required. Some White workers refused to be in the same room with an African American woman. Most agreed that Black women needed “good living and working conditions,” although some argued that “democracy did not necessitate the admission of colored girls into daily relationships with white girls in industrial and social life.”³

In the end, both resolutions passed. Delegates both deeply disagreed over race and saw the issue as crucial for all working women; this was one of the few debates the conference proceedings mention. The following summer, the 200 or so Nepahwin conference delegates passed a resolution supporting “no distinction between the races in privileges of employment.”⁴ A rhetoric of interracial labor solidarity was developing in the YWCA’s Industrial Program during a period of great racial turmoil. [Fig. 1]

² Report of Miss Mary Jackson to the War Work Council and the City Committee, June 1 to July 4, 1918, 2. Box 515, folder 17, YWCA of the U.S.A. Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA. (hereafter YWCA, SSC). (Folder hereafter abbreviated to f.) Resolution to “take an interest” from Report of the Social Service Commission, Nepahwin, 1918, Box 508, f. 7, YWCA, SSC.

³ Report of the Religious Work Commission, Nepahwin, 1918, Box 508, f. 7, YWCA, SSC; Grace Coyle, “Colored Girls in Industry,” November 14, 1918, Box 534, f. 2, YWCA, SSC.

⁴ Report of the Social Service Commission, Industrial Club Council, Camp Nepahwin 1919, 6–7. 508, f. 7, YWCA, SSC. Attendance from “News Editor’s Mail Bag,” *Association Monthly* XIII (Nov. 1919): 455.

These are not the behaviors we might expect from a group of young White working-class women in the World War I era, a period best known for racial violence and White resistance to Black advances. Organized labor was unfriendly to Black workers: at its 1917 convention, the American Federation of Labor had rebuffed a resolution asking it to help fight for African Americans' rights, and had only "[g]rudgingly, unwillingly, almost insultingly," in W.E.B. Du Bois's words, passed resolutions to send Black organizers to organize more unions for Black workers.⁵ Black workers had hardly been allowed to claim a share in what Joseph McCartin has called the wartime "triumph of an ideal—industrial democracy" that factory workers experienced when the federal government briefly protected labor rights.⁶ Many white Americans responded hostilely to Black people's migration, their wartime entry into industries previously closed to them, and even—perhaps especially—their military service. During and after the war, hundreds of Black Americans died in racist riots in East St. Louis, Chicago, and other Northern cities, as well as Southern ones, adding to the death toll from lynching.⁷ Black soldiers endured searing racism during and after the war.⁸ In the few places where AFL

⁵ Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States, Vol. 7: Labor and World War I, 1914–1918* (New York, 1987), 227–29.

⁶ Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor's Great War: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy and the Origins of Modern American Labor Relations, 1912–1921* (Chapel Hill, 1997).

⁷ Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York, 1999), 110–41; Dorothy Salem, *To Better Our World: Black Women in Organized Reform, 1890–1920* (Brooklyn, 1990), 223–30; Jacqueline Jones, *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor* (New York, 1998), 303, 324–28; Foner, *Labor and World War I*, 224–26; Adriane Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), 43–91, 174–79, 194–95; Jonathan Coit, "'Our Changed Attitude': Armed Defense and the New Negro in the 1919 Chicago Race Riot," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 11 (Apr. 2012): 225–56.

⁸ Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles*; Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill, 2010).

organizers had briefly tried to organize Black workers during the war, postwar riots destroyed the possibilities for interracial organizing.⁹ Yet at a YWCA conference, White working women discussed their obligations to Black women and endorsed equal employment opportunity.

This engagement with racial issues was the fruit of efforts by a group of YWCA staff, who seized the opportunities of World War I to advance a racial justice agenda through YWCA programs for working women. Part of a new generation in the YWCA, they used an organization identified with genteel uplift to create labor organizing for Black women and to promote working-class anti-racism among White women. Eva Bowles, the African American director of a new wartime Colored Work Committee, created the first national YWCA program work for Black working women and appointed as its director Mary Jackson, an experienced club woman and labor specialist. Drawing strength and skills from the extensive Black women's club network, Jackson, Bowles, and others pursued multiple strategies, as Kate Dossett notes many Black women did in the interwar period, building separate institutions to foster leadership while also demanding equal treatment and nonsegregation policies.¹⁰ They worked primarily with two White YWCA Industrial Program staff, Grace Coyle and Annetta Dieckmann, who supervised work in the YWCA's mid-Atlantic region. Together, these women took

⁹ David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (Cambridge, MA, 1987): 382–84.

¹⁰ Kate Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides: Black Nationalism, Feminism, and Integration in the United States, 1896–1935* (Gainesville, 2008), especially 66–106.

advantage of new resources and a changed political climate to advance social change goals through the YWCA.¹¹

Jackson and her staff created YWCA Industrial Program work for Black working women, serving thousands and paralleling the formal Industrial Program, which served only White women before the war. With help from Dieckmann and Coyle, they created a conference where Black working women could network and develop leadership skills. Thus, they created separate spaces within the YWCA for Black women.

Besides directing YWCA resources to Black working women, they also advanced a new discourse about racial justice. During and after the war, they made claims for social justice based on Black women's wartime labor contributions. Rather than focusing on the accomplishments of the "better sort," as had been reformers' strategy for decades, they placed Black *working-class* women discursively and literally at the center of the racial justice claims that had been heightened by World War I's strains and opportunities. This approach continued a Black reform tradition of citing women's accomplishments as a critical marker of racial progress, but their rhetoric represented a shift in what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham termed the "politics of respectability," which cited educated, cultured women as evidence of African Americans' respectability and racial abilities. Black club women's role in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century "racial uplift" has been well explored by scholars such as Paula Giddings, Dorothy Salem, Deborah Gray White, Stephanie Shaw, and Glenda Gilmore.¹² While historians' common

¹¹ Other YWCA staff also participated in these efforts; I focus on these four because of their critical role and for brevity.

¹² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, 1993); Paula Giddings, *Where and When I Enter: The Impact of Race and Sex on Black Women in America* (New York, 1984);

understanding of respectability politics includes an emphasis on women's cleanliness, sexual restraint, thrift, and domestic skills, these YWCA activists emphasized women's patriotic contributions through labor. The arguments Jackson made in defense of Black working women's respectability represented a shift from the earlier tendency of African American elites to represent working-class urban migrants as less moral and as sources of disorder.

Because Jackson, Bowles, and their allies based their justice claims on arguments about working women's patriotic contributions rather than on either elite women's accomplishments or men's military service, they also complicate our understanding of what World War I meant for the Black Freedom Struggle. Recent scholarship emphasizes the significance of Black men's World War I service for shifting civil rights strategies. Well known as a turning point in the history of African Americans' claims for justice, World War I raised, and then dashed, expectations for full citizenship rights, prompting bitterness and more militant demands. During and after the war, numerous scholars have found, the earlier politics of respectability and female uplift work were superseded by a masculinist black nationalism that grounded full citizenship claims on Black men's military service.¹³ Characterizing World War I as a turning point toward more radical,

White, *Too Heavy A Load*; Salem, *To Better Our World*; Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill, 1997); Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn, *Black Neighbors: Race and the Limits of Reform in the American Settlement House Movement, 1890–1945* (Chapel Hill, 1993). For a nuanced analysis of contestations over respectability, see Virginia Wolcott *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill, 2001).

¹³ Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 2; White, *Too Heavy* 110–41; “Vanguards”; Coit, “Our Changed Attitude”; See also Salem, *To Better Our World* 201–53; Nikki Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices: Black Women's Activism from World War I to the*

mass-based black politics and culture, historians have for some time highlighted the symbolic significance of Black soldiers and veterans as icons of the disjuncture between patriotic sacrifice and ongoing disfranchisement, violence, and discrimination.¹⁴

However, women as both actors and symbols continued to play an important role for YWCA Colored Work staff and white Industrial Program allies. Rather than focusing racial justice rhetoric around soldiers' service and manhood rights, these women focused on the rights of Black working women and the duties of White working women. Thus we can see them responding to the gendering of New Negro politics, in which, as Nikki Brown puts it, the postwar "drive toward black political equality ... narrowly defined black women's political space and power."¹⁵ Their story highlights both women's activism and women's persistent discursive importance.

