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“Almost a Partnership”: African-Americans,  
Segregation, and the Young  
Men’s Christian Association

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*Nothing has contributed so much to the welfare of the colored race in the last fifteen years as the work of the Y.M.C.A.*

Report of the Y.M.C.A.  
Commission on Colored Work  
March 3, 1920

*However much we may be glad of the colored Y.M.C.A. movement on the one hand, on the other hand we must never for a single moment fail to recognize the injustice which has made it an unfortunate necessity.*

W. E. B. Du Bois  
December 1914

On January 1, 1913, the Colored Men’s Department of the Young Men’s Christian Association gathered in Washington, D.C., at the Twelfth Street “Y”. The six African American International Secretaries made a practice of coming together on this holiday, finding in the New Year a quiet time to talk among themselves. Dr. Jesse E. Moorland, the Department’s senior secretary, was scheduled to give “Remarks,” as usual, and the secretaries looked forward to them—particularly this year, which, they knew, held great opportunity for their work. The Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A.—the “Colored Branch”—itself bore witness to the measured sense of hope abroad in African American communities during the second decade of the twentieth century. The \$120,000 building had been dedicated before a large assembly on Thanksgiving Day in 1908 by no less personage than President Theodore Roosevelt himself.

Jesse Moorland, whose remarks the secretaries awaited, had joined the staff of the Young Men's Christian Association in 1898 and held the Senior Secretary position in the Colored Men's Department until his retirement in 1924. His life during those years, as his friend J. E. McGrew wrote at Moorland's passing in 1940, "was the history of Y.M.C.A. work with black men and boys." "Comparatively few men have been endowed and blessed with more power and privilege to inspire and lift other men's visions to such heights . . . than Friend Moorland," McGrew wrote—Moorland's "contagious life" "fired" the men around him (McGrew, 1940).

Moorland shepherded the African American International Secretaries with great care and knew most of them intimately. Speaking sometimes openly and sometimes in the code which the black secretaries used for white ears, Moorland articulated what every man there knew: that the demands on them as black men were very different than those shouldered by white colleagues.

African America Y.M.C.A. secretaries had an opportunity—"one which the Angels would be glad to have"—Moorland (1913) began, to influence two million men and boys "of a great aspiring race . . . to enable them to live long in the land which the Lord hath given them, to live sweetly, peacefully, happily and to be useful not only to themselves, but also to the nation and the world. . . ." In the mix of race consciousness, anger, uplift, and sense of historical moment which characterized race men of his generation, Moorland exhorted the secretaries to "change prevailing conditions which tend to degrade and destroy this group of men . . . to see to it that the day shall come when [they] shall have a chance to be clean, to be honest, to be effective in every phase of their lives, to be able to protect themselves against the many wrongs which are now heaped upon them. . . ."

Their small group, he continued, must work with "great responsibility," for "after years of toil and waiting we have come into a position where men of great wealth are willing to join hands with us and trust us to the extent of forming *almost a partnership* with us" (emphasis added). Elaborating the tremendous pressures under which black men worked in

this almost-partnership, he cautioned, "A mistake made in the selecting of a leader for a field, a mistake made in an address. . . . may cause disastrous results. An unguarded word at this time may do untold injury." But, Moorland continued, comparing the secretaries' task to that of mariners on stormy seas, the reward would come:

[We shall]. . . steer our ship into ports, reef our sails, . . . unload our valuable cargo and distribute it among the sojourners, enter upon the log of the ship the record of deeds done . . . and thus discharge our duty to present and future generations.

The story of "Colored Men's Work" in the Y.M.C.A. provides a close look at how one, relatively large, social service institution worked along the color line. It celebrates a legacy and vision long hidden from social welfare history, a legacy alive with accounts of persistent, innovative, heroic, tragic, mundane, even humorous efforts to construct social service programs in the face of nearly implacable resistance to any breach in the color line. It unfolds, too, a seldom-discussed theme of social service work in the decades between 1910 and 1930—the *institutionalization of segregation and racial inequality* by northern social service programs. African American professionals, reflecting the race consciousness of their generation, invariably resisted this, and in so doing challenged the historic denial of public services to people of color. Their resistance was based on varying, and sometimes sharply competing, strategies for both surviving within and challenging Jim Crow social service institutions.

