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Compelled to Speak

Women Confronting Institutional Racism, 1910–1950

Sharlene Voogd Cochrane

Women within and outside the YWCA have been able to move this organization to confront its own racism. Although the strategies and goals for this endeavor took several decades to work out, the organization moved more quickly than other similar institutions. One reason for this movement was the power of women speaking out in an institution that encouraged them to make connections between their faith and their daily lives. Their strategy was a profound commitment to connecting talk and action. They constantly set a context for and educated others to see connections between YWCA rhetoric, ideals, and practices.

The article considers this effort through the lens of Boston over a period of forty years and the life of Lucy Miller Mitchell, the first woman of color to be elected to the Boston YWCA board. It explores the work of women in the national, student, and city associations who felt compelled to speak for a more diverse and just YWCA.

The surprising thing about the YWCA is not its racism — American institutions reflect the racism of society at large, and the YWCA was no different in its early goals and practices. What is surprising and instructive is the way in which women within and outside the organization have been able to move the YW to confront that racism and bring about substantial change. Although the strategies and goals for this confrontation took several decades to work out, the organization moved more quickly and to more effect than similar service and membership institutions.¹ Today the YWCA operates from the “one imperative,” one of the most strongly worded mission statements of any nonprofit organization: “Our one imperative: The elimination of racism, wherever it exists and by any means necessary.” The YWCA began in this country in the 1860s. Much of the work that led to this imperative, and to the existence today of a solidly integrated organization serving the needs of women from many races and backgrounds, was accomplished between 1910 and 1950.

Two elements of this struggle stand out. The first is the radical implications of women speaking out in a structure that encouraged them to make connections between their faith and their daily lives. Women with viewpoints that questioned accepted practices overcame immense social pressure to “be quiet,” and instead

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debated and publicly negotiated these strongly felt issues. The YWCA institutionalized the power of speaking out as a way of making change. Through these women “the pressure never let up.”² Their strategy was a profound commitment to a connective process of constant talk and education. They kept issues alive and raised points at every opportunity. They set a context for and educated others to see the connections or disparity between YWCA rhetoric, ideals, and practices.

A secondary theme is the constant tension between separatism and integration in the efforts to make the YW more diverse. Was the goal a separate series of African-American YWs, a fully integrated single institution, or something in between? The YWCA created what at first appeared to be a racially specific structure, completely separating African-American and white women. In fact, this structure was more connected and complicated and, with steady pressure from some members, moved toward full integration. Every step of this movement took immense effort and continual prodding from women who had a vision that challenged traditional American racist assumptions.

Documenting the efforts of the YWCA to confront racism is valuable because of its national scope, the thousands of women involved in its programs, and the relative success of those efforts. The national YWCA story centers on the development of African-American branches in cities and colleges during the early twentieth century. The events and processes in specific cities and local organizations, however, that capture the details and problems of implementing the national policy are not well known. This article considers one local situation — Boston, Massachusetts — in order to better understand the process through which the organization confronted racism and came to have a fully integrated program — or didn’t. It views the story through the life of Lucy Miller Mitchell, the first woman of color to be elected to the Boston YWCA board, and explores the work of women with the national, student, and city associations, which led to a more diverse and just YWCA.

The Boston YWCA, the first in the nation, was founded in 1866 by upper-class women to guide and guard New England’s single, rural women coming to the city to work in the years immediately following the Civil War. They acted despite Boston’s male clergy, who attacked this female institution-building as dangerous and unnecessary. The YW provided a safe, inexpensive place to live, as well as assistance in finding work, for primarily Protestant, white, working young women. The founders expected residents to worship daily, exhibit upright moral character, and follow the rules of their new “home.” The first housemother clearly stated her expectations: “The Superintendent would be grateful to the ladies connected with the Association if they would discourage as much as possible the attempt made by Irish Roman Catholic girls to frequent the rooms in search of employment — the object of this organization being to benefit principally our New England girls over whom we can exert a lasting influence.”³

Women of color were served even less than the Irish within the early YW. Occasionally an African-American woman would be allowed to stay for a day or two at the residence, until “more appropriate” lodging could be found with an African-American family. A few women of color took part in clubs or training programs. Anna Wade Richardson, for example, was part of the Bible study group at the Berkeley residence in the 1880s. She left Boston to start a school in Marshallville, Georgia, which was partially funded for over a decade by her friends at the Boston YW. Such events and individuals, however, were rare.⁴