Jackson, Bowles, and their Industrial Program allies also constructed a standard of patriotic anti-racism, calling on White working women to consider racial justice as their own responsibility. They forged institutional ties between precarious wartime "colored" industrial work and the vibrant, more entrenched Industrial Program. When postwar cuts defunded "colored" industrial work, the Industrial Program became one of the foremost sites for interracial contact and racial justice discourse within the YWCA, just as African Americans' hopes for postwar advances were collapsing amid White people's hostility,

New Deal (Bloomington, 2006), 108–33. On earlier roots of "the masculinist dimensions of black nationalist thought," see Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 101–7, 112–16, 128–51.

¹⁴ Chad L. Williams, "Vanguards of the New Negro: African American Veterans and Post-World War I Racial Militancy," *Journal of African American History* 92 (Summer 2007): 347–70; and *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill, 2010).

¹⁵ Brown, *Private Politics*, 113.

rioting, and conservative government policies.¹⁶ Arguing that cooperation between working people of different races was crucial to social progress, they made African American laboring women and White working-class allies both symbolically and literally crucial to wartime and postwar civil rights efforts, in ways that have garnered little attention from historians.

My subjects' activities in the YWCA, then, also can be understood as an early example of shifts in racial justice strategies toward a focus on the civil rights unionism that would be most apparent in the 1930s and 1940s. Recent studies by Virginia Wolcott, Michael Honey, Beth Thomas Bates, and William Jones, among others, have emphasized the significance of a labor-oriented shift, locating it in working-class activism in the interwar period.¹⁷ In the wartime period, when most Black leaders remained neutral on whether Black workers should join unions, Jackson and Bowles built ties to a part of the YWCA that was dedicated to women's labor unionism, and enlisted help from White labor-oriented allies. Indeed, my findings also suggest the deeper historical roots of the civil rights and citizenship claims that Megan Taylor Shockley found that Black women

¹⁶ Steven Reich, "The Great War, Black Workers, and the Rise and Fall of the NAACP in the South," *The Black Worker: Race, Labor, and Civil Rights Since Emancipation*, ed. Eric Arnesen (Urbana, 2007): 147–77, esp. 166–70.

¹⁷ Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*; Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925–1945* (Chapel Hill, 2000); Michael Keith Honey, *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, 1999); and "The Power of Remembering: Black Factory Workers and Union Organizing in the Jim Crow Era" in *Time Longer Than a Rope: A Century of African American Activism, 1850–1950*, ed. Charles M. Payne and Adam Green (New York, 2003), 302–35; Robert Rogers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, 2007); William R. Jones, *The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights* (New York, 2013).

developed extensively in the context of the Second World War.¹⁸ This effort within the YWCA, then, also suggests an underexplored role of women in a critical chapter of the long civil rights struggle.

Bowles, Jackson, and the other Black YWCA wartime workers who argued for industrial women's importance constitute part of the shift that Nikki Brown has skillfully explored, in which Black club women's "political consciousness evolved to include working-class black women in a groundswell of war-related activism" even as postwar riots and their representation in the black press reinforced the "masculinizing effects" of postwar militancy.¹⁹ Through the YWCA Industrial Program, Black women and their antiracist White allies sought labor-based Black equality through an all-female space.

Finally, their efforts also contribute to our historical understanding of race in working-class American life. We know more about interracial labor organizing, and working-class race relations overall, among men than among women.²⁰ White women in this period often reinforced their racial privileges to keep women of color out of their workplaces and to enjoy superior eating, changing, and washroom facilities when they did share a workplace, while employers reinforced and profited from racial tensions.²¹ We need

¹⁸ Megan Taylor Shockley, *"We, Too, Are Americans: African American Women in Detroit and Richmond, 1940–1954"* (Urbana, 2004).

¹⁹ Brown, *Private Politics*, 29, 112. Kate Dossett notes black YWCA workers' efforts to promote "black women as valuable workers," *Bridging Race Divides*, 81–86. On masculinized postwar militancy, see Williams, "Vanguards" and *Torchbearers*.

²⁰ Dana Frank, "White Working Class Women and the Race Question," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 54 (Fall 1998): 80–102; Peter Cole, *Wobblies on the Waterfront: Interracial Unionism in Progressive-Era Philadelphia* (Urbana, 2013); Daniel Letwin, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878–1921* (Chapel Hill, 1998); Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863–1923* (Urbana, 1991).

²¹ Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 74–75; Dolores Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender, and Class in a New South Community* (Philadelphia, 1985); Nancy Gabin,

to learn more about why women who could reinforce such privileges sometimes did not, and under what circumstances interracial cooperation occurred.

Seizing Wartime Opportunities for Industrial Work

Jackson's experience at the 1918 industrial conference was not the norm in the YWCA, which the sole black woman at the 1915 National Convention had deemed a "spiritual farce, not a spiritual force."²² Though Colored YWCAs had formed outside the South by 1870, White national and local leadership had marginalized them, treating Black women as a "Southern problem," and accepting segregation as part of any solution, ostensibly out of deference to Southern White women's concerns. Black women had been vocal in contesting their exclusion.²³

World War I provided Black YWCA women unprecedented access to association resources, both in service to soldiers and because tens of thousands of Black women

Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the United Auto Workers, 1935–1975 (Ithaca, 1990); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, 1991); Beverly W. Jones, "Race, Class, and Sex: Black Female Tobacco Workers in Durham, North Carolina, 1920–1940; and the Development of Female Consciousness" in *U.S. Women in Struggle*, eds. Claire Goldberg Moses and Heidi Hartmann (Urbana, 1995): 134–44.

²² Josephine Pinyon Holmes, "Youth Cannot Wait," *Crisis* 28 (July 1924): 128–31.

Quoted in Jacqueline Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: 1979), 83.

²³ The racial struggles in the YWCA have been well studied, but their relationship to race relations among working people has not. Nancy Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood: Race Relations and the YWCA 1906–1946* (Urbana, 2010), especially 44–70; Adrienne Lash Jones, "Struggle Among Saints: African American Women and the YWCA, 1870–1920," in *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and the YWCA in the City*, eds. Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt (New York, 1999), 160–187; Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA: 1905–1945* (Cambridge, MA: 1997); Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides*, 66–106; Giddings, *Where and When I Enter*, 155–58; Hall, *Revolt*, 82–86; and Salem, *To Better Our World*, 130–44, 208–19.

joined many White women in entering factory work.²⁴ In 1917, as one of seven national organizations called to help the U.S. government deal with wartime upheavals, the YWCA created a War Work Council to target the cultural and demographic disruptions caused by the huge surge in women's manufacturing employment.²⁵ War work included the YWCA's first commitment to national African American program work, a wartime Colored Work Committee headed by Eva D. Bowles.²⁶

Bowles, who had overseen Colored Work in cities since 1912, used the committee's budget to greatly expand YWCA work for African American women, especially around war centers.²⁷ She recruited dozens of staff through the National Association of Colored Women, which had provided education and other services since the late nineteenth century, and she organized training for new staff at the YWCA's National Training School. The Colored Work Committee was interracial, but Black women ran and staffed most work, gaining access to national YWCA finances for the

²⁴ Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York, 1973), 239; Emma Shields, *Negro Women in Industry* (Washington, DC: Women's Bureau Bulletin No. 20, 1922).

²⁵ "Our War Budget," *Association Monthly* XI (Nov. 1917): 435–37; Mary S. Sims, *The Natural History of a Social Institution: The Young Women's Christian Association* (New York, 1935), 181–82; Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood*, 45–70; Salem, *To Better Our World*, 201–18.

²⁶ Bowles had become the first paid secretary for the YWCA Colored Branch in New York City in 1905. Emma Bailey Speer, "Eva D. Bowles," *Woman's Press*, July 1932; Adrienne Lash Jones, "Bowles, Eva Del Vakia" <http://www.anb.org/articles/15/15-00081>. *American National Biography Online* Feb. 2000.