The Young Men's Christian Association of 1915 was a major social movement and represented a vision of interdenominational service to Christian men in Europe, the United States, and the world. The spirit of the social gospel—"inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me"—suffused the organization, linking its religious and social missions.

The "Y" flourished in the context of the dramatic expansion of industry. This aspect of the Young Men's Christian Association is often hidden behind the social, recreational, and religious activities of its members. But no reading of Y.M.C.A.

history can avoid its intimate connection with the emerging industrial giants. "Railroad Y's" were routinely subsidized by railroad magnates, who like other industrialists welcomed the Y.M.C.A.'s "uplifting" influence in time of great worker unrest. Chicago's "Colored" Y.M.C.A. depended on contributions from the packing companies; African American employees of Swift and Armour were awarded free memberships in it after a year on the job. For the Y.M.C.A., as for many social service agencies, doing unto the "least of these my brethren" was somehow intimately intertwined with the interests of those brethren who were millionaires.

The history of *African American work* within the Y.M.C.A. dates from 1853 and the organization of an Association among black men in Washington, D.C. By 1875 work was sufficiently wide-ranging that a Colored Men's Department under the aegis of the International Y.M.C.A. was organized. Sponsorship by the international branch of the organization, which oversaw all the "mission fields," enabled the Y.M.C.A. to avoid integrating African American work into the established local and state apparatus and thus sidestep the divisive subject of black and white organizational unity. In 1888 William Hunton was hired as the first black International Secretary. A deeply religious man and beloved leader, Hunton stood for years as Y.M.C.A.'s lone black representative, traveling north and south at great sacrifice to himself and his family. By 1905 Hunton reported that there were 116 "Colored Associations" boasting 8,000 members, and that 50% of the young men at black colleges where Y.M.C.A.'s existed were members of it (Hunton, 1905).

In 1919, Jesse Moorland, looking back on 21 years with the Y.M.C.A., picked 1910 as the watershed year in black Y.M.C.A. history (Moorland, 1919). Before 1910, Moorland felt, Y.M.C.A. work was significant, but haphazard. Most black Y.M.C.A. programs were poorly financed and housed in crumbling clapboard structures.

But in 1910 two important forces converged which dramatically changed Y.M.C.A. work along the color line. The first was the initial surge of the Great Migration, the movement of a million and a half black southerners who came north between 1910 and 1930 "to reassess," in the words of Amiri Baraka (1930),

"the worth of the black man within the society as a whole . . . [and] to make the American dream work, if it were going to."

The Great Migration provided the context for the second transforming event in Y.M.C.A. work with African Americans—Julius Rosenwald's "great benefaction." In 1910, Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears & Roebuck, pledged to contribute \$25,000 to any city that raised \$75,000 for a new, high quality Y.M.C.A. building for black men (Washington, 1914). As a result, "every phase of our work seemed to take on new life," Moorland remembered. During the next 20 years, 25 Rosenwald buildings opened in 24 cities, "splendid buildings . . . which [stood] as beacon lights . . . where [young men could] pray, think, rest, and be safe" (Moorland, 1919:2–3).

North and south, black Y.M.C.A. programs burgeoned. Moorland and Hunton were joined by five new International Secretaries, and, in cities, black secretaries and members worked fervently to take advantage of the Rosenwald offer. For the international secretaries there was always a fundraising campaign to initiate or charge. For month after month, from 1910 to 1930, the secretaries filed reports detailing their journeys: "Atlanta—\$25,000 Campaign;" "Chicago—\$50,000 in ten days;" "Detroit—launched drive for \$35,000." Working with energy and passion, the African American secretaries felt best when a "whole city" was enlivened. In a typical drive, black Y.M.C.A. members in Chicago organized twenty ten-man teams to raise \$50,000 in ten days ("Secretaries Reports," 1910–30).