The National Picture

At the time the national YWCA was formed in 1906, certain patterns existed in the local associations across the country. In both the North and the South, city associations existed for white women. In the North there might be occasional participation by women of color, as in Boston. In the South this option did not exist. In a few southern cities with a large number of African-American women, a separate organization might exist for them.⁵

Within a year after the national YWCA was formed, the directors responded to two kinds of requests from women of color. Those who had established their own city YWCAs wanted to affiliate. Students at black colleges wished to join the new national organization. In response, the national YWCA hired Mrs. W. A. Hunton to visit fourteen interested student associations, including Spelman Seminary in Atlanta and Tuskegee Institute. She also did "city work" in the first four African-American city associations to affiliate, Washington, D.C., New York, Baltimore, and Brooklyn. Within two years, thirty-six student associations were affiliated, and a fifth African-American city branch was established at St. Paul, Minnesota.⁶

The national organization determined by 1910 that in cities with a central (white) association, work should be organized for women of color as a branch of that association. Any decision about creating such a branch had to have the approval of the white association, so that white women had the ultimate say as to whether women of color in a community had a YWCA. That branch would be located separately and have a separate board, overseen by the white board, which also controlled the finances. If no central association existed and the African-American population was large enough to support its own work, a "colored YWCA" could be organized. Within collegiate settings, student associations were also separated by race, and northern predominantly white colleges might have a small separate association for women of color.⁷

By 1912, there were sixteen African-American associations in cities and over fifty African-American college-based student YWCAs. The national organization expanded its commitment to this constituency by creating the position on its board of "Secretary of Colored Work in Cities." The following year, Eva Bowles was hired to fill this new position. She traveled throughout the country, coordinated conferences of women working through the YW with the African-American community, and extended the training of secretaries and leaders for black branches. Under Bowles's leadership, between 1913 and World War I, the branch system grew, increasing both the number of groups and the number of women of color served. As these women became leaders within their branches, they began to participate in national conferences and training sessions. The national and local boards faced increasing pressure from women of color to run their own boards and have control of their own finances and programs. Bowles carefully and patiently supported them; she commented that she "walked a tightrope" in urging women of color to remain involved while she educated and "developed" YWCA white women to understand the disparity between their words and actions.⁸

The student YWCAs moved more quickly toward fuller integration. The initial national response to requests for affiliation were to accept, separately, white student YWCAs and associations from black colleges. In 1915, at Louisville, Kentucky, the first integrated student YW convention took place with twenty-eight delegates meeting together. Bowles said of their work, "The conference marks one of the greatest

forward steps in the Association's history and has served as a clearing house for many preconceived notions and prejudices."⁹

The next year the association faced the question of integrating a college site in a different way. Fifteen women of color, students at the University of Iowa, wanted to establish their own branch of the university association and met friction from white students who wanted them to have full membership in the previously white association. "This is the first student association where there is such a large number of colored that it raises this issue."¹⁰ Seemingly, if a few women of color wanted to attend a northern "white" association, that was acceptable, but this large a group would present a greater, and to some, threatening, level of integration. The report goes on to say the same issue was likely to come up at the University of Minnesota and the University of Illinois. It does not say how the issue was settled.

The student YWCA was soon holding conventions for both black and white students. The first convention for students of color was held at Atlanta's Spelman College in 1917. The YWCA increased its efforts through the work of Eva Bowles to recruit additional students of color at white schools. By 1919 the student convention in Talladega, Alabama, boasted 107 delegates from 42 schools, both black and white. Many student organizations undertook joint meetings in the early 1920s, and between 1923 and 1926, a number of student groups became interracial, a step in race relations that at the time was considered extremely radical.

World War I provided immense opportunities for the YWCA, since its war work councils provided housing and activities for growing numbers of both white and African-American women who moved to cities in response to the need and opportunity for work. Following the war, the YWCA built on this momentum by establishing the Girl Reserve clubs, with separate clubs for young black and white women. If there were twelve girls and a woman able to lead them, the YW granted them a charter. Although the organizations were separate, again the leadership roles provided an opportunity for women of color to meet at conventions with white women, and leaders of the separate groups met together within the local organization boards and committees.