²⁷ "Our War Budget"; "Millions for Defense," *Association Monthly* XII (Sept. 1918): 311; "The United War Work Campaign: A Report of the Latest Developments," *Association Monthly* XII (Sept. 1918): 345; "United War Work Campaign" (New York: The Campaign, 1918).

first time. Bowles quickly established Black women's control over this first YWCA national program designed for Black women.²⁸

Among other projects, Bowles set up YWCA services for Black working-class women who had been excluded from the YWCA's Industrial Program. The Industrial Program had, for more than a decade, provided tens of thousands of working women with recreation, meeting spaces, education, and political allies. Serving the most working women of any organization, it operated hundreds of industrial clubs all over the country, and held conferences planned by the working women themselves.²⁹ The Industrial Program was experiencing its own wartime surge in membership and resources. However, since industrial clubs followed the national YWCA's broader segregation practices, Black women were generally unwelcome at club meetings in White associations. Poor funding for Colored YWCAs and the lack of a national staff member to coordinate Black industrial work had left Black working women underserved.

Bowles appointed Mary E. Jackson as national Industrial Secretary for Colored Work. Jackson, a Rhode Island club woman and state labor official, brought significant

²⁸ Jane Olcott, *The Work of Colored Women* (New York: Colored Work Committee of War Work Council, National Board, Young Women's Christian Associations, 1919), 6–9, Box 703, f. 6, YWCA, SSC; Jones, "Struggle Among Saints," 176–77; Gladys Calkins, "The Negro in the Young Women's Christian Association: A Study of the Development of YWCA Interracial Policies and Practices in Their Historical Setting" (MA thesis, George Washington University, 1960), 53–54; Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood* 44–129; Weisenfeld, *Christian Activism*.

²⁹ Dorothea Browder, "'A Christian Solution of the Labor Situation': How Working Women Reshaped the YWCA's Religious Mission and Politics," *Journal of Women's History* 19, June 2007: 85–110; Mary Frederickson, "Citizens for Democracy: The Industrial Programs of the YWCA" in *Sisterhood and Solidarity: Workers' Education for Women, 1914–1984*, eds. Joyce L. Kornbluh and Mary Frederickson (Philadelphia, 1984); Marion W. Roydhouse, "Bridging Chasms: Community and the Southern YWCA" in *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism*, eds. Nancy A. Hewitt and Susan Lebsock (Urbana, 1993); Richard Roberts, *Florence Simms: A Biography* (New York, 1923).

experience and skills in both labor and racial issues to the new position.³⁰ [Fig. 2]

Jackson and her national staff could circumvent local White resistance to Black industrial work. They used wartime Colored Work Council funds to create an African American parallel to the Industrial Program.

Jackson fought Black women's invisibility as war workers, arguing for their inclusion in the YWCA's dramatic wartime expansion of resources for working women. War Work Council reports omitted information on Black women from the "Industrial War Work" section, as though they were not part of the factory workforce. Jackson launched a series of investigations, surveying government officials and labor groups about racial attitudes and cataloguing areas in which industrial workers were most needed.³¹ She documented material and ideological barriers to Black women's full and equal participation in the labor force. She gathered information about employment numbers, occupational statistics, wages, unionized status, and whether Black and White women workers shared workspace or restrooms. In reports to various YWCA committees and national leaders, Jackson pointed out the large numbers of Black wage-working women, their range of occupations, and their often brutal working conditions.³² She, like other Black staff, also carved out a role for Black women as trained YWCA

³⁰ Active in the Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, Jackson also had worked for Rhode Island's Department of Labor. *Negro Yearbook* 1925–1926: 421.

³¹ Olcott, *Work of Colored Women*, 8–9; Report of Miss Mary E. Jackson to the Department of Method, City Committee and War Work Council, Feb. 21, 1918. Box 515, f. 17, YWC, SSC.

³² Report of Miss Mary Jackson to War Work Council, Mar. 20–Apr. 16, 1918; and other reports in Box 515, f. 17, YWCA, SSC; Olcott, *Work of Colored Women*.

professionals.³³ Jackson vividly rendered Black women's dramatic entry into new occupations and their need for YWCA support.

Jackson and others also drew on a growing wartime network of reformers and government staff interest in Black people's industrial labor and women's wage labor. Woodrow Wilson's administration had introduced segregation into the civil service soon before the war, signaling a grim racial climate. Jackson's wartime network, in which some members held positions in both government and reform groups, created lonely outposts of more progressive thinking on race and gender. Jackson and Black YWCA worker Elizabeth Ross Haynes, in particular, forged ties with a range of social reformers, government workers, and educators. Staff in the Labor Department's Division of Negro Economics and the Women-in-Industry Service of the War Administration Board (later the Women's Bureau) helped support arguments to White YWCA leaders.³⁴ The DNE and the WIS cooperatively researched Black women's working conditions, investigated major changes in Black working life, coordinated Black workers in war industries, and advised the government and private organizations. Nongovernmental reformers also were engaged in trying to make visible and remedy Black women's significant workplace disadvantages.³⁵ For instance, in Chicago, whose African American population was large

³³ Report of Miss Mary E. Jackson ... Feb. 21, 1918; and Report of Mary E. Jackson to the War Work Council, City Committee and Industrial Committee, Nov. 25, 1918, Sept. 5–Oct. 30. Box 515, f. 17, YWC, SSC.

³⁴ Iris Carlton-LaNey, "Elizabeth Ross Haynes: An African American Reformer of Womanist Consciousness, 1908–1940," *Social Work* 42 (Nov 1997): 573–84; Olcott, *Work of Colored Women*, 124; Gerald Mark Hendrickson, "Labor Knowledge and the Building of Modern U.S. Labor Relations, 1918–1929" (Ph.D. diss., University of California Santa Barbara, 2004), 141.

³⁵ Jackson and Bowles joined representatives of numerous reform groups on a study, *A New Day for the Colored Woman Worker: A Study of Colored Women in Industry* in New York City, March 1919.

and growing, Jackson obtained detailed information about Black women in factories from Women's Trade Union League organizer Irene Goins, who had been organizing Black women stockyard workers.³⁶ Jackson used the information to advocate for increased funding for Colored YWCA industrial work, and built up a significant Chicago program. The industrial committee she created included renowned anti-lynching crusader Ida Wells-Barnett, who was, Jackson noted, "prominently connected with all forward movements" for racial justice.³⁷

This critical interracial research network, inside and outside the government, contributed racial and labor expertise that, as Mark Hendrickson has argued, would help expose the uneven benefits of the labor market during the conservative 1920s.³⁸ Their studies and discussions, which highlighted Black women's growing presence in industry and the particularly brutal conditions they faced, also helped increase the wartime YWCA budget for Colored Work.

Mary Jackson and her staff created YWCA Industrial Program work for thousands of Black working women where none had existed before. They launched industrial work in dozens of cities and towns in Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia, sometimes building on existing YWCA work and often organizing the first YWCA effort for African American women. They created dozens of industrial clubs for domestic workers, laundresses,

³⁶ Olcott, *Work of Colored Women*, 115–16.

³⁷ Report of Mary Jackson to Industrial Committee, Oct. 1 to Nov. 1, 1920. Box 515, f. 17, YWCA, SSC.

³⁸ Hendrickson, "Labor Knowledge," 1–18 and 297; and Mark Hendrickson, "Gender Research as Labor Activism: The Women's Bureau in the New Era," *Journal of Policy Studies* 20:4 (2008) 482–15.

seamstresses, and women in tobacco and garment factory work. [Fig. 3] The clubs' emphasis on safe and wholesome recreation sometimes reflected earlier YWCA emphases on uplift, but they also provided young Black women encouragement about their right to industrial jobs, which offered them relief from the sexual vulnerability and isolation of the household occupations to which they had been largely confined.³⁹ Unlike the Industrial Program work for White women, the industrial work carried out by the wartime Colored Work Committee entailed fighting racism at every turn and creating committees to educate the public about Black women's right to decent work conditions and wages. Like the Industrial Program, it also provided working women a place to discuss their problems and seek solutions, and created rare recreational and social opportunities, as in Louisville, where 1,000 women attended "industrial girls' parties" in 1918.⁴⁰

YWCA workers also sought to increase Black women's job opportunities. In St. Louis, for instance, the new industrial secretary, Nellie Agee, visited 125 factories, urging employers to hire African American women. Some refused, but many were "willing to try out colored girls and the girls made good as a rule when given a chance."⁴¹ However, employers were not the only barrier. The federal director of the U.S. Employment Bureau of Connecticut emphasized the need "to protect the white workers from close association with colored people" and "felt it a very definite part of his personal responsibility," Jackson reported, "to prevent colored and white workers from

³⁹ Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides*, 81–85.