Optimism permeated the Rosenwald campaigns which promised to bridge, however tenuously, the racial divide. Secretary C. W. Watson reported, "I think I have not done any work since I have been in the service of the International Committee from which I have received more benefit personally." Departing from the usual dry tone of monthly reports, Watson added an observation about his work with Wood White, a prominent white Atlanta businessman who was chairman of the Atlanta drive. In the midst of the 1913 campaign, White invited Watson to his office, and "as usual," Watson wrote, "Mr. White . . . began to pour out upon me his multitude of platitudes. . . ." After "writhing and squirming for nearly an hour," Watson decided to take issue with White. They argued and disputed until finally

the conference concluded with White observing, "Well, Watson, I do not believe you know what you are talking about but I believe you are sincere and that you and I can be mutually helpful in our efforts to erect this building for the Negroes of Atlanta." Thereafter, according to Watson, the two men "worked like brothers to accomplish the desired end" ("Secretaries Reports," 1913).

Watson's conviction that he and a white businessman could work together "like brothers" epitomized the secretaries' hopeful outlook. Although insults, humiliation, and segregation were regular experiences of black secretaries, the hope for a better day exuded in the Rosenwald building campaigns was clear.

Thousands of black citizens supported the Y.M.C.A. building drives with contributions ranging from twenty-five cents to \$1,000. Newspapers featured stories of those "colored people who have made large individual gifts to the Young Men's Christian Association Buildings." James Tilgham of Chicago was one such man, a messenger, who remembered how as a young man he could find no place where a black "wanderer" could feel homelike and happy. "Seeing the door of hope closed to me and to my people, and my hands tied to give millions, I vowed to give largely of my hard-earned means . . . to the first call that came . . . which would help to fully develop the boy and man," he said in bestowing \$1,000 to the Chicago drive (Washington, 1914).

The dedication of a Rosenwald building was an occasion of great celebration, attended by pomp and circumstance and the participation of thousands of citizens. In 1919 in St. Louis, for example, more than 2000 people packed into the new, \$193,000 "Negro Young Men's Christian Association" and heard Missouri Senator Selden Spencer proclaim it "the best building for men and boys of the colored race in the world" ("Negro Y.M.C.A.," 1914).

The programs that grew up in the Rosenwald Y.M.C.A.'s were multifaceted. In cities where it was difficult to find housing, the Y.M.C.A. was proud to provide refuge for young black men, safe from the influences of the saloon and dancehall. "Colored Branch Y.M.C.A.'s" were the "busiest places in town," black newspapers reported. It was not unusual for a large crowd to gather in the Y.M.C.A. lobby each evening to use the much

needed meeting and recreational resources ("Y.M.C.A. Busiest," 1914). Job training was available, and athletic competition was popular; photos show men in Buxton, Iowa, posing on gymnastic horses at the "Miners' Y" there (Washington, 1914).

Thus Y.M.C.A. work occupied a leading role in social service work among African Americans in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Growing out of years of lonely work by men like Hunton and Moorland, African Americans in the Y.M.C.A. moved to take advantage of the opportunity that the Great Migration and Julius Rosenwald's great benefaction presented. The Rosenwald gift, however, was distinctly two-sided—for all the Rosenwald buildings were segregated. Since 1875 separation of the races had been an unspoken rule in the Y.M.C.A., and black men and boys, in general, were not allowed to join white Y.M.C.A.'s nor use their facilities.