Another YWCA activity following World War I was organizing industrial clubs for working girls. These clubs were biracial, since the issues the girls had required joint organizing. "We hope the Association's approach to the colored girl who works will be a different one. Out of 12 years' experience we feel that the organization of colored girls in clubs without relating them to the whole industrial situation in the community does not develop racial understanding. The Industrial Department of an Association should seek to know the whole industrial situation of its city and realize that the colored girl is a definite part of it. The responsibility of the Industrial Department is to develop a consciousness in both white and colored groups to know that their interests are dependent on each other."¹¹ As in other segments of the organization, women of color who took on leadership roles were integrated into local and national participatory structure and ongoing training opportunities. White and African-American women gradually began to work together more and know and respect one another.

The Boston Story

In 1924, Lucy Miller Mitchell, a young woman of color, newly married and ready to make the city her home, moved to Boston. She had graduated from Mary McCleod Bethune's Dayton Beach, Florida, school and earned a college degree from Talladega

College in Alabama. Although she had participated in the student YWCA there, Mitchell did not become involved in the organization. In 1941, nearly twenty years later, she became the first woman of color elected to the Boston YWCA board.

By the time Mitchell settled in Boston, both the local YWCA and the African-American community were changing. The YWCA became a membership organization in 1912, the same year Boston affiliated with the national organization. Membership meant a significant shift in focus, from upper-class directors helping young working women to a broader spectrum of women designing and carrying out programs for themselves. A growing outreach effort accompanied this shift and expanded YW membership to younger girls, mothers, older women, and immigrants. New leadership began to come from the women using the YW, while national conventions and personnel brought a wider view to the local organization. Women who had not previously been involved in policymaking were encouraged to speak out. With greater power and voice, a stronger internal leadership developed.

In 1920, the African-American community made up only 2 percent of Boston's total population, as it had consistently for several decades. It was changing its physical location within the city and gradually becoming more diverse as a community. During the nineteenth century, people of color had clustered on the north slope of Beacon Hill near the African Meeting House built in 1806. Overcrowding and the change in that area to tenements for Italian and Jewish immigrants led African-Americans to move to the South End and Roxbury. The 1920s witnessed a steady stream of people of color from the South and the West Indies arriving in Boston. Many, like the Mitchells, were new residents from small southern towns. Others were poorer migrants and immigrants bringing a less skilled working class to the city. A number of new and established organizations served community needs, including at least ten churches representing a variety of denominations, and settlement houses such as the Robert Gould Shaw House in Roxbury and the Harriet Tubman House in the South End.¹²

Mitchell had first come to Boston with her family in 1916, when her brothers attended Northeastern University, and lived one block from the Harriet Tubman House. Many African-American families living in that area of brownstone townhouses rented out part of their home to students, since no students of color were allowed to live in any of Boston's college dormitories. Mitchell returned South to college, and the student YWCA was important in her college years. She was influenced in her choice of colleges by Juliet Derricotte, a national secretary whom she met when she attended her first national YWCA conference for women of color in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1917. Derricotte convinced Mitchell to attend her own alma mater, Talladega College, where Mitchell served as president of the student YWCA and attended additional YWCA student conferences.¹³

Mitchell raised two children, a son and a daughter. After volunteering at her own children's schools, she studied education at Abigail Eliot's school and received a master's degree in the new field of early childhood education from Boston University in 1935. She then developed the model nursery school at Robert Gould Shaw House and became a respected professional educator in the early childhood field. Mitchell later led efforts to improve and license day care providers and consulted to the national Head Start programs in Massachusetts.

In the 1920s, the city YWCA had the opportunity to support the development of an African-American branch in Boston. While many large cities developed branch

relationships between black and white women, Boston developed in a different direction. Local members did not support efforts to establish a branch for women of color.