⁴⁰ Olcott, *Work of Colored Women*, appendix.

⁴¹ Olcott, *Work of Colored Women* 47–49, 69–72, and appendix, "Information from War Work Centers Indicating Industries in Which Colored Women are Employed and those in which Y.W.C.A. Club Membership is Represented."

association on terms of equality.”⁴² Jim Crow was enforced in the North, here, by the very official in charge of employment policies.

All this hard work produced a dramatic increase in Black YWCA industrial members, who gained access to safe spaces, education about labor issues, and recreational opportunities. By war’s end, fifty-seven industrial clubs in twenty-two cities served about three thousand Black working-class YWCA members, and another seven thousand women attended club meetings without joining. Ten local industrial secretaries focused on African American women.⁴³ Wartime efforts by dozens of local workers, regional field workers, and national workers created institutional structures and resources for thousands of Black working women, who had little access to labor unions and were likely to face significant racism from most White-led organizations.⁴⁴

Racial Justice and American Democracy

Jackson explicitly linked YWCA industrial “Colored Work” to the civil rights struggles Black soldiers were waging. Articulating a widespread hope among African Americans that wartime service would earn better treatment, Jackson celebrated Black women workers’ contributions. “Everyone realizes,” she wrote, “that both justice and efficiency demand that white and colored soldiers be treated alike. We are just beginning to awake to the necessity of giving colored girls fair” working conditions and wages.⁴⁵

⁴² Report of Jackson ... Jan. 16, 1919.

⁴³ Olcott, *Work of Colored Women*, 124; Frederickson, “Citizens,” 81; “The Colored Girl Gets Her Chance,” *War Work Bulletin* 51, Dec. 6, 1918 (YWCA National Board, New York), 2–3. Box 710, f. 13, YWCA, SSC.

⁴⁴ Frank, “White Working-Class Women and Race.”

⁴⁵ Mary E. Jackson, “Colored Girls in the Second Line of Defense,” *Association Monthly* XII (Oct. 1918): 363–64.

In fact, “everyone” did not acknowledge that Black soldiers should be treated equally. Black men’s military service aroused deep anxieties among white supremacists and evoked responses ranging from petty denials of cake and hot chocolate from the Red Cross, to newspaper attacks on the “Negro in uniform [who] wants the whole sidewalk,” to attempts to keep overseas troops from interacting with French women, to assigning troops the worst and most difficult labor, to attacks by White soldiers. “Jim Crow sailed to Europe” on the same ships that transported African American troops, Adriane Lentz-Smith has observed, and military service entrenched rather than weakened racial hierarchies.⁴⁶

When Jackson referred to Black soldiers’ equal treatment, then, she was invoking a dramatic, highly visible struggle between the ideals of democracy for which soldiers fought and the reality of racism, placing Black women discursively into the battle as home-front soldiers in service of the nation. Writing in the *Association Monthly*, another Black YWCA war work staff member observed: “The same grave questioning is taking place among women, which one hears from the soldiers back from the front.” She wondered whether “the soldiers in the trenches waiting for the grenades” would have agreed that a Black woman, denied a job, was unfit to work in a grenade factory, and noted that the woman’s grandfather had fought for American independence.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles*, 96, 109–36; newspaper quote from 70; Williams, *Torchbearers*. Likewise, Black women serving abroad faced insulting treatment. Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides*, 86–90; Addie W. Hunton and Kathryn M. Johnson, *Two Colored Women with the American Expeditionary Forces* (1920: repr. New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1997).

⁴⁷ Mary Alden Hopkins, “A Square Deal for Colored Women,” *Association Monthly* XIII (Apr. 1919): 152–55; and Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides*, 84–85.

Jackson connected this struggle with the wartime discourse that encouraged working people to claim citizen rights based on their labor. The Black woman was “no longer a ward of America, but a citizen with the rights, duties, and responsibilities of citizenship”—willing to work hard for the war effort, and worthy of full citizenship in return. Wartime labor agencies were less supportive of Black workers than of White female workers, but nonetheless they created conditions that helped Jackson make her claims.⁴⁸ She linked Black working women’s status with racial progress, writing that present labor responsibilities built “future opportunities . . . a future hope of economic freedom and industrial democracy.” Like the NAACP, whose wartime rhetoric Steven Reich has skillfully explored, Jackson used a language of patriotism and sacrifice to demand democracy at home.⁴⁹ However, unlike NAACP leaders, Jackson based her claims neither on military service nor on men’s labor, but on women’s patriotic labor contributions, making them symbolically and literally central to civil rights claims.

Dating the claims further back, though, Jackson also pointed out the “skilled and unskilled woman labor of the South” performed under slavery, work that had been repaid “neither in gold nor in gratitude.” (The term “skilled” countered portrayals of Black women as unskilled and therefore deserving lower wages.) Even aside from Black women’s war service, she suggested here, postwar economic rights were due as reparations, because much of the U.S. economy had been built by the labor of *enslaved* Black women. “Is this not the day,” she asked, “for the nation to repay to the daughters of

⁴⁸ McCartin, *Labor’s Great War*, 114–18; Jackson, “Colored Girls in the Second Line of Defense,” 363.

⁴⁹ Reich, “The Great War,” esp. 160–61; McCartin, *Labor’s Great War*, 104–6.

to-day its debt to the mothers of yesterday” by allowing Black women equal economic opportunities?⁵⁰

Mary Jackson’s reports and articles assumed Black women’s permanence in industry and argued that they should not be penalized for their earlier lack of opportunity; rather, their occupational segregation had created problems that must be remedied in the face of wartime labor shortages.⁵¹ Her “carefully ... workable plan through which to reach and develop the colored industrial girl” emphasized equal treatment and appropriate training.⁵² No less moral than White women, Black women needed the same protections. They also needed and deserved “vocational training on the same basis as ... the white girl.”⁵³ Unlike many middle-class (and nearly all White) observers in the early twentieth century who viewed Black working-class people as struggling to enter the modern industrial age, she insisted on solutions beyond training women for household service.⁵⁴ She argued for identical workplace conditions regardless of race, and insisted that any mistakes Black working women might make were due to “inexperience and human weakness rather than to some racial defect.”⁵⁵ Emphasizing the need for Black women to have safe housing and protection, Jackson countered stereotypes of Black women—particularly Black working women—as sexually loose and morally dangerous, an image common beyond the YWCA as well as in it.⁵⁶ Here she invoked the working-

⁵⁰ Jackson, “Colored Girls in the Second Line of Defense,” 362. “To-day” in original.

⁵¹ Jackson to War Work Council, Mar. 20–Apr. 16, 1918.

⁵² Report of Jackson to the War Work Council ... Nov. 25, 1918, 1.

⁵³ Jackson, “Colored Girls in the Second Line of Defense,” 363–64.

⁵⁴ Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability* 1–48; William P. Jones, *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South* (Chicago, 2005).

⁵⁵ Report of Jackson Mar. 20–Apr. 15, 1918; Jackson, “Colored Girls in the Second Line of Defense,” 363.

⁵⁶ Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 14–27.

class respectability of laboring women. Emphasizing the inherent capabilities and morality of African American *working-class* women was a rare position at the time, when even elite African Americans often blamed their laboring migrant counterparts for what they saw as inappropriate behavior.⁵⁷

Jackson's rhetoric advanced a long effort, within and beyond the YWCA, to defend the respectability of African American women. The association's White national leaders portrayed Black and White women in quite different ways. They emphasized keeping young White working women out of trouble during leisure hours and safeguarding the moral condition of women and girls affected by war conditions.⁵⁸ The *Association Monthly* argued for the YWCA's "wholesome influence" on "inexperienced young folks during the tumultuous, bewildering period of war," with the threat of the "irresponsible khaki hero" waiting to "look after her good times."⁵⁹ It also focused on protecting them through good working conditions and wages.⁶⁰

However patronizing their language, these authors did not raise the specter of masses of idle, dependent, diseased, and criminal women, as did some association portrayals of Black women. One article warned that inefficient or untrained migrant Black working women might "through misguidance . . . drift into inefficiency, disease and lawlessness." The author emphasized the need to "discourage in every way the transfer of

⁵⁷ Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 1–48; Hall, *Revolt*, 84; Floris Barnett Cash, *African American Women and Social Action: The Clubwomen and Volunteerism From Jim Crow to the New Deal, 1896–1936* (Westport, CT, 2001), 14.