An 1890 letter to the *Nation* detailed the experience of two Topeka men, one black and one white. The men, curious about the rigidity of the color bar in their city, proposed to enter different eating establishments and "see how [the black man] would be received." To their surprise they were politely served in three of Topeka's best restaurants. "We then made a move on the city Young Men's Christian Association," they reported, where the young black man produced references and made application for membership. He was refused admission "on the ground of color, and that only," the two men wrote, commenting with irony on the Y.M.C.A.'s "Christianity" (J.H.H., 1890).

But while Y.M.C.A. practices were racial, before 1910 the organization had not fully institutionalized segregation in the north. Policies excluding blacks were understood, not written; no generalized system channeled blacks into separate buildings, and occasionally a black man might be admitted to a white branch. Most important, black communities maintained hope that, with changing conditions, they could pressure Y.M.C.A.'s to integrate (Davis, 1972:262–63). In the next twenty years, however, communities' and professionals' hopes were systematically thwarted and a massive system of segregation was put into place. The migrants called it "Jim Crow, northern-style."

The institutionalization of segregation in the Y.M.C.A. was reflective of growing segregation throughout the north. In 1914, Woodrow Wilson segregated federal offices, an act widely



protested in the black community ("Afro-Americans," 1914). Jobs were increasingly segregated. By 1930, black workers in steel mills, for example, were rigidly funneled into "nigger jobs," where the work was dirtiest, hottest, and most dangerous (Greer, 1979:85). Ghetto boundaries hardened for blacks; real estate agents, bankers, and police unwilling to protect blacks who moved into white neighborhoods all became part of a system of boundary control (Philpott, 1978).

In social services, too, the institutionalization of segregation proceeded relentlessly. Settlement houses became strictly segregated; black city dwellers were served by black settlements or not at all (Philpott, 1978:314-42). White social service agencies unwilling to open their doors to black citizens referred "negro cases" to agencies like the Urban League. African American professionals worked with imagination and considerable skill to build up social services for blacks, but were rarely included in social services' policy-making bodies. City social work establishments were generally lily-white. The Chicago Council of Social Agencies, for example, typically included no blacks on its executive committee (Grossman, 1989:173). Reform movements which sprang up in the wake of post World War I riots had their limits, as well, the most essential one being that the system of segregation would remain intact. "Better services," thus, meant better segregated services. "Better neighborhoods" meant not the opening of ghetto boundaries, but funds for a black settlement house—funds which, predictably, dried up as memories of racial unrest waned. Together, these practices in time created a dual service system. In black ghettos an officially sanctioned, inadequately funded, and continually neglected system of segregated public and private services functioned to provide minimal assistance and, at the same time, to veil the larger neglect.

In the Young Men's Christian Association segregation was fully institutionalized after 1910 and remained intact until 1946. Separate "colored" buildings in all the major cities announced to black and white alike that this Christian social service organization deemed it right to protect white members from association with blacks. At the same time, the existence of "Colored Y's" also suggested, albeit in a quieter voice, that in this segregated

organization, African American men were working for the advancement of the race. Within the balance of these two realities, African American work in the Y.M.C.A. proceeded.

The tying of Julius Rosenwald's gift to segregated facilities was quickly noted. In Boston, prominent blacks made no effort to meet the terms of the Rosenwald offer, seeing in a separate branch a step toward their exclusion from the central Association (Whiteside, 1951:34-37). W. E. B. Du Bois (1914) also challenged segregation within the Y.M.C.A. He praised both Rosenwald and the "Colored Secretaries," but added:

The Y.M.C.A. movement in America is not acting in a Christian manner toward colored folk. In most cities colored people are . . . excluded from all the well-equipped branches of the Y.M.C.A. and herded in a poorly equipped "colored" branch. . . [The splendid new accommodations are a fine thing. . . but it is an unchristian and unjust and dangerous procedure which segregates colored people in the Y.M.C.A. movement (p. 77).