In 1925, Victoria Saunders, a black social worker, sought support from the board for her plan to use a building in the South End for club rooms and overnight lodging, with the hope of becoming a branch of the YWCA. Saunders hoped to establish a day nursery, rooms for twenty-five young women, club rooms, and a food service. She tried to purchase furniture from the YW residence to help get started. The YW leadership discussed this request with Eva Bowles, then serving as administrator of colored work in cities. She did not support the project, because she hoped that the associations of the YWCA would become single, racially integrated organizations. A letter from Bowles to the Boston board said that groups wishing to duplicate YW programs and services seldom realized the effort and financial processes involved. She suggested to the Boston group that their YW become interracial, admitting any girl to any program on her merits, not developing programs according to race. Second, she believed the time was not right to give this project the attention and energy it would need to be of the highest quality, since the YW was in the midst of a major building campaign. Shortly after receiving this letter, the Boston board decided not to assist in establishing this residence.¹⁴

Saunders went ahead anyway, moving into 511 Columbus Avenue, a five-story building with a cafeteria in the basement, club space, and rooms for girls. The project was not mentioned again in the YW reports, and apparently it did not last long. Mitchell stated in a 1944 report that Victoria Saunders never had much of a following among the African-American community and the project “might not have prospered even if we had given her the aid she requested.” Mitchell saw this episode as important not because of the end of the request, but because it is characteristic of the association’s ambivalent attitudes during those years toward efforts of women of color to work with the YWCA.¹⁵

Boston’s African-American community faced the question of supporting separate or integrated institutions in another way during this same period. A black hospital wishing to expand was strongly opposed by radical African-American newspaper publisher William Monroe Trotter. Through his newspaper, the *Guardian*, he led a controversial fight that led to the closing of the hospital and the eventual integration of Boston City Hospital. Both Trotter and the student YWCA worked at the same time to move Boston hospitals to allow women of color to train as nurses.¹⁶

At a time when most major cities had a local white YWCA and a growing black branch, Boston did not. It was also not clear that the city organization shared Eva Bowles’s sentiment that they should be “fully interracial.” The most common practice for women of color needing lodging was still to find room with an African-American family, rather than at the YW. The board president explained as late as 1926 that “it is part of our job to fit the girl into the proper environment.” For women of color that meant boarding in private homes because “we believe they will be happiest among colored people.”

Certain women on the board worked for a more open, consistent policy. The person most associated with these efforts in the 1920s was Mrs. Everett O. Fisk, a white woman who lived in the wealthy suburb of Brookline and served as YW education chair and vice president throughout the decade. In 1921, she brought a member of the Urban League to the board to speak about “the colored girl problem.” The rep-

representative, Mrs. Barney, urged the board to make specific its position regarding women of color living in the YW residence. Fisk met with other members of the Urban League and pushed the local Council of Social Agencies to call a meeting of the various social institutions in the city. She chaired a conference of the association for all social agencies to consider the welfare of young women of color. Her committee continued to meet, again reporting that many people in the community wanted a more open housing policy.¹⁷

For the most part, that open policy was confirmed in 1929. In that year, the Boston YWCA opened its new facility, a large modern complex, still in use, on Clarendon Street at the edge of the South End, about one-half mile from the center of the African-American community of the 1920s. When the new building was about to open, the student YW, which planned to use meeting rooms there, met with city YW representatives to assist in “promoting right race relations” through the use of its facilities. Chairpersons and secretaries of the city departments and the president and executive secretary of the student board met to establish policies. The group confirmed a general policy conforming with the national policy — absolutely no discrimination in the use of dining room, cafeteria, Pioneer residence, and other facilities and programs. A racially mixed committee of members would consider any cases of discrimination arising outside of this general statement.¹⁸

The last facility to become fully integrated was the swimming pool. A symbol of the new building in 1929 and of new directions for meeting women’s physical and social needs, the pool also symbolized the difficulties facing African-American and white women who struggled to make the YW serve all Boston women. The pool was an exception to the “no discrimination” agreement, and the planning group decided that policy regarding its use would be made later. Apparently even this well-meaning group could not decide on a suitable policy. Pool use remained the most inconsistent element of the YW policy for several years.