⁵⁸ Reba Forbes Morse, "Report of the Secretary of the War Work Council Delivered at the Annual Meeting, June 18, 1918" (New York: National Board of the Young Women's Christian Associations, 1918). Box 710, f. 13, YWCA SSC.

⁵⁹ Mary Alden Hopkins, "Starting War Service Centers," *Association Monthly* XII (Sept. 1918): 325–26.

⁶⁰ Margaret Williamson, "New Jobs for Old," *Association Monthly* XI (Nov. 1917): 466–47.

the undesirable and unfit from one community to another” and warned of the potential “menace to society.” The source of feared irresponsibility here was not a “khaki hero”; the protection evoked was *from*, not *for*, the working women, and, as Judith Weisenfeld has documented, invoked Whites’ stereotypes of venereal disease as particularly common among black people.⁶¹

White association national leaders treated Black working women’s presence as a temporary and a moral problem. A Social Morality Committee sent women physicians touring the country, targeting “those who are innocent, emotional and in most cases, actually ignorant,” a *War Work Bulletin* put it.⁶² However, the War Work Council suggested it was especially important for Black women, who were deemed less innocent. While council publications claimed to treat Black and White workers equally, they presented Black working-class women as morally weak and dangerous to others. Fundraising efforts depicted Black women as an excessively sexualized threat to Whites, urged war work in “colored” communities to contain Black women’s threat to White and Black soldiers in cantonments, and emphasized its “social morality talks” for them.⁶³ The Colored Work Committee protested negative stereotypes such as a War Work Council bulletin that portrayed African Americans in stereotypically menial positions.⁶⁴

By war’s end, Jackson had helped shift how Black women workers were portrayed in the YWCA. Noting that war emergency had “created the demand for colored

⁶¹ Elizabeth Boies, “A Migration Within Our Borders,” *Association Monthly* XI (Feb. 1917): 23–26; Weisenfeld, *Christian Activism*, 124–27.

⁶² “Social Morality Lectures,” *War Work Bulletin* No. 41, Sept. 27, 1918: 2, Box 710, f. 13, YWCA, SSC.

⁶³ Weisenfeld, *Christian Activism*, 124–27 and 139; Morse, “Report of the Secretary of the War Work Council ... June 18, 1918,” 7–8; 5–6; 10–12; 12.

⁶⁴ Weisenfeld, *Christian Activism*, 140–42.

labor,” a December 1918 *War Work Bulletin* article argued for “the permanence of that demand.” The article noted that the YWCA’s purpose included educating “the white worker to her responsibility to the colored girls.” Accompanying the article was a photograph of a row of “white and colored girls working together in perfect amity,” making Red Cross buttons, with a caption that the war had given African American women “the chance to show they are as good Americans as white girls.”⁶⁵ Such interracial cooperation, a goal Bowles signaled early on, was one of the cornerstones of Jackson’s civil rights rhetoric.⁶⁶ While the photograph and article may have promoted a rosy view of working women’s race relations, Bowles, Jackson, and White Industrial Program staff members Annetta Dieckmann and Grace Coyle had been working hard to promote interracial labor cooperation.

From Social Service to Social Science: White Working Women’s Responsibilities

A wartime YWCA document laid out White working women’s role in welcoming Black women who were newly entering many industries. Though likely a talk Mary Jackson gave at white industrial conferences, but possibly by Grace Coyle, it noted the wartime labor shortage as the “greatest national problem.” Inverting Black women’s double burden of race and gender, the document emphasized White women’s double *duty*, asking “what is the white woman’s supreme test of patriotism industrially expressed?” The task, argued the author, included both recognizing her responsibility for war production “and also the more difficult and delicate task of unifying the

⁶⁵ “The Colored Girl Gets Her Chance.”

⁶⁶ Eva Bowles, “The Colored Girl in Our Midst,” *Association Monthly* XI (Nov. 1918): 491–93.

womanhood of the country regardless of race, to supply needed output.” Invoking the wartime emphasis on work’s patriotic aspects, the author concluded:

One gravely questions the true patriotism of that class of women who hysterically rush into the frontline trenches of the industrial battle but throw down their arms and refuse to go into action if they find colored women seeking places as their comrades.⁶⁷

As radical Black labor leaders such as A. Philip Randolph and Frank Crosswaith would argue in the postwar period, the document urged that interracial cooperation among working people was essential to achieve workplace justice.⁶⁸

This language illustrates what may be the least known aspect of wartime YWCA work: its insistence that White working women challenge their own racial prejudices and treat Black coworkers as equals. In October 1918, the Colored Work Committee formally asked the Industrial Committee “to take up the matter of industrial discrimination among colored girls and women,” and to make it “a national matter and brought to the attention of the government.”⁶⁹ After the war, Jackson and her allies astutely harnessed Industrial Program resources to make up for a postwar decimation of YWCA Colored Work funding. At a time when national leaders of the YWCA, the nation’s largest women’s organization, signaled a lack of commitment to Black women, the Industrial Program’s White national staff proved more receptive. Just when many Whites were attacking African Americans who sought economic equality, and when conservative Blacks and

⁶⁷ “Industrial Movement Among Colored Women,” Nov. 1918, typescript. Box 534, f. 2, YWCA, SSC. Parts (though not the language about patriotic anti-racism) appear in the Dec. 1918 *War Work Bulletin* article “The Colored Girl Gets Her Chance.”

⁶⁸ Cornelius L. Bynum, “The New Negro and Social Democracy during the Harlem Renaissance, 1917–37,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 10 (Jan. 2011): 89–112. On the NAACP and patriotic discourse, see Reich, “The Great War.”

⁶⁹ Industrial Conference, Oct. 1–6, 1918, Box 501, f. 13. YWCA, SSC. Meeting minutes, Colored Work Committee, Oct. 25, 1918. Box 533, f. 9, YWCA, SSC. Report of Social Service Commission, Nepahwin, 1918; and Report of Religious Work Commission, Nepahwin, 1918.

White supremacists both feared interracial labor cooperation, the Industrial Program became a site for civil rights struggles that demanded White working women's participation.⁷⁰

As we have seen, some YWCA industrial members already were considering this issue in summer 1918. At the mid-Atlantic regional conference that opened this article, some White women urged their conference colleagues to cast aside prejudice. They cited various reasons: to protect wages and standards; because "Christianity demanded a sisterly attitude"; because in wartime, "a democracy for which colored men were willing to die should be vital enough to ensure their sisters a chance to work side by side with white girls," especially because Black women were crucial to home-front production.⁷¹ Grace Coyle, the conference executive, reported with pleasure that soon thereafter, in a laundry where Black women had begun to work, a White woman who had attended the 1918 conference "has felt herself responsible for seeing that there was as friendly an attitude as she could bring about toward these girls. She has been quite successful."⁷²

[Fig. 4]

Coyle was part of a new generation of YWCA staff, trained in social work and inspired by the Social Gospel, and she and Annetta Dieckmann, the national Industrial Program executives for the East Central field (the mid-Atlantic region), represent some of the most ambitious early efforts by White staff to include race in the Industrial Program. Their social work training predisposed them to search for concrete solutions, and changing religious currents in the YWCA influenced their goals. Inspired by John Dewey's emphasis

⁷⁰ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 235–37.

⁷¹ Report of the Religious Work Commission, Nepahwin, 1918.