Du Bois' reservations were soundly rejected by the philanthropic establishment. White philanthropists and the handful of African Americans in their confidence were a small and exclusive circle. Booker T. Washington, who by 1910 exercised nearly complete control of philanthropic money directed to African American causes, led the opposition to critics like Du Bois. In keeping with his general philosophy as articulated in the 1895 speech at the Atlanta Exposition, Washington had approved the construction of separate Y.M.C.A.'s at least since 1907, accepting the reality of segregation, or, more precisely, the reality of white philanthropists' tie to it.

The tying of philanthropy to segregationist policy in social service agencies had hundreds of daily manifestations for African American Y.M.C.A. members and employees. Young black men were refused at central, or white, branches and directed to "Colored Branches" instead. The use of certain facilities was especially highly charged. Swimming pools, of course, were problematic, and dining rooms, dormitories, and summer camps all required strict attention to the rules of racial etiquette. For black employees segregation meant, among other things, a lower salary schedule. In 1922, the average black secretarial

salary was \$2,537 a year, 64% that of white secretaries ("Average Salaries," 1927).

Segregation was rarely accepted in principle. Most secretaries were strongly race conscious and entered Y.M.C.A. service determined to fight for the welfare of the race by building strong black programs, albeit in segregated facilities. Rufus Meroney, the secretary of the Brooklyn Y.M.C.A. for eleven years, chose this path. In 1922 Meroney died at age 40 and was eulogized in the *Crisis* by Du Bois. "He never played, never attended conventions, he simply worked," Du Bois (1922) wrote.

Night and day, summer and winter, he cultivated with fierce intensity his one field. . . the welfare of a group of colored boys and young men. He molded, trained, and encouraged them. He gave them his advice, his money, his guidance. . . He digged and delved until there rose a Temple—a light and beautiful. . . sanctuary with everything to delight the heart of a virile boy. . . . And into the glittering brick and soul of this vaster Temple, Meroney poured his life, for eleven years. . . He pooh-poohed the pain in his side, he worked to the last drop of heart's blood and died half-conscious beneath the surgeon's knife that searched too late.

"He was just a Negro," Du Bois went on. "He was not good enough to remain within the portals of the Central Y.M.C.A. . . . And yet he was a gentleman. A son of Tillotson and Yale, an upstanding handsome, hearty fellow. . . fit for the presence of Kings and the kisses of women. And yet he dropped dead at forty."

Meroney, like dozens of other Y.M.C.A. secretaries, quietly committed himself to the young men of the race, and in that, resisted and subverted a system bound to deny them. He conveyed his expectations for young people through praise, admonition, and a model of community responsibility which drove him to excellence in a world of narrow possibilities. In that way Meroney and race men and women like him lived out a powerful river of African American tradition; guardians of the coming generation, they tapped the talented and fiercely protected them and their dreams.

In a few cities, segregation was successfully challenged. In a lively editorial in the *Crisis*, Du Bois referred to the Y.M.C.A. at Emporia, Kansas:

Why make reference to the Y.M.C.A. in Emporia? Because, in its membership, you will find boys of all the race and national groups that live in the city. Yes, Negro boys! . . . In the game room, lobby, on the gym floor and in the pool! Yes, in the pool, you will find Negro boys (Du Bois, 1927)!

Emporia had a Klavern of the Ku Klux Klan, Du Bois went on, but it also had L. A. Duffy, City Boys' Work Secretary, De Witt Lee, General Secretary, William Allen White and the *Emporia Gazette*. "And would you believe it, there has been neither an earthquake nor a falling of the stars in Emporia!"

Local challenges to segregation, however, were unequal to the organization's determination to continue it. In the Y.M.C.A., the policy ground on through the 'teens, 'twenties, and 'thirties, distorting African American work and black communities' relationship with the organization.