In 1926, when people of color were denied access to the YWCA pool in New Bedford, the Boston leadership claimed that would never happen in Boston. “Colored girls are treated just as any girl is treated by the Boston YWCA.” However, once there was a pool in the new Clarendon Street facility, the policy was anything but inviting. Unlike other community organizations, groups from the Robert Gould Shaw House had to make special requests of the YWCA board in order to use the pool. Young women of color who were members of YWCA clubs could swim when the club did, but they were not welcome as individuals during free swim periods. Since fewer than sixty African-American women were members of the YWCA in the 1930s, this effectively limited the number of women of color to ever use the pool. Although the board claimed a no-discrimination policy, the daily reality for women of color was still often an “unwelcome sign.”¹⁹

Reflecting the national pattern, the local student YW moved more quickly than the city association toward integration. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, as the city YWCA haltingly confronted its own racism and clarified its policies, the student YW was taking much stronger action to diversify itself. Women represented several colleges, including Simmons, the Practical Arts and Letters College and the College of Liberal Arts of Boston University, and Sargent College. Following the national student convention in 1923, several local women decided to find a way of better understanding racial issues in Boston. Their efforts included regular discussions, research about racial practices, and organized action.

The student group initially received help from Constance Ridley, a secretary at Robert Gould Shaw House, who assisted in organizing a first meeting between black and white women. "In the first discussions, there was considerable groping about in an endeavor to become familiar with the general aspects of the problem, but by autumn the group seemed eager to concentrate upon a definite line of study for the year and to give honest thought and preparation to the meetings."²⁰

By the fall of 1925, with growing talk and trust, the group expanded to twelve African-American and twelve white members, with a regular program of monthly meetings. Each meeting included discussion, often based on readings, and a program "revealing the cultural contributions of the modern Negro." The group received a boost the following year when two members of the National Conference of Settlements at Cleveland, Ohio, said that the Boston group's meetings "had made the greatest advance of any in the country in promoting right race relations."²¹

The student group grew in membership and developed more activist tactics. Research committees studied racial problems and issues throughout the city and attempted to influence their resolution. The Education Committee assembled African-American and white representatives from fourteen local schools and colleges. They collected information, made reports, and organized discussion groups of African-American and white students on their respective campuses. At the time no nursing schools or hospitals accepted women of color for nurses' training. The Interracial Committee set a goal to change this policy and met quietly and without publicity with doctors, hospital superintendents, and trustees. In 1929, after much effort, two young women were admitted to the Nurses Training Course at Boston City Hospital.

The group also researched conditions in industry and business. The industry initiative collaborated with efforts of the Boston Urban League to analyze and publicize the job situation for men and women of color. The Urban League placed about 1,000 of 5,000 applicants for jobs, mostly in domestic service. The committee collected information documenting the difficulties of African-Americans in obtaining work in clerical positions and the Boston Elevated (the subway system), as well as discrimination in wages for women of color once they received a position. Students teamed up to study businesses' racial practices. Women of color who attempted to eat at certain lunch counters or use facilities at a store reported their experiences to the study group, and white members interviewed business leaders. Records were kept of ways in which the practices did not match the declared policies: "The report of practices was seldom wholly praiseworthy."²²

The student YW Interracial Committee continued its work until 1944, although its greatest impact appears to have been between 1925 and 1930. According to the 1944 report, its biggest problem was the short life span of each college generation. Just when members of the group were educated and ready to make an impact, they would graduate, and the process would have to begin again. A further difficulty in evaluating their work was not knowing the committee's influence on students in their later years.

Despite these problems, members of the early Interracial Committee were seen as real pioneers, stepping into untried territory by talking and working together. Constance Ridley Heslip continued to support the group through the Robert Gould Shaw House and the National Conference of Settlement Workers. Helen Morton, longtime volunteer and secretary of the Interracial Committee, went on to become executive secretary of the Cambridge, Massachusetts, YWCA.

Through “eternal vigilance and . . . never letting any situation reach a crisis,” discriminatory actions (except for the pool policy) were discouraged and dealt with and gradually a small number of African-Americans became more involved in programs. Still, some women of color who were very active in their community did not support the YW because their experience found the organization to be “prejudiced and discriminatory.” A study carried out by the YWCA in 1930 made a telling recommendation: “That serious consideration be given to the fact that there is a very large colored group within our immediate neighborhood, with whom the Association is at present doing practically nothing.”²³

Women of color were more likely to engage in community activity through their community churches and settlement houses or through women’s groups such as the Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs. The national YWCA recognized the need for the support of black women’s organizations as early as 1920, when their minutes of the Board of Colored Work said, “The Federation is a very powerful organization and that as it is necessary to have the cooperation of such sister organizations, the YWCA should make a decided effort to secure the good will of the Federation.”²⁴