⁷² Report of the Industrial Club Girls' Council, Camp Nepahwin, 1918 (East Central Field Committee). Box 508, f. 7, YWCA, SSC.

on building democracy through education, staff deeply interested in social change flocked to the Industrial Program by the late 1910s. Grace Coyle would go on to be a pioneer social worker, after years in the YWCA Industrial Department, and Annetta Dieckmann followed decades of YWCA work with an illustrious career in the Illinois American Civil Liberties Union.⁷³ They and other Industrial Program staff were shaped by contact with working women and by the more radical strand of the Social Gospel movement, which urged engagement with social problems.⁷⁴

Grace Coyle, a new Special Industrial Secretary for war work, quickly rebutted Black working women's portrayal as a source of disorder, emphasized the need for more attention to their problems, and reported a sense of interracial class solidarity. In one of her first reports, Coyle wrote that time and experience were disproving the stereotype that Black women were unsuited to factory work. In garment work, Black and White women belonged to the same union, had joint meetings, and were "working out their economic problems together," and a White member had told her that Black women were "especially loyal members." Most White women, she reported, did not plan to engage in hate strikes if workplaces were racially integrated.⁷⁵ These Black women were hardly the diseased forces of social disorder, the "menace to society," that figured elsewhere in YWCA

⁷³ Robert M. Westerbrook, "Schools for Industrial Democrats: The Social Origins of John Dewey's Philosophy of Education," *American Journal of Education* 100 (Aug. 1992): 401–19; Browder, "A 'Christian Solution'"; Frederickson, "Citizens"; "Service Set for Pioneer in Feminism," *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 18, 1974; Lucy P. Carner, *Unionizing New York City Women Office Workers* (MA thesis, Columbia University, 1924); "Dr. Grace Coyle, Educator, Dead," *New York Times*, Mar. 10, 1962. "The Church and Social Reconstruction," Editorial, *Association Monthly* XIII (Sept. 1919): 355.

⁷⁴ On the Social Gospel movement's troubled history on race, see Ralph E. Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1865–1912* (Chapel Hill, 1991), 314–21; quoted on 321.

⁷⁵ Coyle, "Colored Girls in Industry."

coverage, and the portrayal of interracial cooperation contrasted with the race riot accounts that filled the news.

The YWCA Industrial Program's East Central Field soon became the most important site of interracial cooperation.⁷⁶ In December 1918, Jackson met in Pittsburgh with the local Industrial Committee and with Coyle, Dieckmann, and other regional field workers and was pleased by the "interest shown in the colored industrial girls by" the field executives. Jackson continued attending the Nepahwin industrial conference, and Dieckmann and Coyle consulted extensively with her throughout the year about Black women workers' needs.⁷⁷ Dieckmann incorporated her strong interest in Black working women's problems into her broader YWCA work.⁷⁸

Meanwhile, the Nepahwin delegates showed signs of the "democratic attitude" they had pledged in 1918. In 1919, they reported that Black industrial club members sometimes used their local facilities. One reported that her club had admitted African American women "to teach them how to form and lead clubs for colored girls," and the Religious Work Commission proposed members "make a special effort to know and understand . . . and help the colored girl all we can" and "help them organize industrial clubs for themselves."⁷⁹ Despite overtones of uplift and a language of segregation, these were attempts to share resources with Black women and to incorporate them into the

⁷⁶ Records of Industrial Conference, Feb. 5, 1921, p. 6. Box 502, f. 1, YWCA, SSC.

⁷⁷ Report of Mary E. Jackson to the City Committee and the Industrial Committee from Dec. 2nd, 1918 to Jan. 2nd, 1919, Jan. 16, 1919, 1. Box 515, f. 17, YWCA SSC; Colored Work Committee meeting minutes, May 18, 1920, Box 553, f. 10, YWCA, SSC.

⁷⁸ Colored Work Committee meeting minutes, Sept. 26, 1919 and Oct. 31, 1919. Box 553, f. 10, YWCA, SSC.

⁷⁹ Report of the Religious Work Commission, Industrial Club Council, Camp Nepahwin 1919 (Philadelphia: East Central Field Committee), 2–3. Box 508, f. 7, YWCA, SSC.

Industrial Program.⁸⁰ Indeed, Black women may have epitomized the Industrial Program's broader shift toward politics: a White delegate reported that the two clubs of black women who used the YWCA library and gymnasium "were the first clubs in Wilkes-Barre to endorse the eight-hour bill for women." The 1919 Nepahwin Social Service Commission, evolving from a charitable to a political focus, recommended all clubs endorse a set of industrial standards that included "Equal pay for equal work and no distinction between the races in privileges of employment."⁸¹

Racial justice appeared in other Industrial Program conferences. The 1919 Northeastern summer industrial conference passed a resolution "that Colored Girls should be given the same opportunity in industry as the White Girls."⁸² The Industrial Program's first national conference, in November 1919, was the place where "interracial instead of bi-racial clubs were first suggested" in the YWCA, a YWCA staff member later noted.⁸³

These ties between Colored Work and the Industrial Program proved crucial at war's end, when a resource crisis hit both federal resources for Black women and YWCA industrial work for Black women. At the federal level, the government eliminated the Labor Department's appropriations for Colored Work. Within the YWCA, postwar cuts in Colored Work affected working women, because YWCA industrial work for Black women had been organized and funded under the auspices of the Colored Work Council

⁸⁰ Report of Religious Work Commission, Nepahwin 1919, 2–3.

⁸¹ Report of Social Service Commission, Nepahwin 1919, 6–7.

⁸² Annual Report, Altamont Industrial Council, June 28 to July 12, 1919. Box 508, f. 15, YWCA, SSC. Remarkably, neither resolution appeared in the *Association Monthly* summer camps coverage. "Camp Bubbles," *Association Monthly* XIII (Aug. 1919): 342.

⁸³ Calkins, "The Negro in the YWCA," 55. However, this national conference did not include racial nondiscrimination among the labor demands it issued to the YWCA National Board. "National Conference of Industrial Clubs of the Young Women's Christian Association called by the National Industrial Committee in Washington, DC, Oct. 24 to 28, 1919." Box 501, f. 14. YWCA, SSC.

rather than the Industrial Program. Mary Jackson's position was eliminated in 1921, leaving no national staff assigned to Black industrial work, and still no Black national staff in the Industrial Program itself.⁸⁴ Conditions were bad, and wartime advances were eroding. Black working women faced layoffs, closed doors, and discrimination on all sides, as Jackson warned in one of her last reports. All across the nation, even in areas considered racially progressive, employers were renegeing on promises to hire Black women, and the government was little help.⁸⁵ Just as returning Black soldiers found White hostility, Black women war workers faced dismal postwar prospects.

Within the YWCA, African American members still lacked autonomous structures after the war. They remained in separate local "branches," in charge of daily operations but under the direction of White-led "affiliating committees" at the "central" White branch. They lacked a structural base at national conventions, and reports on their programs fell under "city work" or "student work." Most White YWCA leaders continued to emphasize education, rather than legislation, insisting racial problems could be solved when the "better sorts" reached "mutual understanding." Many Black women despaired of the association's commitment to interracial work after the 1920 National Convention, where the all-White National Board rebuffed and silenced their attempts to raise racial issues.⁸⁶

By contrast, the Industrial Program emerged from the war significantly larger and institutionally stronger than it had been. Before the war, working-class members and

⁸⁴ Colored Work Committee minutes, Sept. 26, 1919; *Association Monthly* XIV (Jan. 1920): ix.

⁸⁵ Report of Jackson, Jan. 16, 1919, 1.

⁸⁶ *Proceedings, Sixth National Convention of the Young Women's Association of the U.S.A.*, Box 271, f. 1, YWCA, SSC. Salem, *To Better Our World*, 239–52; Hall, *Revolt*, 85–6; Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood*, 71–74, 80–91.

progressive staff had begun reshaping its initial goals of protection and moral uplift to focus on education, class-based solidarity, and self-determination. By the late 1910s, program activities had shifted from sewing and Bible study to study of economics, history, trade unions and labor laws. Considered full YWCA members, industrial members also found their distinct needs and interests acknowledged in the Industrial Program. In local associations, they had their own clubs but could participate in other programs. At the regional level, they had organized federations and held conferences. Wartime work dramatically increased membership, strengthened regional program structures, and highlighted members' interest in organized working-class power.⁸⁷

After the war, industrial members and staff allies convinced the national YWCA to endorse legislative solutions to labor problems, a dramatic shift and one that national White leaders refused to make on racial issues. At the same 1920 National Convention where White leaders dismissed Black members' concerns, industrial members pushed through a platform supporting labor unions and other workers' rights.⁸⁸ Members ran their own governing council, based on the program's philosophy of "self-governance," and by 1922, met separately in an Industrial Assembly at National Conventions.