In 1930, the issue of Y.M.C.A support of segregation came to a head, cast in sharp relief by a highly publicized cross-burning at the home of a black Y.M.C.A. leader in White Plains, New York. Two members of the Committee of Management of Colored Branch of the White Plains Y.M.C.A., Dr. Errold Collymore and Dr. Arthur Williams, after a long, frustrating search for good housing, had purchased homes in a white neighborhood in White Plains. Enraged, white homeowner associations threatened the doctors, and ultimately a cross was burned on Dr. Collymore's front lawn. The city ministers' association and a leading white newspaper in White Plains protested the violence vigorously. The Young Men's Christian Association, in contrast, sought to pressure the doctors to give up their homes and urged Mr. Samuel Morsell, the secretary of the Colored Branch, to "do what he could" to influence the doctors to sell. Mr. Morsell, a deeply committed young man, refused, and for that, was fired ("Whiteplains," 1930).

The dismissal of Mr. Morsell was widely reported in both the white and black press. For Channing Tobias, who had succeeded Jesse Moorland as Senior Secretary of the Colored Men's Department, and the other black secretaries, the White Plains incident was humiliating and deeply discouraging. Tobias felt that the "very foundation of Negro confidence in the Young Men's Christian Association has been shaken" (Tobias, 1930).

Several months later the national Y.M.C.A. issued a statement opposing "threats of force" and encouraging the Association to "prevent . . . outbreaks of race conflict by meeting concrete needs constructively. . . . [through] improvement of housing . . . and economic well-being" ("Resolution," 1930). The statement was welcome, but notably did not challenge segregation itself. While horrified at the violence and the publicity the incident engendered, top Y.M.C.A. leadership was unable to bring itself to address the question of segregation; it went as far as "harmony" and stopped. Black members, of course, were keenly aware that much more existed, and, for many, the incident represented the end of one era and the beginning of another.

In late 1930 William West, Dean of Men at Howard University, wrote Tobias about the incident and congratulated him on his "straightforwardness": "I think *the time has about come for a showdown* in all interracial groups pretending Christianity. It seems that when it comes to a Christian test, they are not willing to face the issue" (emphasis added) (West, 1930).

A showdown. It was not the fruit Jesse Moorland hoped would come of African Americans' labor in the Y.M.C.A. Moorland's 1913 vision of "almost a partnership" between the "best colored men and the best white men" had born much—twenty five \$100,000 Rosenwald building as well as programs in scores of black communities. But in the end, step-by-step interracial efforts in the context of Jim-Crowed institutions had neither broken down segregation nor enabled young black men and boys to "live sweetly . . . in the land which the Lord hath given them." In two decades, the black secretaries had pushed work in segregated institutions to the limit. The Rosenwald buildings, the organizational structure of the Colored Men's Department, the fund raising campaigns, the resources won were all testimony to this generation of African American men and their commitment to creating a world where passions and violence did not foreshorten the lives and dreams of black young men and boys. But the greatest dream, that black men and white men could work together "as brothers" did not come to pass. The segregated Rosenwald buildings in the end were temples to segregation, not racial equality.

The existence of "Colored Branches" was an embarrassment and an affront to the new generation of black Y.M.C.A. members, and, beginning in the mid-1930's they began to vigorously push the issue of segregation in the organization. In 1946, the Y.M.C.A. finally desegregated.

The question arises, is it fair to criticize the Y.M.C.A. for segregationist policies? That it had a Colored Men's Department at all, the argument goes, attests to a progressive spirit in the Y.M.C.A. often lacking in other organizations. I believe the criticism is just and warranted. While the Y.M.C.A.'s program offered opportunities for combatting race hatred, at the same time its institutionalization of segregation was an appalling development and served to give the blessing of social welfare to a system "morally wrong and reprehensible. . . . a sin against God and man" (King, 1965).

In recent years, moralism, upon which early colleagues with all their frailties so relied, has been in disfavor in the profession. Drawing on the best of that strong, spiritual tradition, these words from James Russell Lowell may provide a glass through which to judge the lost opportunities of this era of change in social services:

Part the sheep upon the left hand  
   and the goats upon the right,  
 And the choice goes by forever  
   between that darkness and that light.

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