Several steps had been taken to confront racism throughout the YWCA by 1930. The national organization ended its Council on Colored Work, chaired by Eva Bowles, because the goals of the subcommittee had become an integral part of the whole organization. Committees of local organizations now had both African-American and white women. Three cities had women of color on their boards: Detroit, New York, and Philadelphia. A woman serving in a leadership role in a branch would become a member of the central association and could then be appointed to the national board, usually as chair of the Colored Work Committee. Policymaking levels of the organization were becoming integrated, even when the branches themselves were not.²⁵

YWCA-sponsored Industrial Clubs had a solid grounding in work for both African-American and white women, and the Girl Reserves were more closely united. Leadership activity of black branches led to the training and raising through the ranks of many women of color, who had positions of leadership either in their local branches or within the national organization.

The student organization had achieved a certain level of interracial knowledge and understanding. African-American and white students learned from one another and established ties through several generations of students on both northern and southern campuses. Still, for many women who advocated full integration of policy, finances, and power, the progress was extremely slow and difficult.²⁶

The national YWCA, through its annual convention, established in 1936 a number of resolutions urging local groups to study racial relations in their cities and work toward better understanding. Following this national push, the Boston board expressed increasing concern for the lack of service to the African-American community and requested the Program Committee to make a study of this issue. The study was the most thorough ever undertaken by the Boston association. It included investigation of every group connected with the YW, an inquiry into recreation facilities in the community, and a week-long visit by Isobel Lawson, a woman of color serving as secretary of the National Services Division. She interviewed key persons in the city and held meetings with various groups within the local YW.

The Program Committee made its report in 1939. It showed that sixty-four women of color participated in programs. Half were seventeen or younger, the other half between ages seventeen and thirty-five. Nearly all the women were in clubs. All were

single and lived in Boston or Roxbury. The recommendations were clear: the YW was still seen by women of color as discriminatory, and more active messages had to get out to the community. Specific measures were encouraged, such as having women of color serve on the board and inviting volunteers from the African-American community to come to club meetings to talk about subjects other than race. As part of the recommendations from this report, the pool was finally declared open to all women. While the report sounded far-reaching, the truth of the allegations is seen in the fact that its recommendations were not publicized, and no clear messages were immediately sent to the nearby African-American community.²⁷

More progress was made in increasing the number of women of color on the board. Boston had followed the national recommendation that its Industrial Clubs be interracial. In 1940, Sara Conyers, an African-American member of one of these Industrial Clubs, was appointed to the board, representing that group of working-women members. The following year, in line with one of the 1939 report's suggestions, the board invited community leader Lucy Miller Mitchell to run for board office. Mitchell was by then directing the nursery program at the Robert Gould Shaw House and was a respected professional in the developing field of nursery and day-care education. Following her election to the YWCA board, she served for seven years, chairing the Public Affairs Committee.

Mitchell recalls that even though policies in general had been agreed upon by the board to welcome people of color to all the programs, a huge job remained to encourage racial mixing of club groups, craft groups, and gym programs. The process of changing these practices and making the pool truly available to blacks involved constant work, it being "slow but steady, and the pressure never let up!" Mitchell constantly interpreted the YW to the community through the work of the Public Affairs Committee. She has understated her own achievements, saying her activities were "not spectacular, and received no publicity, but were meaningful and had impact on community attitudes and practices." The accomplishment she valued most was the complete integration of the pool by the time she left office.²⁸

The national organization played a significant role in the increasing integration of the Boston association. Its pushing local YWCAs to become more inclusive constantly provided a powerful model for women working together. It acted as a support and justification to those in the local association who wished to confront racism. By 1940, they had issued their call for extensive study and reform, and the local association could use the national policy and reports to give weight to their arguments. The Boston student and city YWCA responded to stimulation from the national leadership. Conventions and visits by national secretaries continually prodded the local organizations for response. In 1923, the student group organized the first interracial study group in Boston, following a national convention attended by several Boston student YW representatives. Visits from the national leadership urged the city group along throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The national convention of 1936, urging local groups to study their own interracial practices, led the Boston YW to finally clarify and expand its local policies and compile a report documenting its struggles. Movement on the local level was closely related to activities of the national association.