Amid the postwar YWCA funding crisis for Black women, Bowles emphasized the need to racially integrate local industrial programs, and called on national industrial staff to help. She drew on the Industrial Program's staff and conference structure to compensate for low Colored Work staffing levels and black members' lack of a structure

⁸⁷ Local staff nearly quadrupled to 365, and field staff grew from 4 to 13 and headquarters staff from 1 to 30; by 1918 more than 800 clubs had formed. Browder, "A Christian Solution"; Roberts, *Florence Simms*, 211–14; Financial Statement of the War Work Council, Nov. 1, 1918–June 30, 1919, 11, Box 703, f. 15, YWCA, SSC; Frederickson, "Citizens," 78–79.

⁸⁸ Browder, "A 'Christian Solution'."

through which to bring concerns to the entire YWCA. In her 1922 annual report to the City Department, she recommended that White national industrial staff who traveled to oversee local programs spend time with local staff for African American working women and “help to develop in that community a working relationship with the city wide Industrial program to include the Colored girl.”⁸⁹

The Industrial Program provided crucial spaces and relationships that staff used to protect and extend the political and economic gains that that they had claimed for Black working women during World War I. Coyle and Dieckmann reported on Black working women and helped organize conferences. Dieckmann showed particular enthusiasm, viewing the YWCA’s Industrial Program as a rare opportunity to build better race relations. Her reports to the national Industrial Program staff included extensive descriptions of Black industrial work in her region, and thoughts on how to improve underfunding and difficult situations.⁹⁰ Dieckmann studied the myriad factors that shaped possibilities for interracial cooperation among working-class people. She noted in her master’s thesis that groups of “influential white and colored leaders” such as the Commission on Interracial Cooperation only reached a few thousand people directly, and called the “continuous contact of a large and increasing number of whites and Negroes” in industry a crucial factor in race relations.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Report of Eva D. Bowles to the City Department, Annual 1922. Box 541, f. 2, YWCA, SSC.

⁹⁰ Report of Annetta M. Dieckmann (East Central Field) to Industrial Department from Apr. 1, 1922–Sept. 1, 1922, and other reports in Box 515, f. 7, YWCA, SSC.

⁹¹ Annetta Dieckmann, “The Effect of Common Interests on Race Relations In Certain Northern Cities: A Preliminary Study of Industry” (M.A. thesis, Columbia University, 1923), quote from 8. She was at Columbia graduate school at the same time as Elizabeth Ross Haynes, who became the first Black woman on the National Board in 1924.

Dieckmann and colleagues organized an industrial conference in 1919 designed to offer Black working women what white working women had been getting for years from Industrial Department conferences: a sense of solidarity and a group setting in which to relax, discuss common interests, gain skills, and read and hear from key figures in American reform.⁹² Conference attendees discussed why factory work was preferable to domestic work; affirmed a commitment to strengthen trade unions despite their sometimes discriminatory practices; and agreed “that colored women do not have equal opportunity to secure desirable work.”⁹³ The conference likely provided the sort of “space for homo-social camaraderie, black self-organization, and critical intellectual engagement” that Chad Williams has found Black male veterans were enjoying through such sites as the radical *Messenger*, during a period of growing racial claims for justice.⁹⁴

By 1920, this group of YWCA staff had developed an annual Conference of Colored Business and Industrial Girls in Cheyney, PA. The conference served as a Black parallel to the White Nepahwin conference, and was the only place Black working women in the YWCA could meet regionally to discuss common problems, forge club strategies, gain leadership skills, and feel part of the YWCA industrial movement. Cheyney drew dozens of women from a range of occupations, including elevator operators, teachers, clerks, laundry workers, and domestic workers.⁹⁵ Delegates sought to

⁹² Colored Work Committee minutes, Sept. 26, 1919, Oct. 21, 1919, and Oct. 31, 1919. On YWCA industrial conferences, see Browder, “A ‘Christian Solution’” and Frederickson, “Citizens.”

⁹³ Editorial, *Association Monthly* XIII (Dec. 1919): 466.

⁹⁴ Williams, “Vanguards,” 356.

⁹⁵ Conference records, Cheyney Conference of Colored Business and Industrial Girls, 1921–1924. Box 469, f. 5, YWCA, SSC. The Cheyney conference drew from the Midwest as well in 1924. Report of Miss Lucy P. Carner, Industrial Secretary, for May 1 to Oct. 1, 1924. Box 514, f. 7, YWCA, SSC.

nurture both pride in cultural heritage and a sense of belonging to a larger group of working women, urging local clubs to study “Negro history, current events, literature and art” and “industrial movements of the world.”⁹⁶ Reflecting Industrial Program goals, various committees recommended building working-class solidarity abroad as well.⁹⁷ Members returned with enthusiasm and sought new challenges “such as special study of Negro history or of industrial and interracial problems” to keep things fresh for long-standing members.⁹⁸ The Cheyney conference helped solidify a sense of unity among Black working women in YWCAs across the country in the postwar period, when their local program work struggled for lack of national support.⁹⁹ It reinforced ties among Black YWCA women and created and publicized program ideas.

Cheyney also made African American women a part of the broader YWCA Industrial Program. It drew Black and White staff from all over the country and helped develop greater commitment to racial issues among White staff.¹⁰⁰ Cheyney exchanged greetings with other YWCA industrial conferences, reminding them that Black women had a place in the movement. Cheyney delegates maintained contact with national and regional industrial staff, with “colored” industrial clubs outside their region, and with the YWCA industrial movement at national conventions. The East Central staff played an especially key role this progress, staffing both East Central conferences, helping to build

⁹⁶ Conference Findings, 1921 Cheyney Industrial Conference. Box 469, f. 5, YWCA, SSC.

⁹⁷ Conference records, Cheyney, 1921–1924, Box 469, f. 5, YWCA, SSC.

⁹⁸ Conference of Business and Industrial Girls, Cheyney, PA, June 23–30, 1923. Box 469, f. 5, YWCA, SSC.

⁹⁹ Annual Report of Eva D. Bowles to the City Department for Jan.–Dec. 1924, Box 541, f. 2, YWCA, SSC.

¹⁰⁰ Findings, 1922 Cheyney Conference of Business and Industrial Girls. Box 469, f. 5, YWCA, SSC.

ties between them, and fostering local program work.¹⁰¹ Dieckmann also reported closely to the national Industrial Program on Black industrial work in the region, and worked to remedy harmful staff situations in the region's YWCAs, for instance removing a local industrial committee member hostile "to allowing Colored women to serve" on the committee.¹⁰²

All of this organizing created possibilities for Black working women's leadership just as industrial members' power within the Y increased. In 1922, industrial members gained their own separate, autonomous body within the YWCA, the National Industrial Assembly. When they created a National Industrial Council, an executive committee of industrial members to work with the National Board's Industrial Committee, they voted to guarantee African American women two out of the fourteen elected council seats.¹⁰³ By contrast, no Black woman served on the YWCA's National Board until Elizabeth Ross Haynes joined it in 1924 after intense pressure from African Americans within and beyond the YWCA.¹⁰⁴

Besides facilitating the creation of an interracial national council, the conference structure fostered regional contacts among Black and White working women. In the early 1920s, the two East Central conferences, Cheyney and Nepahwin, began exchanging

¹⁰¹ 1922 Cheyney Conference findings.

¹⁰² Report of Dieckmann, Apr. 1, 1922–Sept. 1, 1922; and other reports in Box 515, f. 7, YWCA, SSC.

¹⁰³ The Student Assembly also created an interracial structure in 1922, ahead of the Business and Professional group and the YWCA National Board. Calkins, "The Negro in the YWCA," 67; *National Industrial Assembly Proceedings, Seventh National Convention of the Young Women's Christian Associations of the United States of America, Apr. 20–27, 1922*: 301, Box 271, f. 7; and *Proceedings of the Eighth National Convention of the Young Women's Christian Associations of the United States of America, New York, NY, Apr. 30–May 6, 1924*, 116–17, Box 271, f. 13, YWCA, SSC.

¹⁰⁴ Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood*, 94; *Proceedings, YWCA Seventh ... Convention*, 301.

delegates, and the Eastern region's conference included "Colored" delegates in 1924.¹⁰⁵ White YWCA industrial members began treating African American industrial club members as colleagues, with Social Service recommendations shifting from 1922's "volunteer service in ... colored branches" to 1923's "[c]ooperation" with them.¹⁰⁶ In 1924, a list of social science classes held in local White clubs included "Race Relations" for the first time.¹⁰⁷ White delegates had shifted from viewing African American women as subjects for "Social Service" to partners in "Social Science." These changes were evident at the local level as well.¹⁰⁸

By the mid-1920s, all YWCA industrial conferences except the Southern one had begun admitting African American women. In 1924, Black and White delegates agreed to merge into a cooperatively planned joint East Central conference, and a conference executive described the integrated 1925 conference as "so natural and accepted so as a matter of course that it needed no further discussion"¹⁰⁹ By contrast, Black women remained unwelcome at the YWCA Business and Professional Girls' summer conferences.¹¹⁰ In the Industrial Program, Black women gained conference leadership

¹⁰⁵ Report of the Nepahwin Industrial Conference, August 1922. 503, f. 2, YWCA, SSC; Report of Miss Lucy P. Carner, Industrial Secretary, for May 1 to Oct. 1, 1924, YWCA Box 514, f. 7, SSC.

¹⁰⁶ Report of Nepahwin, 1922, 14; Findings of the Nepahwin Industrial Conference 1923, 503, f. 3, YWCA, SSC. [emphasis added]

¹⁰⁷ Annual Report, Altamont Industrial Council, 1919.

¹⁰⁷ Report of Social Service Commission, Nepahwin, 1919.

¹⁰⁸ Lucy P. Carner, Report of Traveling Secretary for Nepahwin Area, Feb. 1925. YWCA Box 514, f. 7, SSC.

¹⁰⁹ Findings and Recommendations from the Nepahwin Industrial Conference, 1924. 503, f. 4, YWCA, SSC. Lucy P. Carner, Report of Travelling Secretary of Eastern Region, June–July 1925. YWCA Box 514, f. 7, SSC.

¹¹⁰ Gertrude M. Lees, "The Industrial Assembly: A Letter to the Industrial Membership Concerning Convention Plans," *Womans Press*, Feb. 1926: 121; Bertha E. Pabst and Harriet A. Cunningham, "The Business and Professional Assembly: The Call to the

positions and national council slots, not only as racial representatives but also as general leaders.

Discussions of race at regional and national conferences spread to local clubs and led even Southern White industrial members to question their conference's racial exclusivity by the late 1920s. In some locations, industrial members led the charge against YWCA racism.¹¹¹ They also challenged segregation in the lively 1920s labor education movement, resulting in the desegregation of the Bryn Mawr Summer School and the Wisconsin Summer School.¹¹² The National Industrial Assembly, the institutional voice of working women in the YWCA, advanced racial justice and fostered interracial organizing for the next three decades. Black women came to constitute 20 percent of the industrial membership, the highest proportion anywhere in the YWCA. These efforts helped create a new interracial space for working-class women that became, from the 1920s through the 1940s, a site of coalition-building and of critical discussion of race issues among tens of thousands of women from many ethnic, racial, religious, and occupational backgrounds, well before the YWCA became a better-known site of interracial justice organizing.¹¹³

Second Assembly of Business and Professional Women at Milwaukee." *Womans Press*, Feb. 1926: 132.

¹¹¹ Boynton, "Fighting Racism at the Chicago YWCA"; Anne Mies Knupfer, *The Chicago Black Renaissance and Women's Activism* (Chicago, 2006), 136–40; Lucy Carner, Report of Camp Gray Industrial Conference, Saugatuck, MI, July 1–12, 1929, 1. Box 514, f. 10, YWCA, SSC.

¹¹² Findings for Cheyney, 1924; Findings of the Prospect Industrial Conference, June 20–July 3, 1925, YWCA, SSC. Dorothea Browder, "Race and Occupation at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers" (M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2000). Eleanor Copenhaver, Report on Visit to Wisconsin Summer School, July 15–16, 1927, Box 515, f. 1, YWCA, SSC.

¹¹³ Lewis, "The YWCA's Multiracial Activism."

These developments fostered early, critical links between labor and racial justice movements through both members and staff. For instance, Floria Pinkney, a Brooklyn member active through at least the 1930s, joined the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and became the first Black organizer for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (which, as Daniel Katz has demonstrated, was building its own multicultural labor movement). Perhaps she had met Black labor leader and BSCP founder A. Philip Randolph when he spoke at a 1925 planning conference for Black industrial members. Annetta Dieckmann closely followed landmark efforts to form Black labor organizations, and other staff helped push the NAACP toward support of labor unions in the 1930s.¹¹⁴ Thus, the YWCA Industrial Program was part of that critical transition in Black Freedom Struggle strategies.

Conclusion

The YWCA Industrial Program was not a space free of any racism, nor was the interracial work easy or straightforward. As late as 1921, Jackson had to warn White staff

¹¹⁴ “Findings of the Prospect Industrial Conference, June 20–July 3, 1925.” SSC YWCA, Box 508, f. 20; Findings of the Midyear Conference of Colored Industrial Girls, New York City, Mar. 14 and 15, 1925, Box 534, f. 2, SSC YWCA; Annetta Dieckmann, “Summary of Discussion of Industrial Work Among Colored Girls,” Oct. 10, 1925; Dieckmann’s untitled notes on the formation of the Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro Workers, Oct. 10, 1925; “Notes of Miss Bowles with the National Industrial Staff, Oct. 5, 1928,” all in Box 534, f. 2, YWCA, SSC; Daniel Katz, *All Together Different: Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism* (New York, 2011), 111–12; Melinda Chateaufort, *Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* (Urbana, 1998), 44; Beth Tompkins Bates, “A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933–1941,” *American Historical Review* April 1997: 340–77, esp. 347–48; Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood*, 130.

away from minstrelsy, an activity common in and beyond the YWCA clubs.¹¹⁵ Eva Bowles struggled for greater resources for Black industrial work until she left the association in the 1930s, and local YWCAs differed considerably in their policies and funding. However, the program did become a rare and significant site for interracial socializing and political strategizing, during a low point in American race relations. Not free of racial tensions or prejudice, the YWCA Industrial Program was, nonetheless, a rare place where working women met in interracial settings, had difficult conversations about race and racism, and respected Black leadership in its organizational structures.

The interracial connections and labor-based racial justice discourse that developed in the YWCA Industrial Program suggest we need more attention toward the World War I era and the 1920s, and particularly to women's role and the place of working women. The current historiographic debate over the "long civil rights movement" chiefly centers on whether the liberal and radical interracial labor efforts of the 1930s should be considered part of the civil rights movement or a separate antecedent, but here we have a yet earlier antecedent.¹¹⁶ Wartime conditions highlighted the distance between America's rhetoric of democracy and African Americans' lived reality, and recent scholarship documents how Black soldiers and male veterans contributed to shifting civil rights strategies in response. Women did so as well. In an era of Black women's waning political influence as "race leaders," amid efforts that presented Black men's military service as the basis of civil rights

¹¹⁵ Notes from Industrial Conference, Feb. 5, 1921.

¹¹⁶ Steven F. Lawson, "Long Origins of the Short Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1968" in *Freedom Rights*, eds. McGuire and Dittmer: 9–37; Jacqueline D. Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91 (Mar. 2005): 1233–63; Kevin Boyle, "Labour, the Left and the Long Civil Rights Movement," *Social History* 30 (Aug. 2005): 366–72.

claims and emphasized Black masculinity, these YWCA women placed Black working women at the center of their claims. During the rise of what A. Philip Randolph termed “New Crowd” activism, which emphasized mass politics over “Old Crowd” elite leadership, a group of women founded claims to justice upon African American women’s labor contributions and invoked White working women’s responsibility in the struggle.