A second force in confronting racism was the strong belief of many YWCA women that their faith called them to serve all women. They accepted the moral power of the argument that the YWCA was a Christian organization and that Christian principles of equality, love for all, the oneness of all under Christ, were compelling reasons for

action — the power of social gospel Christianity. As the current president of the national YWCA likes to remind today's members, "They were Christian women and they were living out their Christianity. They talk about being compelled, that 'Our Christianity compels us to do certain kinds of things, and that if we are true Christians then we are compelled to take action.' They were compelled, not just to believe, but to take action." As Mitchell said, "As one of the most influential Christian bodies in the country, both at the student and community level, there wouldn't be any other stand that the organization could take other than to be in the forefront of eradicating racism in this country." While this might be true, the argument needed to be made constantly and coherently throughout the board and membership meetings, and women within the YWCA, through their constant talk, continued to build the context for understanding this moral argument. Their sense of being compelled to act gave women an intensity, a fervor, which overcame other powerful cultural messages of racism and silence and gave them a clarity of purpose and courage to act. Their voicing of the moral argument was unending, coherent, and powerful.²⁹

When asked how pressure was applied to change the YW, Mitchell smiled. "We just kept talking," she said. "At every meeting we would raise issues, we kept bringing them up, and presenting the rationale and reasonableness and moral power of our arguments. Eventually our position prevailed." This statement is a testimony to a different kind of power that women have when they find their "voice," when they speak out consistently, firmly, argumentatively, out of the place of connection in their lives between goals and practice.³⁰

In 1946, Dorothy Height was elected the first African-American chairperson of the national board, and the association made its strongest statement against racism, in the Interracial Charter. The charter stated: "Wherever there is injustice on the basis of race . . . our protest must be clear and our labor for its removal vigorous and steady." When Mitchell's term on the board ended two years later, the Boston YWCA was a fully integrated organization on paper and becoming more so through its actual policies. Where 64 women of color were members of the association in 1938, the 1944 report showed 151 members. The student department claimed the largest number of participants, with the younger girls having the next largest. The swimming pool was completely integrated.³¹

Speaking Out

This movement had proceeded slowly and needed constant prodding. Pressure came from both African-American and white women at every level of the YWCA — the national office, the student YW, and women within and outside the Boston organization. The student YWCA in Boston followed the pattern of the student groups in the South and Midwest. Its interracial group met throughout the twenties, acting as a catalyst and model for the work other student YWCAs did in developing connections between races. In the city organization there were efforts to diversify that met with modest success. The first effort of women of color to organize a branch of the YWCA in Boston came in 1925, but was not supported by either the city or the national association. The local group did not respond to the calls of the national board for studies of the community, and in 1929, when the new facility was built, it expressed concern that the YW reach out to women in the African-American community. Again in 1936, responding to the national call for further work, it began a

major study of the association and its relationship to women of color. Following this study, and as a direct result of its recommendations, the YWCA in Boston elected Lucy Miller Mitchell to the board and supported the Interracial Charter of 1946.³²

Constance Ridley Heslip, Helen Morton, Eva Bowles, Lucy Mitchell, and many others at every level of the YWCA faced a difficult challenge. Each of them felt compelled to keep talking, setting every action within a moral context and making connections between the policies and practices of the YW. They confronted the disparities, educated the organization's leaders and members, and kept the pressure on for a diverse, welcoming, and just YWCA. 🌱

Notes

1. The YWCA was considered to be more interracial than the YMCA; see Vincent P. Franklin, "In Pursuit of Freedom: The Educational Activities of Black Social Organization in Philadelphia, 1900–1930," in *Papers and Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Midwest History of Education Society* (12th), Chicago, October 29–30, 1976, 94. "This advance toward sisterhood at a snail's pace . . . must also be seen in the perspective of comparing it with the much less successful efforts of other women's and community organizations." Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 479.
2. Lucy Miller Mitchell, *Black Women Oral History Project*, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, 1987, 49. Much recent work by Carol Gilligan and others has shed light on women's moral development and the ways in which women experience their own knowledge. For a discussion of "silence," "voice," and "connected knowing," see Mary Field Belenky et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).
3. *YWCA Annual Report*, 1867. Thousands of Irish immigrants came to Boston after 1845, and young Irish women needed the kind of residential and employment support offered by the YWCA. While many Bostonians agreed with the superintendent, many Irish leaders discouraged their young women from the organization as well, because of its requirement that the women follow daily Protestant worship.
4. *YWCA Annual Reports*, 1880–1890.
5. The national YWCA was formed following nearly twenty years of negotiations between the international YWCA, which represented primarily groups in New England cities, and the American committee, representing midwestern student associations. The Boston YWCA, founded in 1866, was the first city association. The first student YWCA was formed in 1873 at the Illinois State Normal School, and the first "colored association on friendly terms with the white association but not part of it" began in Dayton, Ohio, in 1893. Mary S. Sims, *The Natural History of a Social Institution: The YWCA* (New York: Woman's Press, 1936), 173.
6. Jane Olcott Walters, ed., "Young Women's Christian Association History of Colored Work: Chronological Excerpts from Reports of Secretaries and Workers and from Minutes Showing Development of the Work among Colored Women, 1907–1920," typescript, 1920, September 1907, 2, 3. There was also a small city group in Kansas City and presumably the one Sims mentions in Dayton.
7. *Ibid.*, national subcommittee report, 1910, 8.
8. *Ibid.*, 17, 19, 24, 1912; Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 479–488; Jean Blackwell Hutson, "Eva delVakia Bowles," in *Notable American Women 1607–1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James and Paul S. Boyer, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 214–215.
9. Walters, "YWCA History," Report by Bowles, October 20, 1915, 42.
10. *Ibid.*, Report, Conde, December 20, 1916, 59.

11. "Interracial Practices in Community YWCA's," in Gladys Gilkey Calkins, "The Negro in the Young Women's Christian Association: A Study of the Development of YWCA Interracial Policies and Practices," master's thesis, George Washington University, 1960, 55. For a larger discussion of the YWCA role in women's labor history, see Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Survival Strategies Among African-American Workers: A Continuing Process," in *Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of US Women's Labor History*, Ruth Milkman, ed. (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 148–150.
12. Robert C. Hayden, *Faith, Culture and Leadership: A History of the Black Church in Boston* (Boston: NAACP, 1983), 1–2.
13. Mitchell, *Black Women Oral History Project*.
14. Eva D. Bowles felt strongly that all members should work for total inclusiveness of the YWCA and not support racially-separate YW branches. "Chronological History of Interracial Practices, Boston Young Women's Christian Association, 1918–1944," 4–6.
15. *Ibid.*, 4.
16. "William Monroe Trotter, One-Man Protester," slide/tape, Institute for Boston Studies, Boston College, 1985.
17. *Boston Post*, May 25, 1926; "Chronological History of Interracial Practices," 2–4.
18. "The History of the Interracial Committee Which was Sponsored by the Student Y.W.C.A., Boston, Massachusetts, 1924–1944," 3.
19. *Boston American*, May 24, 1926; *Boston Post*, May 25, 1926; "Summary of Chronological History of Interracial Practices of the Boston YWCA, 1918–1944," 5–6.
20. "History of the Interracial Committee," 1; Ridley's name appears as Constance Ridley Heslip later in the report.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, 2–3. Unfortunately no further details are provided.
23. "Area Studies, 1930," Boston YWCA study of neighborhoods near the Clarendon Street building; Melnea Cass, *Black Women Oral History Project*, 87. Cass returned to the YW as an older woman, and the Clarendon Street building now bears her name. The 1944 history supported Cass's view: "The YWCA from 1920 made slow but steady progress in race relations . . . The Negroes have at times had just cause to doubt our sincerity . . . Experiences did not add to their confidence in us as a Christian organization." "Summary of Chronological History," 9.
24. Walters, "YWCA History," Minutes, Board of Colored Work, September 24, 1920, 78.
25. Calkins, "Negro in the YWCA," 63.
26. Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam, 1984), 155–158.
27. "Summary of Chronological History," 5–6.
28. Mitchell, *Black Women Oral History Project*, 48–50, and personal interview, August 1988, Boston.
29. Mitchell interview; Glendora Putnam, personal interview, October 1990, Boston; Calkins, "Negro in the YWCA," 23, 24.
30. Mitchell interview, 1988.
31. Interracial Charter of the YWCA, 1946; "Summary of Chronological History," 9.
32. It was 1968 before the Boston YWCA established a branch in the African-American community and women of color were widely served by the organization and active participants in it. An oral history project documenting the establishment of Aswalos House in Roxbury is currently under way.